

# Valentine's Day Massacre at West Central

Frank H. Joyce

1967

**Editor's note:** The West Central Organization is a "poor people's organization" founded in June of 1965. It is modeled after the militant community organizing projects of Saul David Alinsky, executive director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, who is retained by WCO as a consultant two days per month at \$200.00 per day.

WCO has had many battles with the City of Detroit since its formation concerning low-income housing, urban renewal and police brutality. Its most recent widely publicized action in September of last year involved the arrest of fifteen people, many of whom were suburban ministers, on Hobart Street. They were subsequently convicted of trespassing for their attempts to secure decent housing for a low-income family which had been displaced by urban renewal in the Wayne State University area.

On February 14, Valentine's Day, the Citizen's Sponsoring Committee of WCO, its fundraising arm in the church establishment, fired the entire staff including Conrad Eagan, Lorenzo Freeman, David Aroner and secretary Louise Lasky. Former staff Director David Miederhauser had already been dismissed. Thomas Johnson a white Lutheran minister and Mary Valentine, a neighborhood resident and WCO spokesman were hired as interim staff coordinators although there is no staff to coordinate.

The action, which threatens to destroy the entire organization, came as a result of internal struggles which have plagued the group for months unknown to supporters and even members of the group. Following are some reactions which indicate the positions at variance by those involved in the internal bickering.

Jesse De Witt, Methodist church executive and president of the Citizen's Sponsoring Committee stated, "The organization is on a much firmer foundation; the grass roots feels encouraged. Mr. Alinsky's recommendations have been followed. Jerome P. Cavanagh should be more worried than before. We are building toward a strong convention in June."

Another clergyman, however, close to the organization from its inception stated, "The chickens have come home to roost. By that I mean, the Citizen's Sponsoring Committee never raised enough money to provide an Industrial Areas Foundation buffer. When the pressure built up, the church denominational representatives had to find ways to pull the teeth from the tiger."

"This is typical of the way the poor are always crapped on. WCO has become simply another disillusioning experience; it is a dollhouse for clergymen and poor people are the dolls.

"Thomas Johnson reminds me of his namesake in the Whitehouse," he added.

The same general feeling was echoed by a neighborhood resident in the WCO office. Upon learning of the Valentine's Day Massacre he said, "You mean all this power play and throat cutting has been going on all along in WCO and the neighborhood people had no real say? Who the hell do you think you white folks are messing with our organization?"

While admitting that none of them were IAF trained organizers and that grass roots participation was not what it should have been, the former staff feels shafted. "I've had it" said one as he cleared his desk. "Saul will tell the board they can't organize without a staff, but I wouldn't come back even if they gave me five weeks back pay and a living wage." [Three lines of text missing here. —Web Archive]

Another staff member added, "The tragedy would be if Jerome Cavanaugh is the winner. The people who will really hurt if this thing doesn't straighten out is the little people, the Howard Kings who have suffered additional police harassment because he brought his police brutality case to WCO, the Patrolman Johnsons who told the truth for WCO and suffered the consequences and the tenants who got out on a limb and fought their landlords because WCO was with them."

At least some people believe the grass roots has taken over WCO, that a new stage has been reached.

The grass roots has a chance to show whether it has taken over or not at a delegates meeting on February 28 at the WCO headquarters at 3535 Grand River.

The Fifth Estate will report the results of that meeting along with a complete background story in the next issue.



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