

Poor People Lose Out in West Central Elections

Frank H. Joyce

1967

Detroit is a killer city. It is a city in which radicals and reformers of various political stripes have found it nearly impossible to survive.

Internal difficulties of personnel and finance along with external pressure from the police and other elements of the establishment have combined time after time to murder grass roots community organizations, peace groups, civil rights forces and radical religious organizations.

One thinks immediately of the Unity for Mankind movement which arose out of the black community of the lower East Side to protest the killing of two citizens by the Azzam family crushed by a combination of the city, prosecutor and newspaper.

CORE exists as a shadow of what it once was on Twelfth street. Except for sporadic activity, the Adult Community Movement for Equality (ACME) exists in name only. Citizens for Peace in Vietnam lay dormant for months and is only now attempting to resurrect itself.

The campaign of James Lafferty for Congress in the Seventeenth District against Martha Griffiths left no permanent organization to challenge the at once ultra-conservative and ultra-liberal Democratic party in that district. The Freedom Now Party lasted for one election.

The list is a long one and it now appears that the West Central Organization (WCO) may be added to the casualties. It is of course the slumlords, the white police, the Negro Removal bureaucrats, the city administration and the editorial writers for the daily press who would gain from the demise of WCO. And that is precisely who is benefiting from the present struggle within WCO by a group of white ministers who are working out their own guilt complexes and professional needs to be "involved churchmen" in what Mary Valentine calls "the little people."

They are being manipulated by the Pastor Tom Johnson and the Rev. Peter Pillsbury no less than the slumlords and city officials. Their intentions may be better but the effect is the same. The little people not only do not control their own community—they do not control their own organization.

This became clear at a special convention of WCO held on February 28. Officially the convention accepted the resignation of Peter Thomas Johnson as President of WCO. Mary Valentine, a popular and militant community leader, became the co-director of the WCO staff. The vice-president, Mr. Archie Perry, became president.

And the other co-director of the staff became, guess who, Pastor Thomas Johnson.

A proposed amendment, suggested by the executive board, to amend the constitution to allow Pastor Johnson to function as both president and co-director of the staff was rendered unnecessary by his surprise resignation. All of this was accomplished through a great deal of parliamentary maneuvering and double talk. Johnson cited the reason for his resignation was to protect the sacredness of the WCO constitution.

Later, when challenged on a point of authority, he argued that the constitution was vague and ought to be changed. Mr. Perry, who took over conduct of the meeting following the resignation, frequently held whispered consultations with Johnson as to how to respond to hostile or confusing inquiries from the floor. Officially, however, that was what occurred.

Actually what happened is that Johnson and his devoted sergeant Pillsbury solidified their control of the organization. Their success was symbolized by their appearance, Sunday March 5, on a special Channel Two Reports program. Neither Mrs. Valentine nor Mr. Perry appeared on the show.

The meeting was enough to make one understand how it is that SNCC and other groups have come to exclude whites from policy making positions. The exclusion is impossible in WCO, at the moment at any rate, for two reasons.

First, because the previous WCO staff, whose firing in the Valentine's Day massacre had not succeeded in creating a solid grass roots base for the organization. The minimal function of any white organizer in any black community is of course to get fired as soon as possible. Had the white staff of WCO been fired by a militant community group it would have been just as messy but still a sign of progress for the group.

There has been an attempt by Johnson and others to create the illusion that that is what happened in WCO. Unfortunately, it is not the case. The firing came as a result of maneuvering by other whites to take control of the organization. The people were left out entirely or involved only insofar as their votes were needed to accomplish the deed. (Black people's votes are always used to accomplish white people's objectives—if you don't believe it, ask Lyndon Johnson or Mel Ravitz or Jerome P. Cavanagh or Walter Reuther or countless others who have risen on the basis of Black Power.)

Just as there is a "tipping point" in changing neighborhoods, there is a reverse tipping point in inter-racial organizations. (The tipping point in a changing neighborhood is that time when the number of Negroes reaches a certain percentage, ranging between 0.0000000001% and 51% in a neighborhood, after which all of the whites panic and move out.) SNCC and other groups have "purged" whites only after their participation dropped below a previously attained level. It is not the purging which leads to a drop in support. It is the drop in support which leads to the purging.

Despite appearances to the contrary, that point has not been reached in WCO.

The reason it has not been reached is also a function of money. WCO has been supported in the past largely by contributions from church denominations. The churches have a new-found need to be involved in the great social issues of the day. WCO has been the badge of involvement for the Protestant churches and a number of their ministers in recent years. They have sustained its \$30,000 per year budget.

They have had to struggle within their own denominations to get the money, and that has given them an exaggerated sense of their own importance. It has sustained their belief that the poor cannot do without them and that they are making great sacrifices on their behalf and surely will go to heaven as a result. It has also, as money is wont to do, given them nearly absolute control over the organization. It has given them power to create real and imagined financial crises which then serve as a reason for doing most anything, like firing the whole staff and appointing oneself as co-director.

Whither WCO? It is too early to tell. It looks, however, as though it has become a dollhouse for ministers with the little people as the dolls. If so, it might as well be added to the list of unsuccessful attempts.

The people must fight for control of WCO. If you change the first two letters of "won," it comes out "own." Time, as-Malcolm X used to say, will tell.



Frank H. Joyce
Poor People Lose Out in West Central Elections
1967

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/26-march-15-31-1967/poor-people-lose-out-in-west-central-elections>
Fifth Estate #26, March 15-31, 1967

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net