

The Torch Drive

Say No to United Fraud

Dennis Witkowski

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The *Fifth Estate* has published information exposing the Torch Drive hustle for the past several years. In keeping with this tradition, the following article presents an up-to-date account of what the Torch Drive is really about; how they initially get their money, who they eventually give it to and why.

You can help extinguish the Torch Drive by circulating this article in your neighborhood and where you work. When your local Torch Drive volunteer approaches you this year, say, "Hell no." Hopefully the Torch Drive will fail miserably again this year as they did in 1974. Do it again Detroit!

The Torch Drive officially kicked-off its 27th annual fund raising campaign on October 13 with a corny "torch lighting" ceremony on Woodward and Jefferson, downtown. The Torch Drive collects money for the United Foundation, the nation's largest "charity" organization.

Last year, the Torch Drive couldn't reach its desired goal of \$36,847,810—their first setback in 26 years. Torch Drive spokespersons blamed "recession, unemployment and inflation" for their bad luck. Another reason, not mentioned by the Torch Drive representatives, could be that some people have finally refused to be intimidated by the Torch Drive's "forceful tactics" and stopped their donations.

This year, the Torch Drive is only asking for a meager \$34,750,000. If they succeed, more than 75% of this money will come from the paychecks of working people.

Torch Drive propaganda literature is very thankful for the 'generosity' of the working people. "Without payroll deductions the United Foundation would not be able to do the job it does," they claim.

John C. Dean, chairperson of the Torch Drive (also chairperson of the board of Ford Motor Credit Co.) exclaimed: "At Torch Drive time, every segment of our community works together toward a common goal."

Actually, hourly-paid workers are virtually forced into pledging donations to the Torch Drive by their employers through threats of no promotions, no wage increases or even loss of their jobs. Furthermore, according to the Torch Drive, "All international unions freely endorse the...payroll deduction plan." An individual employee hasn't much choice.

Giving Your Fair Share

An ex-employee of Chrysler's Detroit Forge plant on Lynch Road recalled his first encounter with the Torch Drive: "I didn't want to give anything to the Torch Drive when I applied for employment at the Forge plant, but I signed the pledge anyway for fear of not being hired. My union steward later told me that everyone gives at least a buck a week."

An employee who escapes the Torch Drive is really a rare exception. Most workers regard the donation as merely another one of the many deductions taken out of their weekly paychecks. The Torch Drive's suggested "fair share" for a person earning \$3.10 an hour is \$4.60 per month, someone getting \$4.25 an hour should give \$9.00 every month,

and for people making \$5.20 an hour the suggested donation is \$13.00 per month. If there is any guilty doubt about what is your fair share, then simply give three percent of your income, they suggest.

Giving the Torch Drive a three-percent-cut of your income can really begin to hurt after a short period of time. If you make \$10,000 a year, (a typical factory wage) the Torch Drive gets \$300!

The Torch Drive doesn't see inflation as an excuse for not giving a donation. On the contrary, "inflation is really a reason to increase your contribution," they blurb. "Sure things are tight right now, but the Torch Drive is not a fringe or luxury we can cut out."

It would seem that with their steadily increasing profits, that local corporations might finance Torch Drive projects. Not so, however—corporate contributions amount to barely 25 percent of the total Torch Drive budget. This represents far less than one percent of the area's gross corporate income. No wonder employers support the Torch Drive so enthusiastically!

The Torch Drive not only shakes down workers but it also has its hands in the pockets of students. Jacqueline G., a mother of three children in Southwest Detroit told the *Fifth Estate* how the Torch Drive is hustling kids in the local elementary school:

"My daughters came home the other day all excited about a contest that was happening at school. All of the classes were competing with each other to see which class could collect the most money for the Torch Drive. The winning class got a free gym period Most of the kids didn't even know what the Torch Drive is," she told us.

What is the Torch Drive?

The Torch Drive isn't really a charity organization in itself, rather it's a collection agency for other charities. It began in 1949 to combine the fund-raising efforts of Detroit's many charities into one campaign.

What is done with the money? First of all, the Torch Drive's millions are distributed to three "administrative" agencies: United Foundation, United Way of Michigan, and United Community Services. These agencies then dish out the money to nearly 140 Torch Drive supported charities.

Torch Drive propaganda claims that "five percent is spent...for the cost of operating the United Foundation." They don't mention the administrative costs of operating the United Way of Michigan and United Community Services. When the figures are added up, administrative costs of the Torch Drive will be \$3,294,719 in 1975 or nearly ten percent of the total collection.

This \$3,294,719 is larger than any other item on the 1975 Torch Drive budget (which is available to the public). This doesn't include the administrative costs for all the 140 separate agencies that receive Torch Drive money. Some of these other agencies are merely fund-raising bureaucracies themselves such as the United Way of America which is allocated \$102,000 in 1975. Torch Drive literature describes the United Way of America's activities as "fund-raising, budgeting, allocating and planning." What do they need Torch Drive funds for if they're merely fundraisers themselves?

The Torch Drive is administered by a small group of business people, like John C. Dean (quoted earlier in this article). Representation by poor, working-class communities in the Torch Drive bureaucracy is non-existent. Consequently, most Torch Drive money goes to approved charities of the middle class.

Who Gets the Money?

One of the largest items on the 1975 Torch Drive budget is the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. They receive \$1,652,459, and if you add the Boys Club and the Campfire Girls and similar organizations, the total is \$2,650,165. (Incidentally, the Boy Scouts get more than the Girl Scouts.)

The Boy Scouts is definitely an all-American charity. A Torch Drive booklet declares that the Boy Scouts "teaches citizenship." Indeed, boy and girl scouts learn to wear uniforms and practice military discipline. They are taught to be competitive at an early age when character and personality is ripe for conditioning.

The Torch Drive gives a lot of money to the Catholic charities including the Catholic Youth Organization of Detroit; the League of Catholic Women; the Catholic Social Services of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb Counties;

and Vista Maria. Combined together, these Catholic businesses will receive \$2,248,639 from the Torch Drive in 1975.

This is really outrageous in light of the incredible sums of money the Church rakes in by itself along with their extensive tax-free property holdings throughout the world.

Another big one in line for Torch Drive bucks is the YMCA and YWCA. The various branches of the “Y” around metro-Detroit will get \$2,201,863 in 1975. Despite these millions, the “Y” still charges plenty for membership and the various activities they sponsor.

Other lesser Torch Drive allocations for 1975 include the Boniface Community Action Center, an organization which operates methadone maintenance clinics in Southwest Detroit. Yes, the Torch Drive even buys dope for junkies.

Who Doesn't Get the Money?

It's obvious that Torch Drive money doesn't even come close to going where it's really needed. The Detroit Public Schools have been suffering from financial problems for years, yet the Torch Drive has only allocated \$33,650 to them in 1975. No Torch Drive funds have been budgeted for the fight against sickle-cell anemia, a disease which primarily affects black people.

Local blind people have been protesting against inadequate Torch Drive services for years. Several blind people representing the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) were demonstrating during the torch lighting ceremony downtown on the evening of October 13. The NFB claims that the Torch Drive money being allocated to the Greater Detroit Society for the Blind (GDSB) “is being wasted.”

The GDSB is a referral agency supposedly representing the blind but in reality, the blind have no say in the organization since most of the administrators are not blind. The GDSB will receive \$290,500 from the Torch Drive in 1975. On the other hand, the NFB, a genuine blind-operated organization, receives no Torch Drive money and must depend on the GDSB.

“We aren't asking for any money,” insists Ruby Garner of the NFB. “We merely want a say in determining the policies of the GDSB. The GDSB does not meet our needs because it was planned for us not with us.”

Is Charity Really Necessary?

The Torch Drive, along with other charity organizations, are a grim reminder that an economic system based on profit cannot meet the needs of its people. Charity organizations will always exist in capitalist societies because there will always be people in need.

Even if the Torch Drive did do an “adequate” job, the poor would still be poor. No charity organization can truly change the social problems of this country.

As the Torch Drive booklet says: “Without payroll deductions the United Foundation would not be able to do the job it does.” People should respond to this year's Torch Drive campaign by simply refusing to give. Extinguish the Torch Drive!

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