

# Off Center

Sol Plafkin

1966

Liberal Detroiters were recently mildly surprised and, perhaps, even a little bit shocked, by a recent picket line thrown by the West Central Organization (WCO) before a union hall where a victory” fund-raising dinner was being held for recently re-elected Councilman Mel Ravitz.

One prominent local progressive, George Crockett, Jr. refused to cross the line, even though he was a close personal friend of Ravitz.

Mel Ravitz has been accused of a “conflict of interest” due to the fact that he is still a part-time professor at Wayne State University while also serving full time as a City Councilman at \$17,500 a year.

Not only did Ravitz vote for the sale of a portion of University #1 area to Wayne State University, but he also was the person to formally introduce the motion. His successful motion (passed 7 to 2 with Beck and Mirlani dissenting) also included a set of promises that no more land would ever be cleared for ‘urban renewal,’ in Detroit without explicit plans for reasonable and convenient relocation of those displaced by the projects. WCO contended that this portion of the motion had already been incorporated into official city policy by the Common Council and the Detroit Housing Commission—and was just another ‘promise’, easily breakable in the future.

What has happened to Mel Ravitz? Is he now part of the ‘power structure’ who has used the ‘liberal’ image of bygone days to promote his own personal career? Was his successful ambition to become chairman of the Wayne County Board of Supervisors fulfilled by “selling out” the common people of the city of Detroit?

Many people, including this writer, worked very hard for the miraculous election of Ravitz to the Common Council in 1961 by a bare 2,000 votes. Ravitz was the ‘ultimate’ in the type of person that many very liberal people thought could represent them in office.

So what happened? Ravitz’s first significant move came in 1963 with his co-sponsorship with William Patrick Jr. of the ill-fated “Open Occupancy” ordinance. It was then that Thomas Poindexter gathered up 44,000 signatures in only a few days to place the “Homeowners’ Ordinance” before the people of the city of Detroit. The three so-called ‘liberals’ on the council, Brickley, Carey, and Connor, got chicken at this impressive showing and voted with the four conservatives to defeat the Open Occupancy ordinance.

Then followed the debacle of September 1964 when the labor-liberal Negro alliance failed in its efforts to stop the enactment of the Homeowners’ Ordinance, due greatly to a blatant showing of political ineffectiveness. Several months later, in November, the author of the ordinance, Poindexter, was himself elected to the council (ironically to fill the vacancy created by the resignation of William Patrick Jr. who, after being offered a plush position with Michigan Bell, decided that he had had enough of white hypocrisy for his lifetime).

Then came the farce of 1965. The three liberals who deserted the Negro and liberal community by voting against Open Occupancy received the support of all major liberal, labor and Negro organizations—despite their betrayal in 1963. So, Mel Ravitz found that his courageous action in introducing Open Occupancy and trying to provide real progressive leadership was of no avail. Why bother, Mel Ravitz must have thought, being “far-out” when those who were cowards in time of crisis are getting the same support which I so well deserve. The 1965 campaign, as it began rolling along, found Ravitz playing a peculiar role. He personally took it upon himself to directly attack the small

band of Negro militants (led by Rev. Albert Cleage Jr.) who did not want to let the Negro community forget the fact that the three “yellow” liberals had deserted them in their greatest hour of need. Ravitz raised the specter of “black nationalism” and began speaking, in a manner that became disgusting, of “extremists” on both sides—as if the militant Negro was to be equated with the Poindexter racists.

The part-time sociologist began veering towards an essentially “centrist” position in city politics—and tragically enough, is still the idol of many sincere devoted liberal members of our community.

What will happen to Mel Ravitz in the future? Not much. It is very doubtful that WCO will be able to launch a negative campaign against him in 1969. Ravitz will vote “right” on enough issues to satisfy the bulk of the so-called leadership in the community, and never offer any real challenge towards the smug, increasingly wealthier elements—of the labor, liberal and Negro Community that are determined to preserve Detroit as a Citadel of Mediocrity.

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