

WCO

Fifth Estate Collective

1966

Energies of the West Central Organization, since its formal emergence on the Detroit scene in June, 1965, have exploded the myth of "apathy" inherent in the behavior of "poor folks." Human beings—Negro, white, Mexican, Maltes, and Puerto Rican—who have never fully recognized and used their latent power are doing so now. "poor folk's" organizations which thrive in one area of Detroit's poor folk ghetto are merging into a poor folk liberation front popularly known as WCO. Presently, WCO is confronting the common enemy—those persons who by design or inability operate the existing educational, welfare, housing, law enforcement, and urban renewal machines, etc., in a way which conspires against poor people.

Robert Knox, the Director Secretary of the Detroit Housing Commission, at an April 23rd meeting with the neighborhood people of the Research Park West Urban Renewal Project, stated that 7000 acres of private property are being appropriated for Urban Renewal clearance. The Research Park's Relocation Council, an affiliate of WCO, has been attempting to cope with the threat of the "BULL DOZER" and the refined process of harassment employed by the Housing Commission and Health Commission to encourage people to leave the area. Types of harassment are plentiful. There are repeated visits by inspectors and assessors, implied raises in rent in various types of notices, telephone calls explaining that if you move we'll do this and that for you, the sole use of income as an index of one's familial situation which ignores how this income is used, removal or replacement of water meters with a device that many times fails to work, heat and gas being turned off for weeks at a time, 10 day eviction notices, the indignity of knowing that your future has been planned for you, and inadequate relocation services—repeated trips to inspect those places offered to you, trips to inspect those places offered to you, trips to relocation offices, failure or delay to pay relocation expenses, inadequate assessment of property, sometimes having to find your own place, subtle attempts to play on racial prejudices, and long, expensive court cases if you desire to challenge final city decisions. These are standard forms of harassment which can be identified by people living within any Urban Renewal project area. Frequently, individuals repeatedly subjected to this treatment, not knowing how to rebut, hostilely tolerate this behavior as they impatiently and anxiously await an opportunity to strike back.

However, there is a new mood permeating the thinking of residents in Urban Renewal Projects. They are learning, through experience rather than leadership training sessions, how to deal meaningfully with their enemies. They demand public hearings and meetings, with the leaders of the power structure, at locations downtown and in their territory, so they can spell out their grievances and demands. They have learned that if they stand firm and refuse to leave their homes until they are satisfactorily relocated in standard housing or until new housing which meets their needs and desires is constructed in their neighborhood they will win. They have learned how to employ forms of expression which most effectively transmit their message to city officials and the public. At the same time, learning to expect the establishment's news media only to legitimate those forms of expression which have consistently proven to be ineffective for "poor folk." (Note: press reactions to walk-outs, slum landlord picket lines, camp-ins). Poor folk also learn that frequently the press will react to their actions with negative half-truths and distortions. (Once again, note press reaction to camp-in and recent Judd Arnett columns.)

The people are going to change the rules. When the Housing Commission writes up a relocation program like that prepared for the Research Park West Project and approved by the Common Council, they're going to have to get it approved by area residents. The residents expect the Housing Commission to adhere to the requirements it submits in its plans to the Federal Government. One of these is in the early stages of planning to arrange meetings with representatives of neighborhood churches, schools, block clubs, community councils, etc. There's been a major infraction of requirements, when 140 residents attending a meeting of the Research Park West Relocation Council indicate their unawareness of meeting the Housing Commission adamantly claims it conducted.

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Fifth Estate #8, May, 1966

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