

PCAUR Puts Heat on Landlord

J.R. Kennedy

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In a near spontaneous action, People Concerned About Urban Renewal (PCAUR) led a demonstration against a local slumlord last Thursday.

The group, composed of more than twenty local residents, street kids and students converged on an apartment building complex on the near west side to confront the caretaker of the building concerning the heat and water conditions there which had become intolerable. The buildings are located on Hancock near Avery.

The residents of the building had notified PCAUR about the situations after having exhausted all the city bureaucracies that are supposed to handle such problems. They told a PCAUR representative that the caretaker, following the instructions of the owner, would shut the coal burning furnace off at night to save on utility expenses. They went on to further describe conditions of the building and stated that the temperature in the building had dropped to as low as thirty degrees during a cold spell and was consistently below sixty degrees, which is a city health violation. They also explained to PCAUR that no one in the three-building complex had had any hot water at all in more than four months.

When PCAUR inspected the complaint they found that the hot water heater being used had less than a sixty gallon capacity to service three buildings. They also discovered that the automatic stoker on the coal furnace was being shut off by night by the caretaker to prevent coal from being used when the temperature would drop below the set thermostat level.

In a meeting with the building residents Thursday night the group decided to take action. PCAUR representatives and tenants went down and confronted the caretaker to convince him to provide more heat and to demand that he take steps to insure that adequate heat would continue in future. He flatly refused this demand and further refused to discuss anything and slammed the door of his apartment in their faces.

Without much hesitation the group decided to elevate their tactics in an effort to make clear the seriousness of their demands. Several individuals broke into the boiler room of the apartment, barricaded the caretaker's entrance, and reconnected the power box that provides electricity for the automatic stoker.

In a meeting that followed the tenants and PCAUR discussed types of escalated actions that were available and effective. The PCAUR spokesmen, themselves community residents, emphasized the importance of tenant participation in all community actions and suggested the tenants attend the next meeting of PCAUR.

When the boiler room was checked later it was discovered that the caretaker had broken down the barricade and entered the room and shut the stoker off again. The same individuals at one o'clock in the morning again broke into the boiler room, heavily barricaded the caretaker's entrance, and reconnected the electricity.

Following this demonstration by the caretaker that he was just acting as a tool of the slumlord, one tenant decided that he would telephone the owner and get him out of bed at one a.m. The owner, a Mr. Golden, responded to the call by losing control and screaming irrationally about revenge and violence. He nevertheless agreed to meet with the tenants the next day.

At that meeting Friday afternoon the slumlord, noticing the unity and determination of the tenants, agreed to take steps to clear up the problems. He stated that a new policy would be instituted concerning coal use and that a

larger more efficient hot water heater would be installed. He went on to promise that the channels for complaint would be open and that all suggestions should be told directly to him.

PCAUR, long familiar with slumlord promises in the face of confrontation, have firmly committed themselves to closely watch over the actions of this owner and to follow up on the action to insure its apparent success.

This minor incident is important in several ways, especially to the residents of the inner city community. People Concerned About Urban Renewal has again demonstrated their willingness to become involved in militant confrontations. More importantly however, they have shown that those actions are community oriented and are carried out with major participation by community people.

Organized resistance to poor living conditions is a process that grows out of real experience in our own lives and a willingness to move on those experiences in an organized militant determined way. The quality of life in the inner city for blacks and whites alike is miserable to say the least. PCAUR is an organization through which local people can operate to attack those criminal forces that perpetuate that misery.

Those criminal forces include the city institutions that are guilty of willful neglect in carrying out their functions. They include the slumlords and businesses that deliberately exploit the people for their own financial ends, they include the Housing Commission that through its urban renewal programs destroys homes and cuts off city services, and they include local absentee merchants that rob poor people and sell them inferior products. In fact, the real criminal force is the entire social and economic system that creates those conditions and allows them to continue.

PCAUR is confronting those forces, serving the local people, and winning a series of small but important victories. Any individual or tenant organization that has a complaint should take that complaint to the only place that it will gain any attention—to the people.

Contact: People Concerned About Urban Renewal, 4603 Third Ave. Phone: 831-5664.

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