

(1967)

FOLLOWUP TO VICTORY
(followup to the 2nd summer newsletter article
"Victory In The Slums")

As late as the last newsletter I was not totally convinced of the value of mass rallies and mass demonstrations. The task of building indigenous power within the ghetto is so great I almost jealously guarded my participation and analysis of the local efforts. Two things have caused me to alter- or should I say-broaden my views.

First, the power structure of Chicago has been forced, as it was not before, to recognize that there is a problem in Chicago. Chicago is sick and the local "doctors" -civic, business and religious leaders-have not been able to uncover the illness; it took a freedom movement, that dared tear off the artificial skin, to reveal the festering sores. Such public view as has been given to the whole country and such sessions as the meetings now being held between the Movement people and the local power structure, has aided in giving birth to dignity among the have-nots of the slums.

Second, I marched in the suburb of Evergreen Park yesterday. The protection was not enough. The whites of all ages and both sexes were vicious. But the heavens were merciful as they gave forth with a drenching rain that probably saved any serious mishaps. The small amount of blood that I did see, the damaged cars that did not make it to the protected parking lot as we did, the huge cement piece that came within inches of my head, the swastikas, and the distorted language: All of these make me understand why the sin of the society outside the ghetto needs to be revealed along with the sin of the slum conditions. One is caught up with the other.

So, what goes on within the ghetto as the power of redemptive love tries to work its way into the sickness of the outer city? What has been happening since that initial victory for slum dwellers when they were able to get a large realtor to sign a tenant-landlord contract?

Following that victory the focus of attention must go to the East Garfield Park Community Organization (EGPCO). Here is where the real work on the Union front is now occurring, if it is occurring at all in East Garfield Park. Further, it is in similar groups to EGPCO that action to unionize the ghetto is taking shape.

EGPCO meets every Wednesday evening in the basement of the Warren Avenue Church, away from the (upstairs) activities of both the West Side Christian Parish and West Side Action Center for the Open City drive. Except for staff persons, such as myself, this is a strictly community meeting. Unlike the mass rallies, the whites are few; not because anyone is unwelcome, but because this is obviously a family gathering and the East Garfield Park family tends to have a rather dark complexion.

Since the excitement of the injunction and court hearing, the weekly meetings have been attracting an average of 40 people. The hard core of the organization is about 20. Others come because they have a specific complaint, they have an eviction notice that has them angry or frightened, or just because they have heard about this group that meets to do something for the people of the community.

One young adult male came from outside the community to a recent meeting. He had a problem that he hoped EGPCO could help him with since he knew of no help in his own area. An elderly woman stood up at a recent meeting and gave a twenty minute sermon on how she was ready to fight because she was tired of chasing rats and roaches. The War Counselor for the West Side gang which calls itself the Vice Lords came to a meeting shortly after the signing of the contract; he came to give his interpretation of why it was so hard to organize the buildings of the contracted realtor...or for that matter, any building. His explanation was that people were afraid and needed concrete assurance that they could act without being hurt.

Probably the most surprising thing at all of the meetings has been the relatively large number of young adult and middle age males who come and at least partially commit themselves. Several of the younger group heckle the very intense young adult female president of the organization, but even in the heckling situations there is an air of pride and joy that fills the room during most of every meeting.

Since the victory that gave them the precedent-setting contract, two areas of concern have been discussed and acted upon. The first has to do with the realtor who signed that contract, and the second has to do with new battles.

Two-and-one-half weeks following the signing of the contract with the realtor only eight of the some fifty buildings had been organized for the Union. The situation was weak, and EGPCO decided to take over itself since the efforts of the 'people upstairs' (SCLC staff and volunteers) was largely directed toward the Open City movement.

Grievance forms were distributed so the persons attending could see how they might issue their grievances and how they were to instruct others in the buildings owned or managed by the contracted realtor to do likewise. A Steward's checklist was issued and explained, and Stewards were solicited at the EGPCO meeting, with plans set up to solicit them in the buildings as well. The checklist consisted of eleven general questions that the Steward was to ask each tenant, after which the grievance form, if needed, was to be filled out by the tenant himself.

At the same meeting where the forms and checklists were distributed, action was called for by the strong-willed madame president. As she said, "It is time to quit jiving, for we've got these (name of realtor) buildings up tight, NOW!" Twelve persons volunteered to organize buildings of the contracted realtor. Names and addresses were taken and reports were due at the next meeting. "Don't volunteer unless you can and will work," was the call.

The volunteers were instructed to carry with them: Union membership cards, a copy of the contract, grievance forms, and the Steward's checklist. They were told to either go door-to-door, or if a resident would open his apartment, to hold a floor or building coffee hour. The word had to be spread and the buildings had to be organized. The tenants had to realize that the rights gained through the contract were worthless to them if they did not join the Union. It was the hope of the Union that all its members would support it at least in their own building where they should work with the Steward; though the need was for members to work in the whole community in the effort to expand the Union to all the buildings of the contracted realtor and on to the whole of East Garfield Park. Finally, the tenants were to be told of the weekly meetings between Union staff and the realtor where all the grievances received during the week are presented to the realtor.

The exciting part of the whole effort was that at the next EGPCO meeting reports came back indicating work completed and success achieved. Community people, not predominantly staff, had done the work and a sense of pride and enthusiasm showed at this report meeting. Further, tenants from buildings other than the ones that the contract covered came to the meeting or sent word that they too had problems and wanted help. The response to them was that if they became working members of the Union it would be much more possible to expand efforts to unionize all of East Garfield Park.

Since the signing of the contract a weekly newsletter has been started by EGPCO. It could hardly win any journalism awards, but it belongs to the community, and in every issue words of the community people are found. It is also a channel for constant communication, something which is needed in the chaos of the ghetto.

In the contracted buildings signs have been put up which tell the residents of their responsibilities...now that they have new rights. The signs simply state: "Keep This Building Clean At All Times!"

Since the word has spread, there has been another problem for the Union besides the need to organize the contracted buildings. The Union has been confronted with the need to decide how to handle all the requests for help from those who live in buildings that have no Union contract. Once again EGPCO has taken over, doing the most, and with few exceptions EGPCO has quite democratically decided to not spread itself too thin but to bear down on two realtors who actually have more buildings outside East Garfield Park

than in it. There are three communities outside the EGCPO jurisdiction that have organizations similar to the East Garfield Park Union and/or to the community organization. As a result of this decision it is hoped that the Union effort might be expanded into a city-wide movement, establishing a federation of tenant's unions. This is why the decision was to hit at two realtors who owned or managed buildings in more than the one community of East Garfield Park, but in communities who at least had the beginning of some kind of union organization.

The three areas which have similar organizations to East Garfield Park and which have buildings with the same landlords are: West Garfield Park, which is led by the Christian Action Ministry (CAM); Lawndale, led by the Lawndale Union to End Slums...both West Side communities bordering East Garfield Park on the west and the south; and, the Old Town area on the North Side, led by the Tenant's Action Council (TAC).

A side issue of this latter effort is that one of the two realtors being pursued may be a member of a syndicate of realtors headed by one man who locates himself in a respectable office in the Chicago downtown Loop. Further proof is being gathered before any action is taken on such an explosive situation as this one could become.

This coming week the regular community meeting is going to be a pot luck supper. In the midst of continuing the efforts to unionize the slums and to open the city time is being taken out to relax and have fun for a few hours. To be sure in between the eating and laughing serious talk on "what do we do next" will be heard.

Bruce D. Christie