

## THE MARYLAND FREEDOM UNION

by Frank K. Smith, THE LONG MARCH, Summer 1966.

When the Maryland Freedom Union was picketing a branch of Silverman's Department Stores on Gay Street, in the heart of the East Baltimore ghetto shopping district on a day in April, a group of young jitterbugs came down the street and one of them dug a big sign with the Union's initials.

He grabbed the sign and started walking in the line, waving it with enthusiasm. "MFU--baby, I don't know what that's supposed to mean, but I'm for it," he shouted.

That the Union's initials correspond with the well-known insult may be coincidental, but there is a lesson to be heeded in the pun. It represents the kind of spirit which Baltimore and other big ghetto cities have boiling just beneath the surface - a kind of nihilistic militancy born of frustration.

It is this energy which the MFU and its parent organization, CORE, are trying to tap with the summer "Target City" project here. The pun is also symbolic of perhaps the greatest problem for any big city ghetto movement - the problem of educating and arousing the great mass of Negroes to the realities behind the difficulties they face and getting them to realize they can do something effective to change the situation.

This is primarily what the MFU is trying to do, through an attack on the most basic factor in the ghetto formula - de facto discrimination in employment. The idea of arousing and educating is important because it is one of the main things that makes the MFU's philosophy different from that of a traditional labor union, which would concern itself more strongly with the bread-and-butter issues of wages and working conditions.

Thus, in judging the Union's effect so far - which has been striking in one instance, at least - one must see it in a different context than the ordinarily assumed in judging a labor union.

The MFU was born when three National CORE field secretaries came to Baltimore in early February to look the town over in preparation for the "Target City" project, which was then in the planning stage. Specifically, the CORE envoys wanted to get data on small retail and service establishments in the ghetto with a view to organizing the workers as part of the summer project. CORE's decision to go into union organizing as one of the main prongs of its civil rights attack was a response to the well-publicized crisis in the Movement: what to do in the big cities, now that things were rolling in the South. The CORE organizers - Tony Riley, Howard Quander and Michael Flug - hadn't been in town for a week when they found themselves on the horns of a major dilemma.

About half a dozen workers - all women - at a West Baltimore nursing home were fired because the manager didn't want to pay them the minimum wage of a dollar an hour, which was soon to go into effect for hospital employees. Several others walked out in support of their sacked comrades. They asked CORE for help. Other workers' groups did so as well, but the nursing home women wanted to strike immediately.

## The Maryland Freedom Union - 2

On the one hand, the situation was ready-made to give the on-paper Union a flesh and blood start. A clear and dramatic injustice had been done - an injustice which could evoke the response of the many Negroes who form the great majority of menial workers in the city's nursing homes and hospitals. The women had been getting as low as thirty-five cents an hour and working a sixty hour week. Often they worked three weeks in a row without getting a day off. To top it off, they were fired when the law made change imminent - very small change, indeed, for who can live on a dollar an hour?

In addition, the Lincoln Nursing Home, from which the women had been fired, was understaffed, incredibly run down, and kept its patients virtual prisoners under the most degrading physical and moral conditions. Most of the patients were on welfare and the state "supported" them with one of the lowest monthly pay scales in the country.

On the other hand, the three CORE field secretaries knew that nursing home and hospital employees are the hardest type of workers to organize effectively. They are the least skilled, their turnover is the highest, they can be replaced easily, and public sentiment revolts at leaving patients uncared for. Further, you can't involve the community by using boycott tactics. In any case, the team had come to do research, and in a difficult area at that. Were they prepared to commit the project to action so quickly before a firm groundwork had been laid?

The force of circumstance swayed them and they decided to support the strike. Demanding \$1.25 an hour and a forty hour week as well as reinstatement of the fired employees, the strikers enjoyed an immediate publicity boom when their action rated a headline story in the Baltimore AFRO-AMERICAN: "Got 35-60 Cents An Hour," the banner said. They were supported by local CORE members and student radicals on the picket line and raised \$75 at a "Peace and Freedom" Rally at which several of the strikers - none of whom had ever spoken before an audience or been involved in any kind of civil rights or union activity before - explained what was going on and asked for aid.

On the Monday following February 14, the day of the Rally, and the AFRO-AMERICAN article some twenty-five workers walked out of the Bolton Hill Nursing Home, another West Baltimore establishment inhabited almost exclusively by black patients on welfare. Their protest was a spontaneous response to the publicity; CORE knew nothing of it until the workers were already out on the street. The workers at the two homes met together at a local CORE headquarters and elected officers. It was out of this nucleus that the present MFU was formed. Ironically the strike at both homes failed. The next few weeks saw repeated futile efforts to negotiate with Asa G. Wessels, operator of the Lincoln home, picket lines at his \$60,000 suburban home as well as at the home itself, and increasing interest in the MFU by local groups, particularly the Students for a Democratic Society chapter at Johns Hopkins University.

Wessels countered with an injunction against pickets at the nursing home and continued evasion of attempts to set up a meeting with the workers. Ray Ford, a Baltimore CORE member, was arrested after an action in which some fifty pickets, mostly students, filed through the home and were horrified by conditions. He was first accused of disturbing the peace, but the charge was later altered to include breaking into the home to let picketers in, even though a somewhat befuddled group of policemen watched the demonstration without lifting a finger.



### The Maryland Freedom Union - 3

A month or so later the MFU wrote off the nursing home strikes as "failures" in terms of achievement of specific wage, hour and benefit demands.

In terms of creating an organization, however, the strikes had achieved a great deal. They had succeeded in interesting radical students and intellectuals and they had brought a hitherto unknown organization to the attention of the Negro community - churches and civic groups which had been appealed to for strike-support funds and, most important, they had developed hard-core leadership and support among the workers themselves, about thirty in all.

With these forces behind them the MFU moved into its present headquarters at 322 N. Schroeder Street and began the work the CORE team had originally come to do. White students from Hopkins, Goucher College and Notre Dame College went into the shops along Pennsylvania Avenue claiming one and all to be taking a course called "Economics 52-101; Economic Dynamics in the Urban Ghetto." The unknowing shopkeepers were, for the most part, cooperative and helpfully answered questions as to wages, hours, volume of business, profit margins, peak hours, which sales items moved the fastest, etc. This data was to be used in determining where workers would be most susceptible to effective organization and what shops would be most vulnerable to consumer boycotts.

Fund raising was also carried out in a variety of ways ranging from standard appeals to groups to more novel methods. A bar on the West Side agreed to let the Union hold "cocktail parties" there on Tuesday nights and pledged a certain percentage of its profits on those nights to the MFU. One bright spring afternoon a group of college girls went out to suburban Towson and raised some \$70 selling daffodils to help the cause. Parties were held at the Schroeder Street headquarters to which admission was charged plus a dime for each beer. During this formative period disagreements over strategy ended with the departure of Tony Riley, who had been the nursing home strike spearhead and up to that time the MFU's most colorful and flamboyant figure, delivering militant orations at every opportunity -- in one memorable instance to an almost vacant lobby in the Lincoln Nursing Home, excoriating the remaining employees for not going out with their comrades and deeply puzzling the aged and infirm who, in all likelihood, had no idea of what was going on. Tony was also involved with the Union's brush with Local 195 of the Laundry and Dry Cleaning Workers' Union, AFL-CIO, whose president, Cleveland Harris, offered to bring his all-black union under the aegis of the MFU just before the local was put into trusteeship because of financial difficulties. The MFU decided that it didn't want to get into a big union hassle and declined Harris's offer. Shortly thereafter Tony left town.

By this time, however, a fiery figure of the opposite sex had begun to influence the MFU with her own peppery style. Vivian Jones, a twenty year old high school dropout who had been working at the Bolton Hill Nursing Home as a nurse's aid, took on her duties as elected president of the MFU with a will. A small woman with a hot temper, she emerged from an initial diffidence and reluctance to assert herself and became a persuasive speaker and recruiter of new members, charging the Union with a grass-roots seriousness and intensity. Her development was all the more astonishing in light of the fact that she had never before taken part in any civil rights or union activity before -- because, in her own words, she had been "too scared." She also kept books for the MFU and later proved to be a tough negotiator.

In the second week of April the Union gathered its facts and figures and launched its first big drive -- to organize workers at Silverman's Department Store branches on Gay Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. The workers there were making seventy cents an hour with no overtime and had no holidays or vacations or other benefits. About sixteen of them signed pledge cards authorizing the Union to represent them, held workers' committee meetings and elected officers. On April 22 they presented their demand to the owner, Mr. Silverman, and gave him until noon on April 25 to answer. They asked for \$1.50 an hour and the other benefits they had not been getting. When the deadline came Silverman rejected the proposals and the fight was on.

The MFU had prepared for the battle by contacting churches and neighborhood groups to get support for the boycott action they knew would be coming. A boycott council representing some sixty churches and groups was formed. On the morning of April 26, thirty pickets appeared in front of Silverman's Pennsylvania Avenue store; a picket line at the Gay Street store was set up that afternoon. They were completely successful. The stores were empty of customers all day and two deliveries were halted when sympathetic teamsters saw the line and drove off. One of them had come from as far away as New Jersey. After having tried in vain to stifle the strike with a small wage hike, Silverman's resistance broke. He asked for a meeting with Union leaders. Negotiations went on until the early hours of the morning, but no settlement was reached. Pickets were set up the next day with equal success. That afternoon pickets went to another store in a white community near Hampden. Racism runs high there -- last year a mother and her children were stoned when they became the first Negroes to move into the area. The hostile white reaction was predictable. Toward evening a group of whites began to heave rocks and bottles unhampered by the police assigned to "guard" the pickets. By that time, however, Silverman had decided to recognize the Union and the Pickets left before any major violence occurred. The first major victory had been won.

The importance of the victory was not confined only to the MFU or Baltimore. It was nationwide, marking the first time a civil rights-type union had won a recognition agreement in a northern urban ghetto anywhere in the country. It was a signal that CORE's new strategy could be successful. Negotiations began on May 8, and on June 13 the MFU made another precedent-shattering announcement: they had won everything they asked for. Silverman's signed a contract with the following terms:

1. \$1.45 an hour for full time workers for the first six months, with a raise to \$1.50 after six months.
2. \$1.20 an hour for part-time workers for the first six months, with a raise to \$1.25 after six months.
3. Five days paid sick leave a year, a week paid vacation and six paid legal holidays.

With this encouragement and with constant requests for organizing help coming in from workers' groups all over the ghetto, the MFU is going after other stores in the same way. The example of Silverman's will provide a powerful weapon in organizing these stores and in gaining further community support and respect.

However, it won't be easy by any means. In the case of one food market the MFU moved into during the Silverman negotiations, the Union's



bright hopes of success were dashed when the owner made a separate peace with the workers by giving them a raise from \$1.00 to \$1.25 an hour on the condition that they wouldn't join the Union. This divisive tactic can be expected from almost every store the MFU decides to hit and a way must be found to deal with it, to develop an overwhelming community consciousness of the importance of a union and the necessity of solidarity.

As mentioned above, solidarity, the "black power" idea, the creation of group awareness, the dispelling of fear and apathy and individual isolationism by bringing the Movement to the heart of the ghetto -- these are the things that the MFU and CORE are really concerned with, beyond the achievement of specific practical goals. How painfully far they are from success on this level, despite their astonishing total victory at Silverman's, was illustrated by a recent rally on Pennsylvania Avenue during which the MFU speakers were virtually ignored by large crowds of Saturday afternoon shoppers. This failure can be partly attributed to the inability of the MFU's tiny staff to prepare properly for the rally -- the Union desperately needs manpower as well as money -- and partly to inexperience.

The main reason, of course, lies in the immense difficulty of the task they are undertaking. The masses just won't budge. If CORE and the MFU don't succeed in budging them, in binding them together for political and economic power, then the future of Baltimore looks bad indeed.

Very bad, because when the ghetto does move -- and given its deteriorating conditions it is certain to move eventually -- it will be in the direction of a Watts-like riot.

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