

CORE - Congress of Racial Equality  
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CORE GOES SLUMMING (Reprinted from Real Estate & Building)

Living conditions in decrepit Hawthorne Village have been the target of a militant campaign by a small but vocal group of moral vigilantes.

In the cluttered offices of the Congress of Racial Equality's North Broad Street headquarters (in Philadelphia) a band of determined individuals met last month to plot the strategy of an anti-slum campaign. For the relatively small (it has approximately 900 members compared to the NAACP's 26,000) but highly militant CORE organization the slum situation was so deplorable it cried for intervention. Unlike the NAACP, which on the national level, at least, prefers to redress old grievances by court order, CORE has been an ardent advocate of the non-violent direct action techniques pioneered by Gandhi and his followers in India. It has used them to good advantage here (e.g., sit-ins by CORE in Mayor Tate's office sparked the anti-bias action by the city against building unions). But, because of its approach, it often envelops itself in what can only be described as a revolutionary aura. A heavy air of secrecy hangs over the small, untidy rooms in which it holds its meetings, creating, for a fleeting moment, the impression of a conspiratorial organization bent on avoiding police detection. Unauthorized personnel -- in effect, those not members of CORE -- are excluded from the deliberations because, according to CORE vice-chairman Edward Hollander (the only white member of the interracial organization's Philadelphia hierarchy), "secrecy is to our tactical advantage." His opinion is shared by a number of college students, Penn professors, local admen and corporation lawyers who prefer to labor anonymously in the CORE vineyards.

Project Slumlord. Mrs. Dell Graham, an employee of the City's Recreation Department who doubles as chairman of the national organization's Philadelphia branch, reports the organization has been concerned about widespread and neglected slum conditions here for some time. It decided to get into the area actively late this spring, choosing as its pilot area the Hawthorne Village section described in a magazine article as one of the worst slums in the city. "Unless we could bring pressure to bear on responsible parties, the City would only do a whitewash job," observed Louis Smith, a lean 34-year-old vacuum cleaner salesman who is a regional representative of CORE.

In a larger sense CORE's action could, of course, be seen as another expression of the rising tide of Negro resentment. The establishment of the slumlord project, together with the creation of Police Brutality and Employment Project committees was, said Smith, an attempt by CORE to move into "the bowels of the Negro community." Though CORE officials disclaimed any desire for "publicity alone," they had, by month's end, managed to steal the limelight, if only temporarily, from NAACP boss Cecil Moore, whose antics were, by now, old hat to Philadelphians.

Determined to approach the slum problem in what Mrs. Graham termed "a responsible manner," CORE sent investigating teams into the Hawthorne area itself early this summer to speak to the people and examine their complaints. "At first," said Mrs. Graham, "they thought we were City inspectors" and wondered why we "bothered to come since nothing ever happens." But it wasn't long before CORE had won the confidence of the community and, with the aid of a questionnaire returned by Hawthorne residents, had gotten a complete picture of housing conditions in the area.

Armed with specific information on Housing Code violations CORE sent letters to the family Levin (Leonard, Saul, and Howard) "who operate a real estate office in the neighborhood and William Lehrfeld whom the organization characterized as "one of the

slumlords in the neighborhood"-- asking for an appointment to discuss the conditions they had discovered. What CORE had observed was that most of the houses didn't fulfill minimum requirements of the weakest code and, of those that did, many were still in need of improvement. The demands formulated by CORE and presented to the slumlords, Smith observed, exceeded the formal requirements of the Housing Code and insisted on the removal of such items as pot-bellied stoves, which were not covered by the existing regulations, but the presence of which, CORE felt, was detrimental to safe and decent housing. According to one CORE investigator "85% of the Levins' properties had Housing Code violations."

Bad Faith? The negotiations that followed with each of the Levins (Lehrfeld never responded) were labelled "completely unproductive" by CORE officials. It seemed that an impasse had been reached: Though the Levins, according to Mrs. Graham, "refused to admit there were substandard conditions in the houses they owned," the condition of their properties, she noted, was "disgustingly obvious to anyone with the eagerness and willingness to look." What further jammed the difficulty the two had in communicating with each other, observed CORE Housing Committee Chairman Nish Richerson, was the attitude of the Levins' attorney, Nathan Edelstein, who had recently been chairman of the City's Commission on Human Relations. Edelstein, reported Richerson, "bragged about his achievements in the civil rights field and said he wouldn't represent the type of people we described." (According to Smith, Edelstein later admitted he hadn't seen any of the apartments in question; when he eventually did get around to inspecting them he blamed their condition on the tenants.)

Though the Levins had requested CORE to provide specific examples of Housing Code violations, the negotiators refused. They insisted the burden of proof was on the owners, and it was up to them to take the initiative in maintaining their properties.

In a letter sent soon thereafter to each of the three Levins CORE charged them with "dealing in bad faith" and warned that "since our discussions had failed to help end the conditions we are concerned with and future discussions seem unlikely to do so either, we now have no other choice but to take other steps to see that they are ended." What form this "direct action" would take was left undefined. CORE itself was engaged in a hot debate over the appropriateness and effectiveness of the various steps it might take.

Out In The Open. For the most part what had happened so far had been pretty well-hidden from public view, for CORE had been dealing directly with the owners of sub-standard properties. As a consequence, the public officials charged with the responsibility for enforcing the Housing Code had not been stung by open criticism. This was one aspect in CORE's approach, however, which was soon to be changed. Blasting the City Administration for its indifference to slum conditions, CORE opened up the second front of its war against the slumlords by publicly charging that the residents of South Philadelphia slums were "trapped in a zoo without bars."

In response to this and other similarly vigorous criticisms, Mayor Tate announced a new "get-tough policy against slum landlords and declared that persistent violators of the housing Code would "have to fix-up or close up." He chided L&I Commissioner Barnet Lieberman for being "a little slow" in moving against the slumlords. "Sometimes," Tate said, "rigor mortis sets in. You just have to needle them."

In reply, Lieberman, now beginning to feel the heat of public pressure, declared that there was no laxity in his department and that the only thing hindering it was "a lack of funds and personnel."

CORE's reaction to this sudden display of concern was one of "skepticism and suspicion." In an open letter to Mayor Tate, CORE Chairman Graham called upon the Mayor to wage "a full-scale attack on the slumlords who profiteer at the expense of the poor and...the other forces and institutions which permit or abet this perpetuation

of human misery." It was her organization's "sincere hope," Mrs. Graham concluded, "that your announced 'get-tough' policy is not a manipulative attempt to mislead the hundreds of thousands of citizens -- black and white -- trapped in the slums; that it is not only a maneuver which gives the impression of a real concern."

Visiting Day. In order to keep the heat on -- for CORE was, by now, solidly convinced that public pressure was the only way to bring about productive action -- Mrs. Graham announced that an open tour of slum properties in the Hawthorne area would be held by CORE. Under the direction of Mrs. Graham and Alice Lipscomb, President of the Hawthorne Community Council, and a long-time resident of the area active in the fight for good housing, the tour got underway a little after 8 p.m., on Wednesday, August 8th. Also present, among others, were L&I boss Barnet Lieberman, U.S. Congressman Robert C. Nix, Jr. and lawyer Thomas D. McBride, co-chairman of the Mayor's prestigious Commission on Civil Rights.

The tour, which some likened to a journey through an amusement park horror house, produced some interesting reactions. Lieberman, said CORE officials, expressed both shock and anger at the conditions he observed ("though I understand that's the eighth time he's been on such a tour," said Louis Smith) and, according to newspaper accounts of the journey, declared that the situation was so bad the whole area should be torn down." Mrs. Graham, commenting on the reaction of some of the participants, noted that the tour had more participants at the beginning than at the end. "Conditions got so deplorable," she said, "we lost some of the tourists."

For all the attention CORE's activities were now receiving in the daily press, however, little was being done to improve the conditions it criticized. L&I, to be sure, had conducted its own inspection of the Hawthorne area a few days after the CORE-conducted tour, and the City Law Department had instituted action against a number of slumlords with particularly serious violations to their credit, but these things had all been done before -- time and time again -- and CORE had little confidence in the ability (and, indeed, the desire) of City agencies to make a real dent in the situation.

Heating It Up. So, a short while after the tour, with public concern still focused on their activities, CORE began to picket the various offices of the Levin family. Some 75 demonstrators, Negro and white, carrying such signs as "Why Pay For Rats" and "Philadelphia Slumlords Must Go" opened the picketing phase of the campaign which was to continue, intermittently, over the next few weeks.

All this served to keep CORE in the news -- but to the chagrin of the organization there had not been any noticeable improvement in substandard Hawthorne properties. It was at this point that CORE decided to intensify its attack on the original slumlord front, and, to the cheers of Hawthorne residents, announced plans for a "dump-in" on Saturday, August 17th. The latest form of protest by an organization which had adopted every form of "in" from the kneel-in to the wade-in, the dump-in was to consist of heaps of refuse "and as many dead rats as possible" gathered from the cellars and back-yards of slum dwellers dumped in front of Bill's Laundry (a store allegedly operated by unco-operative target William Lehrfeld).

That Saturday everything went off according to schedule. But CORE, in a surprise tactic, added a new twist to the protest by loading the tons of junk onto a truck and, after driving out toward Saul Levin's home in suburban Wynnefield they attempted to unload it on his lawn. Stopped by the police, CORE dumped the load in the middle of the street instead.

Police officials present at the dump-in refrained from handing out litter tickets, according to Police Commissioner Howard R. Leary, because it was the Department's policy "to go along with it." Department brass, Leary said, "had a meeting a couple of days before it happened and decided on this approach."

(Two weeks later, however, Leary had a change of heart. After conferring with CORE officials, who refused to give any assurances that such incidents would not be repeated in the future, Leary publicly declared that he would seek to have the leaders of the dump-in cited for litter violations. The reason for the summons-gap, Leary said, was because the Department wanted to give the matter "due consideration.")

While the dump-in served to keep the spotlight on Project Slumlord, a number of responsible Philadelphians began to wonder aloud about the appropriateness of this newest form of protest. It was one thing, they reasoned, to blame the owners, for such structural shortcomings as no heat and no toilets; it was quite another to hold them responsible for the accumulation of junk. The existence of so much litter, many felt, was more a reflection on the tenants' household habits than their landlords. Editorialized the "Bulletin": "The passive acquiescence in Saturday's breach, by police and city officials, was an open invitation to more such incidents. It should not be allowed to happen again."

Code Book. When CORE decided to concentrate its efforts on the slumlords themselves -- rather than the City agencies, such as L&I, whose job it ostensibly was to handle the problem -- it marked a radical departure from the traditional methods used by private organizations bent on improving slum conditions. One such group, the prestigious Philadelphia Housing Association had, in fact, been working for some time prior to CORE's big August push, on a detailed, foundation-financed study of "Impediments to Housing Code Compliance." In a 50-page report first made public late last month, the Association blasted the City for its monumental indifference and, in a remarkably detailed analysis of what has gone wrong with code enforcement lent intellectual support to the increasingly strident efforts of CORE.

"Philadelphia's Housing Code," the Association found, "is not vigorously or effectively enforced against persistent violators." After a careful study of L&I files and magistrate court proceedings the Association concluded "that the enforcement process is itself the biggest impediment to compliance; that the procedures employed by L&I to obtain compliance are needlessly slow; that the City's Law Department appears lackadaisical about Housing Code enforcement; and that the archaic and judicially inadequate system of magistrate court proceedings against violators has little effect in producing compliance."

Though the Association contended that "in the final analysis, the overall responsibility for failure to achieve housing code compliance rests with the City's chief executive," it saw the indifference of the magistrates as the root of the problem. The fact was, reported the Association, that "property owners had little reason to take the enforcement process very seriously" since "failure to comply with the code had no serious consequences." Court prosecutions, it disclosed, resulted in only nominal fines of \$5 or \$10, especially if the defendant appeared in person. It was only when the dignity of the court was offended by the refusal of a defendant to show up that more stringent fines of up to, say, \$100 were imposed. But even this had little meaning, declared the report, since those who refused to pay never were forced to. Liens put on the property of convicted landlords were, in practice, never collected. "In many instances," charged the Association, it is "cheaper for a property owner to pay court costs (if any) than to do the work required by the code."

Lax L&I. To City officials concerned with Housing Code enforcement the findings of the Association were a comprehensive and convincing statement of facts they already knew very well. (Lieberman, himself, had seen preliminary copies of the report as far back as May.) And so, for those who sought to really understand the situation, two big questions stood out:

Why were the magistrates so lax in enforcing the Code?

Why had Mayor Tate and Commissioner Lieberman, all along aware of what was going on, failed to put public pressure (except for the mild and infrequent statements made only when they themselves were under pressure) on the reluctant magistrates to deal more severely with violators of the code?

These were not easy questions to answer -- but there were some, especially in CORE, who thought they had the solution, "It is," assert CORE Housing Committee Chairman Nish Richerson, "an obvious and simple and elementary deduction that there is collusion between L&I, slumlords, and the magistrates." The judges "don't enforce the code," he maintains, "because they want to be reelected."

If Richerson is correct, if, in fact, magistrate reluctance to penalize offenders is premised on something more than mere indifference, then his assessment of Lieberman's timidity is, at least, consistent with the rest of his analysis. "Bill Green would never permit Tate to appoint a crusading L&I head," he says, "because powerful interests would be affected if he did."

The case against Lieberman is, indeed, a strong one. When the currently sitting special grand jury found that L&I was crippled by its own inaction and denounced Lieberman for behaving "as a chiding father urging compliance rather than demanding it," it hit on what was, perhaps, a larger truth than it suspected. For the sad fact of Lieberman's commissionership is that over the long years in which he has held his post he has failed to even begin cleaning up the conditions for which he is now being criticized. Early last month when the CORE commandoes were conducting their tour, Lieberman, by way of explanation, declared that "the real problem ... was the reluctance of the magistrates to mete out effective punishment." But, his critics wanted to know why he hadn't said anything earlier -- in his annual report, for instance, issued only a week or so before CORE began its operation -- and why was he seemingly content to identify the problem but not do anything about it? Eight months ago Lieberman asked the Housing Association to review Code regulations and determine whether changes were needed. An Association committee appointed to study the situation subsequently submitted a list of recommended improvements to him. Why, his critics wondered, hadn't he done anything about them?

Into The Fray. Faced by the monumental lethargy -- if not indifference -- of the responsible City officials CORE sees no other choice but to continue its frontal attack against the slumlords themselves. By the end of the month a slew of techniques designed to put pressure on the recalcitrant owners had already been used. But CORE was considering a host of other possibilities for what it terms "direct action." Under active consideration by CORE leadership was the possibility of a rent strike, a renewed City Hall sit-in, and an expansion of Project Slumlord into the other dilapidated areas of the city.

Where this would lead no one could tell. Of CORE's commitment there could be no doubt. Of the City Administration's one could only repeat the question raised by the Housing Association's report: "How committed to renewal can the City be when code enforcement is used half-heartedly?" At month's end it shaped up as the proverbial struggle between the immovable object and the irresistible force.