

RADICAL AMERICA

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50¢

New York Rent Strike

Analysis and Comments by Activists

James Weinstein on STUDIES ON THE LEFT

An SDS Journal of the History of American Radicalism

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| James Weinstein, STUDIES ON THE LEFT: R.I.P. | 1 |
| Mark D. Naison, THE RENT STRIKES IN NEW YORK | 7 |
| Robert Gabriner, COMMENT | 50 |
| Daniel MacGilvray, A PAPERBACK APPROACH TO THE AMERICAN RADICAL TRADITION | 54 |
| Leaflet: THE GENIUS OF AMERICAN POLITICS | 59 |
| BOOKS ON THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT, 1877-1924 | 62 |

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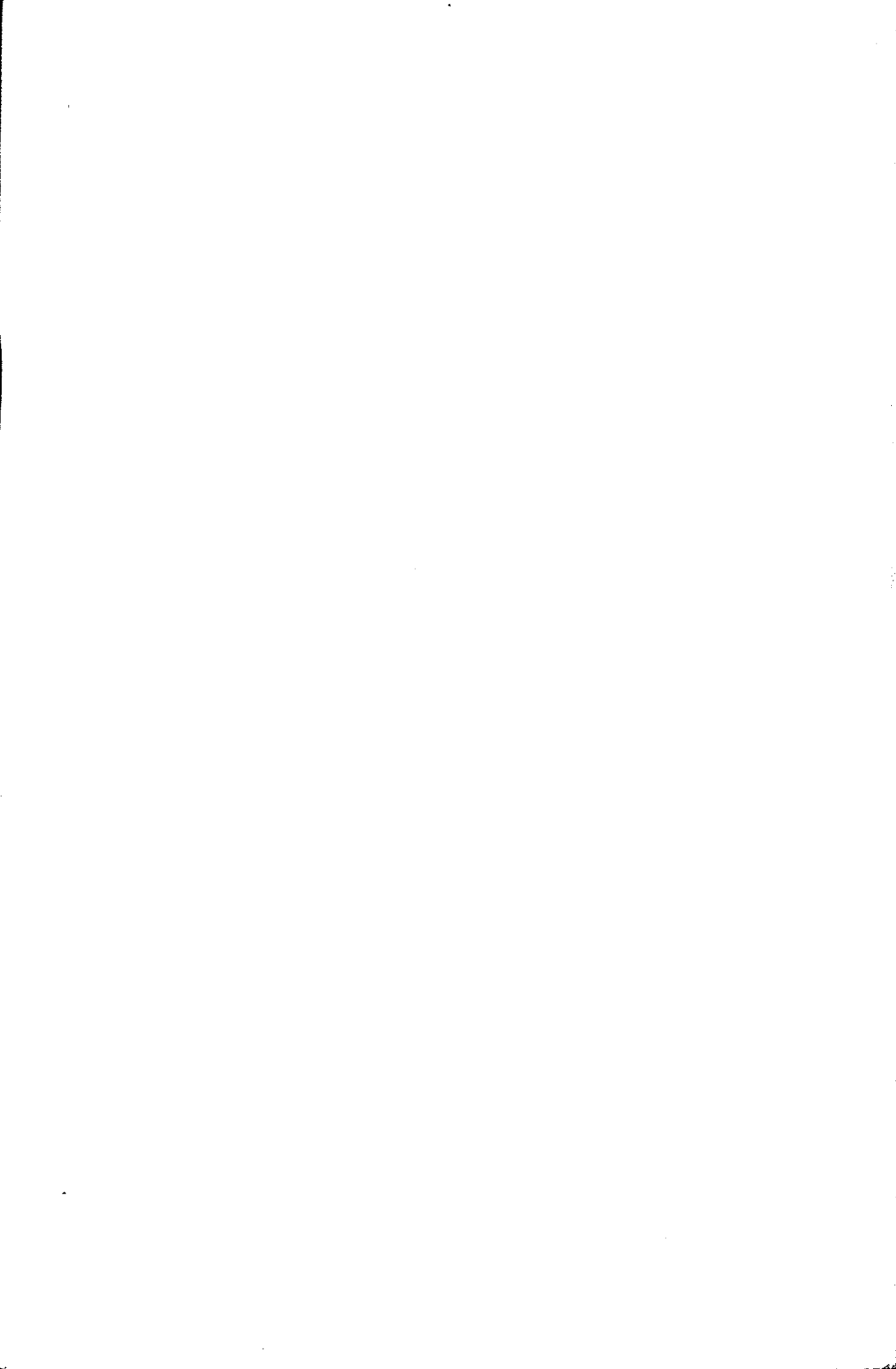
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We repeat for our new readers that RADICAL AMERICA is an outgrowth of a program in the Radical Education Project of the Students for a Democratic Society. The editors hold that the lessons of the American radical past are critical for the development of the New Left. We hope to stimulate an intensified study of radical history by students of the field, and a far greater interest among SDS rank-and-filers concerning these subjects. We look to cooperation with other generations of American Leftists and hope that the realization of our shared tradition will help bring the best of the "Old" and "New" Left together.

With this issue our circulation jumps to 2,000. We ask all those interested in distributing RADICAL

(Continued on inside back cover)



function of American institutions. Studies did little to arouse popular consciousness of these developments. But it did examine and explain their underlying political economy. Studies made its main contribution in the thinking of the new radicals in two areas. 1) It identified welfare state liberalism as the political ideology of the large corporation throughout this century, and, therefore, as the dominant political ideology in the United States. 2) It began the process of orienting socialist thought toward the problem of building a post-industrial socialism.

The development of these two sets of ideas are central in making possible a serious revolutionary movement in the United States. The first is the key to understanding the American political economy. The second is essential to a strategy of social revolution in this country. It distinguishes clearly between the function of socialist transformation in the United States and in the agrarian countries where successful revolutionaries face the need to industrialize rapidly.

Of these two sets of ideas only the first has been widely understood among new left activists. The understanding that liberalism and the liberal bureaucratic state is the central ideological enemy clearly distinguishes the new left from the old. That knowledge makes acceptance of the popular frontism of the Communist party and the social welfarism of the Socialist party unacceptable to most new leftists.

The limited acceptance of the ideas about post-industrial socialism in the United States has several causes, all of them closely related to the nature of the existing socialist parties. The main cause has been the failure of these parties to develop a vision of the kind of life that would be possible in the United States if society were reorganized on the principle of maximum individual freedom, self-development, and participation in decision making. Because socialists of all parties have been caught up in debates about the process of industrialization in Russia, China, or Cuba, they have been obsessed with

centralized social control, externally imposed discipline, the subordination of personal fulfillment to collective economic development. For the United States, after the revolution, such concerns will be mostly irrelevant. (Parts of the new left already understand this. Some are trying to live as if the revolution had already been won.)

We already have the industrial capacity and technological development to assure affluence. The need here is not to sacrifice to achieve the basis for a full life, but to change the political economy so that corporation profits and a favorable climate of investments are no longer the real principles around which our social life is organized. To do that we must take power from the corporations. That requires a group of people with the imagination to create a new way of life and the competence to organize a society that will be able to function without the incentives of the market economy.

THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

The development of a rigorous program and the capacity to run a new society can be achieved only by an organization of people committed to winning power and carrying through the revolution. Such a group will not achieve significant social change until it becomes involved full-time in convincing others that a new social order is in their common self interest. It cannot achieve serious action, whether intellectual or political, unless it takes itself seriously. Any group that has a long range goal and a full-time commitment to it must construct a comprehensive political stance and program, its own means of communicating its views (a press), and a permanent nationwide structure. Such an organization is a political party, whether it participates in elections or not.

Most of the Studies editors would like to see such a new socialist party come into being, but there is no agreement on how that might come about. Some

believe that a party can come about only more or less spontaneously -- out of the experience of the new left. I do not share that view. I see the creation of a party as an act of will on the part of those who believe it to be necessary. I do not think that a party can be formed immediately, but if one is to be formed in the next two or three years, some group of people must take the initiative now.

The possibility of a revolutionary party within the next few years will be affirmed or negated only in the course of making the attempt. The only question that must be answered now is whether there is a need for such a party at this time. If so, then those who understand the need have the responsibility to act. The experience of recent years should encourage such action, since those who have acted against the war, in the ghettos, and on the campuses have almost uniformly found more popular support than they expected.

On the need for a party, the main reason is axiomatic: without a revolutionary party there can be no revolution. But why a new party and why now? The first part is easy. A new party because all the existing ones have failed to develop a revolutionary theory relevant to transforming the United States, and are hopelessly limited by their long-term ideological dependence on one or another tendency in the Soviet Union or China. Further, none of them takes itself seriously as a revolutionary force. They have no strategy of building a mass revolutionary movement here. Their thinking and programs are shaped by events, rather than by themselves as makers of history.

THE TIME IS NOW

The reason for a new party at this time is that the Movement has created the possibility of rapid growth and relevance for a revolutionary party, even though the Movement does not have within it the potential to transcend its present limitations. In the last few years the Movement has educated hundreds of thousands of young people to a better understanding

of the true nature of American capitalism. It has shown that radical actions are possible, and that its own estrangement from the dominant values of American society is widely shared. It has exposed the slavish loyalty to the American business system of our political structure and our educational institutions. It has demonstrated the value of spontaneous action and of local initiative, as well as the personal and group rewards that come from taking an active part in social change.

But the Movement has also demonstrated its own limitations. The diversity which gives it much of its strength prevents the development of a rigorous purposefulness. The primarily student makeup of the Movement makes it unlikely that a permanent core of members will be created, or that there will be any continuity in the development of program or strategy. The chance of the development of a revolutionary single-mindedness within the Movement is almost non-existent, since such a purpose does not, never has, come spontaneously out of dissent or resistance. A movement led entirely by those under thirty is without benefit of the accumulated experience of other revolutionaries and other revolutionary movements. Without that knowledge revolutionary theory is impossible. And, of course, without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary party.

Every revolutionary party that has become relevant, as well as many that haven't, has been created by the willful action of a small group of men and women. If a new party is to be formed in the United States, the same will be true here no matter when it happens. In that sense, the formation of a party is an elitist act. But it is silly not to act because of a fear of elitism. If an elitist party is formed, no one will follow it in any case. The worst that will have happened is that those who formed it wasted their time.

This statement expresses one of the tendencies on the Studies board, and should explain, from my

perspective, why Studies had outlived its historical purpose. The next magazine that I hope to be part of will not be an independent journal with no specific focus, but the journal of a revolutionary political organization.

James Weinstein

The Rent Strikes in New York

Rent strikes in New York are as old as the slums. Already in the early 1890s, there were "annual rent strikes led by the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association" which - along with general labor unrest - "kept the Lower East Side in constant turmoil."¹ After the passage of the Tenement House Law of 1901, the rent strike movement of the 1890s subsided; but in 1918, the limited gains won in the pre-war period were swept away by a growing housing shortage which permitted landlords to increase rents by as much as 200% in a matter of months.

Tenants unable or unwilling to renew short-term leases at substantially higher rentals faced summary dispossession proceedings, and wholesale evictions frequently took place.² In the city's working class districts, hit hard by unemployment during the post war demobilization, tens of thousands were in danger of losing their homes.

THE EARLY STRUGGLES

In the Jewish section of the city, the housing crisis brought with it a new outburst of rent

1. Moses Rischin, The Promised City, (Cambridge, 1952), pp. 167-8.
2. Rudell, Concerted Rent Withholding, p. 18.

strikes. On May 14, 1918, the New York Call, the Socialist party's English language newspaper, reported a large rent strike in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. Tenants were doubling up and "threatening to camp in the streets rather than submit to the unjust demands of the landlord." The Call's editor praised the strike as a "forceful illustration of working class solidarity":

Entire blocks are being organized. The ousted tenant is being welcomed with honors. No one has any use for the woman who is submissive and pays the rent.³

These first postwar rent strikes, like those in the 1890's were largely spontaneous. In the close-knit Jewish communities, a landlord who refused to yield to striking tenants might have to face condemnation by respected leaders of his synagogue or fraternal organization, ostracization by his friends, loss of patronage at his business, and verbal harassment and even physical violence from his neighbors. In the columns of the Call, we find the edifying tale of a landlord named Katz who tried to break a rent strike in a building he owned by hiring a band of thugs to beat up the leaders of the tenants' committee, but who was forced to yield to the tenants when they led a successful boycott of his butcher shop down the block.⁴ Even in the sacred confines of his synagogue, the landlord was not safe from harassment by embattled tenants. During the height of the strikes, 200 tenants stormed a Brownsville synagogue in the midst of Passover services to embarrass a number of landlords in the congregation. The heroic deed was faithfully reported in the Call:

Most of the pillars of the Ohev Shalom (Pillars of Peace) congregation are landlords. The head of the congregation is said to have evicted some

3. New York Call, May 14, 1918, p. 8.

4. Ibid., New York Call, March 20, 1920, p. 4 and March 23, 1920, p. 5.

tenants Friday. He was reported to have suffered some bruises in the excitement yesterday when the tenants poured into the synagogue crying, "Down with the services, stop raising our rent."⁵

As the year went on, tenants began to develop more formal organizations for their protests. While local action of the type just mentioned had some success, it was clear that the housing crisis could not be ended unless the city government and the state legislature acted to reduce the immense legal authority of the landlord over the tenant, which gave him almost unlimited power to set rents, determine the length of leases and evict allegedly undesirable tenants.⁶ In 1919, tenant unions and tenant-protective associations were formed in Brownsville, Williamsburg, Harlem, the Bronx and the Lower East Side, to expand the scope of local actions against landlords and to articulate tenants' demands for government action.

The new tenants' associations were closely linked to the major progressive organizations in the immigrant community--the socialist parties and the labor movement--and their leaders were avowed socialists who saw in the tenants' revolts a manifestation of the new class consciousness that seemed to have seized workers all over the world after the war had ended. Their imaginations, like those of most American radicals had been stirred by the proletarian uprisings that the European War had unleashed, and every strike, every mass action, seemed to herald capitalism's imminent fall. The revolutionary impulse of the tenant leaders found outlet in periodic attempts to organize mass action

5. New York Call, April 9, 1920, p. 6.

6. Under New York City housing law, a landlord had only to establish that he was "acting in good faith" in order to evict a tenant whom he considered undesirable.

on a citywide level to dramatize the tenants' grievances. In May of 1919, the Brooklyn Tenants Union threatened to call a "general strike" involving the cooperative action of tenants leagues and labor unions, to focus attention on housing problems.⁷ And in September of the same year, "socialist agitators," according to the mayor's Committee on Rent Profiteering, attempted to organize a rent strike involving one million tenants.⁸ Neither of these projects, however, were actually implemented. The most "revolutionary" of the tenants unions' actions were the local rent strikes, which continued under their direction to be primarily a defensive action designed to force landlords to retract rent increases and stop eviction proceedings. The political demands of the tenants were articulated through traditional "democratic" means--petitioning, lobbying, and organizing protest rallies--although the size of the local rent strikes (the Brooklyn Tenants Union had over 4000 tenants on strike in 1919) with their implied threat of massive disorder, added weight to the petitioners' requests.

When the tenants unions were first organized, the city administration, caught up in the public hysteria about radicalism which the Bolshevik Revolution seemed to have engendered in American society, tried to suppress them. The Mayor's Committee on Rent Profiteering, organized to arbitrate disputes between tenants and landlords, opened an investigation of the tenants' movement with the warning that:

Bolshevism unrest and anarchy are increasing rapidly because of the activities of these so-called anti-rent societies and a stop must be put to their work,⁹

and initiated a series of police raids on the local tenants' leagues. "Our meetings were broken up, our

7. New York Times, May 15, 1919, p. 6.

8. Ibid., April 24, 1920, p. 1.

9. Ibid., October 4, 1919, p. 24.

members imprisoned, our offices raided, and our executives given the third degree," declared Harlem Tenants leader J. Louis Dubros in an interview with the Call.¹⁰ Municipal court judges joined in the effort to break up the tenants leagues. A typical judicial response to the rent strikes was that of Magistrate Shraub, who closed a Brooklyn rent strike case by ordering tenants to pay their rents and warned them that a second offense would bring them jail sentences:

This appears to be nothing more than a case of Bolshevism such as seems to be running riot over the city at the present. You have no right to prevent this landlord from running his houses. Or to prevent him from collecting his rents. He is a taxpayer and through paying taxes you are afforded police protection and a good many other things. If I am informed by him that you interfere with him in the slightest degree. I will issue a warrant for you and put you in jail.

Some judges were known to give pardons to tenants who would inform on their radical leaders. A Manhattan judge offered three members of the Harlem Tenants League, convicted of conspiracy charges for obstructing an eviction, lenient treatment if they told him the names of the organizers of the tenants leagues to which they belonged.¹¹

10. New York Call, March 25, 1920, p. 1. A more detailed account of the police raids can be found in the issue of the Call from March 19, 1920, which includes a speech made by a leader of the tenants movement at a street rally in Brownsville: "About a year ago," he complained, "when tenants began to offer resistance to profiteering landlords, the mayor issued a bill against such organizations, and threatened to send to jail all the leaders of the movement. Many were sent to jail, the municipal judges using their offices to smash every rent strike.

11. New York Times, November 22, 1919, p. 18.

THE GOVERNMENT'S SHIFT

The public authorities, however, did not succeed in breaking the power of the tenants' movement. There was a period of relative quiet after the police raids in September and October of 1919, but agitation was resumed with even greater energy in the early months of the next year. The mayor, anxious to appease organized labor and prevent the strikes from growing larger, sent a series of bills to the state legislature designed to control rent gouging and prevent evictions. In presenting these bills to the state legislature, which was then considering the expulsion of its five socialist members, city officials warned that their passage was necessary to prevent disorder from reaching unmanageable proportions. If the legislature were too doctrinaire to pass the "socialistic" rent control laws, Fiorello La Guardia (then a member of the state legislature) declared, it might find itself dominated by socialists after the next election:

Unless rapid relief legislation is passed, next year a radical legislature might be debating whether to allow five old party-men to sit instead of a Republican and Democratic assembly suspending five socialists...and when the hot days of August have exhausted the people's patience, the great body of citizens of New York will refuse to pay any rent whatsoever. Then what can you do? You can't disposses every tenant in New York.

The rechanneling of discontent into a legal framework seemed to undermine the power of the organized tenants movement. The local tenants leagues suffered a rapid loss of membership once the rent laws were passed and the Tenants Defense Union, the city-wide coalition of Jewish organizations, fell apart entirely, unable, in the face of widespread tenant apathy, to develop a workable program for the achievement of its legislative goals. Tenants' leaders who had expected a permanent organization to be forged in the housing crisis were sorely disappointed. Within

a few years, there was no trace at all of the movement that had inspired fear of a "rent revolution." Some tenants' leagues in middle-class neighborhoods were active, but they made little impact on the housing policies of the city or state government. The rent control laws of 1920 remained essentially unmodified until their expiration in 1929.

THE 1930'S

The Depression, however, initiated a revival of tenants' agitation in New York City. In 1931, rent strikes were begun by tenants in Brownsville the Bronx and the Lower East side to prevent evictions and to force landlords to lower rents. On January 14, 1931, the Daily Worker reported with some exaggeration that:

The slogan 'high rent must come down' is echoing throughout the upper Bronx territory and is taking concrete form in growing rent strike... Everywhere, hundreds of workers are organizing house unemployed councils and are demanding 10-15% reductions in rent.¹²

Like the early postwar tenants revolts, these rent strikes occurred in Jewish neighborhoods, and were accompanied by considerable mob action. Both the New York Times and the Daily Worker reported, from rather different perspectives, the use of violence and sabotage to force landlords to yield to tenant demands, and to prevent city marshals from carrying out evictions. On January 26, 1932, four thousand tenants, the Times reported, rioted and attacked police reserve forces trying to evict seventeen tenants from an Onlinville Avenue (Bronx) building.¹³ The mob was led by women poised on rooftops who directed the action with megaphones and hurled objects upon the police, shouting with upraised fists that "the workers' struggle has commenced." This

12. The Daily Worker, January 14, 1931, p. 2.

13. N.Y. Times, January 23, 1932, p. 4.

was the same neighborhood, the reporter noted, where 2000 people, 'chanting revolutionary anthems,' had tried to stop the eviction of four tenants exactly one year before. In celebrating one rent strike victory, the Worker pointed with pride to the courage that tenants had shown in resisting police attacks:

After a bloody battle with the police and the eviction of a worker had failed to break the organization of the rent strikers at Onlinville Avenue, the landlord was forced to reduce the rent on 2 room apartments by \$2, on a 3-room apartment by \$2.50, and on four-room apartments by \$3...earlier in the day, police and detectives brutally attacked an open-air meeting of the tenants which was led by the Upper Bronx Unemployed Council. Five workers were arrested and a number injured.¹⁴

The organization of striking tenants appears to have largely been the work of the Communist Party. Scornful of the legalistic tactics of the "old-guard socialists" in the trade-unions and the Socialist Party, it was willing to sponsor any kind of protest activity to develop and encourage "class-consciousness", and it seized upon housing agitation as an area in which it could assert its leadership in the class struggle. In developing the rent strike as an effective weapon for the unemployed to use in dealing with their housing problems, the Party filled a vacuum of leadership in the Jewish community, which the socialists, now hostile to mass action, had left. In its coverage of the rent strikes, the Daily Worker proudly reported several instances where party workers had won over buildings from socialist organizers who had tried to convince tenants to fight their landlords in court.¹⁵ Sometimes, the landlords themselves were socialists. The Worker told of a rent strike in the building of a Socialist landlord, 'who was a member of the Workman's circle and several democratic clubs.'¹⁵ "This socialist landlord," the

14. The Daily Worker, January 23, 1932, p. 4.

15. Ibid., The Daily Worker, January 14, 1931, p. 2.

1. Ibid., The Daily Worker, January 28, 1932, p. 4.

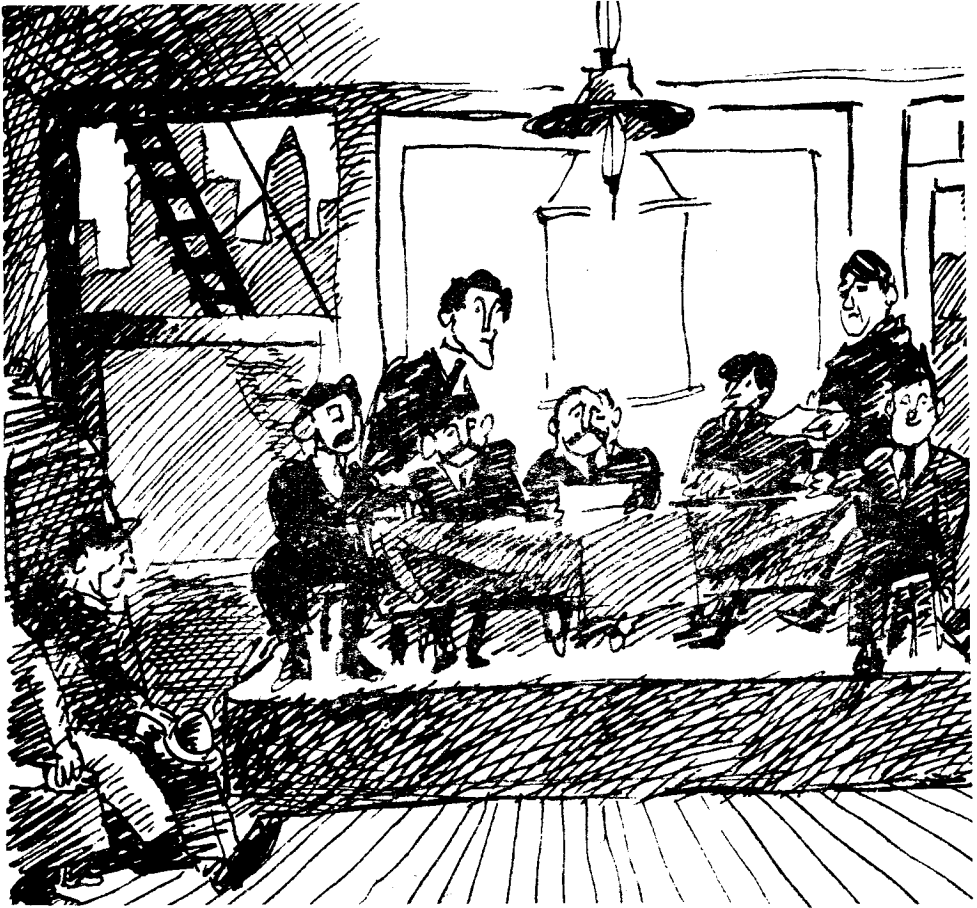
article declared, "is most rabid in his attacks on the workers, egging on the police to break up the meetings of the rent striking tenants and threatening blood baths against the tenants."

After 1933, these rent strikes appear to have subsided, despite the growth of a powerful tenants movement in the city. The liberalization of the city's eviction policies,¹⁷ combined with the gradual extension of welfare services by the state and federal governments, made the problems of tenants far less acute and unsettling than they had been in 1931-32 when the rent strikes were most common. There was not the same sense of urgency that there was in the earlier period and the new tenants organizations which grew up after 1933 concentrated on the development of a stable tenants movement capable of being a continuing source of pressure for enlightened government intervention in the housing field. The Citywide Tenants Union, an organization which eventually included twenty-four affiliated tenant leagues in different sections of the city, emphasized the use of lobbying and public demonstration to arouse support for reform legislation.¹⁸ Its local chapters, which tried to develop a stable network of tenants' councils in the neighborhoods where they worked, used the rent strike to influence landlords only when all other forms of pressure had failed, and then, only for ends which could be supported in court. They regarded the rent strike as an extremely dangerous form of protest, to be used only when tenant unity was high, and

17. After pressure from a number of reform organizations, who were part of the United Front Committee Against Evictions, the Mayor issued a directive to CTU marshals ordering them to delay eviction until the Emergency House Relief Bureau could find adequate shelter for the evicted tenant.

18. See Stuart D. Wright, The City-Wide Tenants Union of New York, (unpublished master's thesis, Columbia Univ.), 1938, pp. 46-55.

extensive legal aid available. Before a rent strike could be organized in a particular building, the action had to be approved by a strike committee of the central body, presumably to prevent hasty action which might harm the reputation of the organization. These careful precautions regarding the rent strike's use prevented it from ever attaining the status of a protest movement under the Council's direction. From 1940 to 1953, rent strikes continued to play a limited role within the larger framework of tenants' agitation. The tenants' organizations became highly specialized during this period, both on a local and a city-wide level, with a limited array of tactics, and a legalistic, down-to-earth way of doing things. The massive rent strike that arose in Harlem in 1963, with its extravagant aims and messianic rhetoric, caught them entirely by surprise.



HARLEM, 1963

In the fall of 1963, when rent strikes once more began to make their appearance on a massive scale, housing conditions in New York City's slums were much the same as they had been for the past 50 years. In the old neighborhoods which the European migrants once inhabited---Brownsville, Williamsburg, Harlem, the East Bronx and the Lower East Side---Negroes and Puerto Ricans now resided, crowding tenements which had been regarded as substandard in the Progressive Era. Nine-hundred thousand people still lived in houses built before 1900,¹⁹ when the Tenement House Law had established the city's first set of health standards for residential construction.

Despite the continued decay of the slum areas, only partially offset by the construction of low-income public housing, it required the impetus of the Civil Rights Movement to transform passive resentment into active protest. Inspired by the mood of growing militancy which the March on Washington both reflected and negated, several CORE chapters had begun, in the summer of 1963, to apply the tactics of non-violent direct action to the field of housing. Brooklyn CORE started with a campaign to pressure the city into enforcing the existing housing code. It taught tenants how to file forms with the buildings department to set the code enforcement machinery into operation, and it picketed the homes and businesses of landlords who refused to yield to tenant demands. Two college chapters, NYU CORE and Columbia CORE, also formed "housing Committees" and began to organize slum tenants in Harlem and the Lower East Side. The Columbia Chapter, like the Brooklyn group, tried to teach tenants to work through the city agencies to improve conditions, but NYU CORE and a small organization called the Northern Students Movement, convinced tenants in six buildings on the Lower East Side to fight their landlords by withholding rent.

19. N.Y. Times, January 13, 1964, p. 34.

These rent strikes won the approval of James Farmer, the national director of CORE. On November 9, in a statement to the "Amsterdam News" he declared that "the rent strike had proved an effective weapon," and urged that "more of them be employed by tenants having problems with indifferent slumlords."²⁰ A week later, he warned of a "citywide rent strike with up to ten thousand tenants on strike if slum conditions are not cleared up," and predicted that the civil rights drive in the city would be stepped up on all fronts after the first of the year.

ENTER JESSE GRAY

Although Farmer's prediction of a citywide rent strike proved to be accurate, the initiative for it did not come from CORE but from a 38-year old Harlem tenants leader named Jesse Gray. For ten years, Gray had been trying to do what CORE chapters had only now begun to think about--organize a mass movement in the ghetto around the issues which mattered most to the lower class Negro---poor housing, unemployment, police brutality. A longtime radical expelled from the National Maritime Union for his left-wing associations, he had begun his work in Harlem with a revolutionary dream. But the response to his agitation was unenthusiastic, and instead of a mass movement, he was able to develop only a small tenants organization on a few blocks in Central Harlem called the 'Community Council on Housing.' In October of 1963, at the head of a protest march on city hall which he had organized, Gray threatened to lead a political rebellion of Harlem tenants unless the city acted to take over buildings with longstanding violations and meted out stiffer punishments to landlords. "The Wagner administration has proved that it is unable to handle the housing problem," Gray was quoted as saying, "and we don't want him to come up to Harlem to ask for votes."²¹

Immediately after this protest march which drew 800 tenants, Gray decided to organize a rent strike in

20. The Amsterdam News, Nov. 9, 1963, p. 12.

21. The Amsterdam News, October 25, 1963, p. 1.

the Central Harlem buildings he had been working in. The stimulus for this decision, made, apparently, with little preparation (there had been no mention of a rent strike at the protest parade), was the growing militancy that Gray's followers had been showing at meetings and protest rallies since the end of the summer. Tenants who had once meekly accepted Gray's aid with their buildings department forms, were now demanding dramatic action to get repairs. "The people," Gray told the *Amsterdam News*, "are much more conscious than ever of the slum conditions in which they are ready to listen to an agitator who tells them not to be frightened by eviction notices."²² After one week of organizing, Gray claimed, he was able to place 16 buildings on strike.

The Community Council on Housing, when it began the strike, was a small, informally run operation that teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. It depended for its support on a combination of membership dues, which were rare in coming, and private contributions from wealthy radicals. Aside from Gray, who managed to eke out a meager salary from its treasury, there were four men who served as organizers, only one of whom, Major Williams, worked full time. Gray, moreover, could expect very little help from the tenant members of the council in organizing the strike. Most of them were women, who would join a picket line or give a small contribution to the Council's treasury, but who were content to leave the formation of strategy and the organization of buildings to Gray and his aides. Despite these disadvantages, Gray was able to almost triple the number of buildings on strike during the month of November. In the few blocks that he had organized before, the response to his message was enthusiastic, and the only limit on the speed of organization seemed to be the time that was required to explain the mechanics of the strike. There were buildings in Central Harlem where the name "Jesse Gray" would open any door. In

22. The Amsterdam News, December 7, 1953, p. 1.

the neighborhood where he had lived and worked for ten years, Gray, by countless hours of unpaid service, had built up a remarkable reserve of trust. Like the Democratic district leaders in the old immigrant quarters, Gray was the man people called upon when they were in trouble with the welfare department, the police, or any of the other huge and confusing bureaucracies with which they were dependent for their survival.

In early December, at a mass rally held at the Milbank Community Center near Mount Morris Park, Gray announced the results of November's organizing. Tenants in 34 tenements, he declared, had joined the strike, raising the number of buildings participating to 52. The rent strike, he proclaimed jubilantly, had become a mass movement, "with almost 3000 persons ready to participate in the action."²³ It was time for tenants to "take their case downtown!..and serve notice to Mayor Wagner and other city officials not to come up to Harlem at election time."

The political implications of a mass movement under Gray's leadership were not lost to Harlem's established political leaders. Men like Adam Clayton Powell, Huelan Jack, and Lloyd Dickens, who had never shown much zeal in demanding housing reform, quickly announced their support of the rent strike. Rev. Powell, with characteristic flamboyance, declared at a rally in the middle of December that he would dump the Democratic Party if no action is taken to remove the blight from the Negro community and called for a march on city hall if the city failed to take over the struck buildings.²⁴ Fifteen church and civic groups, represented at the same rally, pledged their support to the rent strikers and formed a coordinating committee to help extend the strike to other parts of Harlem. The voices were angry and the spirits were high. "The bells toll, the drums roll," Adam Powell exulted, "Harlem is on the March again."²⁵

23. The New York Times, December 2, 1963, p. 30.

24. The Amsterdam News, December 21, 1963, p. 12.

25. Newsweek, December 30, 1963, pp. 17-18.

Gray seemed almost intoxicated by the community solidarity that had been manifested at the rally. He began to see a citywide movement emerging from the small strike that he had started in Central Harlem. The great power blocs of the Harlem community, the ministers and the politicians, were lining up behind the strike, and CORE groups in Brooklyn and the Lower East Side were already beginning to organize their locales. "If our plans materialize," he told a Times reporter two days after the rally, "we will have 1000 buildings on strike by the first of the year. We hope, by means of a citywide rent strike, to force a mass rehabilitation of the slums."²⁶

NEW FACES

In these last frantic days of December, some new faces appeared in the Community Council's cluttered office. On the morning of December 27, while the Community Council's staff nervously awaited the results of the first court case, a well-dressed white man with a brusque manner walked into Gray's office, and asked "how he could help the movement."²⁷ He had read about the rent strike in the newspapers, he said, and had come to the conclusion that it was the first significant radical movement in New York since the 1930's. He was rich, had executive experience and had many powerful friends in the "liberal community". What could he do? After a long discussion with this man, who, it turned out, had been president of one of the largest smelting and refining companies in the United States, Gray decided to put him in charge of the rent strike's public relations". He was to take over all of the Council's dealings with the "white community", from fund raising to press relations, leaving Gray free to concentrate on extending the strike in Harlem. But he was to remain completely anonymous, so that no stories about a white man behind the rent strike would be publicly circulated.

²⁶. N.Y. Times, December 23, 1963, p. 30.

²⁷. This really happened, and in exactly the way I have described it.

Mr. Levin, as we shall call this man, did an extraordinarily effective job of publicizing the strike. Before he came, the rent strike was known among the rather exoteric group of people whom it affected directly---Harlem tenants, and politicians, city housing officials, civil rights workers, and the landlords. There had been five articles on the rent strike before December 28, but they had been hidden away in the back pages, and had not attracted much public notice. After Levin began work, however, articles on the rent strike began to appear regularly on the front pages of every major newspaper in New York except the Daily News, and stories on it were written in Newsweek, Time, and the Saturday Evening Post. Appearances were arranged for Jesse Gray and other rent strike leaders on local and national television. The rent strike, for a time, became the all important local political issue, and the cause celebre of the civil rights movement in the North.

Mr. Levin had no experience in public relations work to refer to in his new job. But the self-confidence and ability to deal with people that his executive training had given him, were sufficient to make him a success. His method was simple: he would call up reporters on the various newspapers who covered civil rights news and invite them down to Harlem to speak to Jesse and inspect the buildings that were on strike. For many of the reporters who came down, the experience was overwhelming, at once frightening and humbling. Even for men hardened by years of reporting wars, murders and riots, the sight of a family shivering in a heatless tenement while the temperature outside was eight degrees, of a mother treating the rat-bites on her four-year old child, could not be borne calmly. Homer Bigart, the Pulitzer Prize winning Times reporter came out of one striking building quivering with anger. The tenants in the building had no heat and no water---because the building had no boiler, and the inspection report from the buildings department listed no violations. "This is the worst thing I've seen in all my years of reporting," he told Levin, "I'll write anything you want."

Meanwhile, Gray warned,

The concept that the Negro is going to explode in the summer, when it's hot, man you know that's a farce. Harlem is going to explode right now in the cold...We have been in touch with Detroit and Chicago. We hope the impact of Harlem will spread over the country.²⁸

Gray seemed to articulate the feeling of every poor Harlemiter when he declared: "Nothing is being done we might as well have a rat mayor."²⁹

AND THE CITY

A barrage of criticism came down upon a Wagner Administration that was quite unnerved by the conflicting political pressures that the movement had unleashed.³⁰ Since the rent strike had begun, city officials had desperately sought ways to prevent it from spreading without spoiling their liberal image or offending powerful civil rights leaders. The city's policy began to take form as early as December 1, when the rent strike was still localized on a few blocks in Central Harlem. A committee of 33 city officials, chaired by Robert Low, the city councilman from the district where the rent strike had broken out met on that day and suggested that the city speed inspections in the Harlem area, take more buildings into receivership and add more personnel to the buildings department staff.³¹ The Mayor rapidly acted on these suggestions.

Finally, on January 5, after a hurried consultation with some of the rent strike's lawyers, Wagner

28. Newsweek, December 30, 1963, p. 17-18.

29. Ibid., p. 17-18.

30. A new leading housing lawyer whom I spoke to claimed that City Hall was "in a state of complete and utter panic," in December and January because of the rent strike.

31. New York Times, December 1, 1963, p. 18.

announced a new housing policy designed to identify him with the progressive forces demanding housing reform. In a seven-page statement to the press, he announced that he was sending a bill to Albany to legalize rent strike and initiating a "pocket book attack on the slumlords." He was going to "step up pressure for maximum fines and jail sentences for violations affecting health and safety, press the legislature for minimum fines and jail sentences for housing violations, increase the inspection force of the buildings department by 35, and try to close the time between reports of a violation and official action to correct it, urge the creation of special housing courts in Queens and the Bronx, and ask for a study of the city's housing and health codes, aimed at the elimination of duplication both in the codes and in the city's inspection service."³²

This program, impressive as it sounded, was greeted with profound skepticism by proponents of housing reform. R. Peter Straus, the president of WMCA, who had been leading a slum cleanup campaign known as "Call to Action", called the Mayor's proposal a 'lot of hot air' and pointed out that the city had "plenty of authority to make improvements under the present laws."³³ In a devastating column entitled "How Not to Fight the Slumlords," Woody Klein enumerated all the occasions that Mayor Wagner, in his various capacities as a public official had "declared war on the slumlords" (there were 14) and asserted that the new program was nothing more than a warmed over version of past promises, with the possible exception of legalizing rent strikes.³⁴ The Wagner Administration, it

32. New York Times, January 6, 1964, p. 1.

33. New York Times, January 7, 1964, p. 22.

34. The New York Telegram and Sun, January 8, 1964, p. 15. The whole flavor of Wagner's approach to slum housing, and indeed to most of the complex social problems in the city, is beautifully conveyed by Klein's column, as the following abstracts illustrate:

'Mayor Wagner has declared war on the slumlords. Ho Hum...In 1947, as chairman of the City

34. (Cont.)

Planning Commission, he publicly took responsibility for the "safety, comfort and very lives" of New York Tenants. In 1948, as chairman of the City Planning Commission, he called for a bold program to clean up slums and meet the housing crisis...

In 1959, he announced that housing was the city's No. 1 problem and made public a program, which, he said, had been "sweated out for months." It called for rent reductions, stiffer court fines and more inspections.

In 1950, Wagner renewed his pledge to step up the housing program and boasted: "We are doing more, I believe, than the rest of the country combined."

In 1961, the Mayor announced a "massive" attack on slums and a six-point program to help tenants.

In 1962, at a public hearing, he vowed to drive slumlords out of business in a new war on the real estate villains. He called for more and tougher weapons and promised to "press war vigorously" against the tenement speculator.

In 1963, he predicted that New York would be a "slumless" city in 50 years.

Also in 1963, after a meeting with the late President Kennedy in Washington, Wagner declared: "I am determined that adequate means shall be developed to enable us to mount a new and ever more effective attack on slum conditions."

And in June of 1963, in an announcement billed as a major policy shift, he pledged a seven-point program to "hit the slumlords where it hurts---in the pocketbook."

He also called for more vacate orders, stiffer enforcement of the receivers program and twice-a-year inspections of all old tenements.

Now in 1964, Mayor Wagner has once again called for a pocketbook attack on the slumlords..

Six years ago, Mayor Wagner told me in his office in City Hall--"There's nothing you can do about the slums, you know that--they're always going to be that way." The New York Times, January 7, 1964, p. 22.

was clear, was not willing to commit itself to the massive rehabilitation of the slums without a significant increase in the pressures on it from the white and the Negro community. The fundamental question was ---could the rent strike provide these pressures, whether through the use of massive civil disobedience, or the threat of a political revolt of slum tenants?

"MASS MOVEMENT" STUMBLES

In early December, when the Community Council was beginning to make plans to turn the rent strike into a "mass movement", it was counting on extensive cooperation from civil rights groups and civic organizations within the Harlem community. The initial response of such groups had been enthusiastic; fifteen Harlem organizations, including block associations, church groups, Democratic clubs and a labor union (Local 1199 of the Drug and Hospital Workers) had joined a coordinating committee set up by Gray to extend the strike. Gray's expectations of support, however, proved to be over-optimistic. As December came to a close, and the rent strike began to make the front pages of the daily newspapers, the Community Council's organizers were struggling to extend the strike in Harlem almost entirely unaided. The fifteen Harlem civic groups who supported the strike gave Gray some money and helped publicize the movement in the community, but did not provide what the rent strike needed most to become a mass movement---manpower---to organize buildings, to run the office, to keep up contact with the striking tenants and advise them on legal matters. They were content to remain patrons of the strike rather than full partners. In the beginning of January, the bulk of the organization was still being done by the same 7-10 workers from the Community Council and the Northern Students Movement. The strike expanded to involve 100 buildings, far short of the 1000 which Gray had predicted.

The major national offices of the civil rights groups, moreover, did not reply at all to the Harlem rent strike's pleas for assistance. James Farmer of

CORE refused to comment on the tactic as soon as it became publicly identified with the work of Jesse Gray,³⁵ and the Community Council received neither organizational help, nor financial aid from CORE. The NAACP's Central Harlem chapter, under Reverend J. Edgar Johnson, urged its members to participate in the rent strike and contributed money to the Community Council's treasury, but its national office remained aloof to the movement. Roy Wilkins refused to answer questions from a press agent, and made no reference to the rent strike in his public statements.

BUT THE ACTIVISTS RESPOND

The hostility of the established civil rights leaders to the rent strike, however, did not accurately mirror the feeling of the rank and file of the city's civil rights groups. Jesse Gray's initial successes in organizing the people of Harlem, exaggerated and glorified by a "muckraking" press, captured the imagination of young civil rights activists around the city, activists who were unacquainted with Gray's radical background. One after another, local CORE groups in the city dropped their other activities and began to organize rent strikes in their districts. The Brooklyn chapter, which had been organizing tenants since the summer, placed its first buildings on strike on December 1, and had a number of cases in court before the end of the month. Downtown CORE and Columbia CORE,

35. From the middle of December on, James Farmer did not make a single statement on the subject of the rent strike, although he had himself advocated a citywide rent strike earlier in the year. In February, moreover, when interviewed by The Saturday Evening Post about problems of the civil rights movement, he declared at the outset that he would answer no questions relating to the rent strike and to Jesse Gray.

which had been operating small housing programs which worked through city agencies, dropped their reformist approach and began to organize rent strikes early in January. And Bronx CORE and East River CORE, which had been devoting most of their time to "employment" campaigns, began rent strikes of their own in February.

With the possible exception of the Brooklyn groups, these CORE chapters entered the rent strike with only the vaguest notions of what they were trying to accomplish and the most limited experience with tenants organization and housing law. The young activists who composed the bulk of these organizations were responding more to the general sense of excitement which surrounded the rent strike, than to the appeal of a well-thought-out strategy of action. The headlines in the press, the radio broadcasts, the mass meetings and the leafleting campaigns, created what those who experienced it called a "rent strike fever", an extraordinary sense of exhilaration and even of historic destiny that drew people to the movement as the initiator of a new stage in the civil rights movement. The excitement reached its height at a mass meeting held in Harlem on January 11. A crowd of eight hundred people, composed of Harlem tenants and representatives of almost every civil rights group and tenants organization in the city heard a group of prominent speakers, including James Baldwin, William Fitts Ryan, Jesse Gray and John Lewis tell them to spread the rent strike to other parts of the city. "At this Meeting," one leader of a student CORE group told me, "everyone caught the fever--Rent Strike. No one knew about the legal consequences, or the amount of work involved. It seemed like the thing to do...the only way to beat the landlord."

In addition, Mobilization for Youth, a federally sponsored social work project trying to encourage social action among low-income people on the Lower East Side saw in the mass movement that Gray seemed to be developing a model well worth imitating. Throughout December, MFY's directorate worked to devise a way to sponsor a successful rent strike on the Lower East

Side without offending the political interests upon which it depended for its funds. To be successful, they believed, a rent strike on the Lower East Side would have to be as militant and vocal as the strike in Harlem, it would have to attack the city government as well as the landlords. But if MFY organized such a rent strike, it might jeopardize its existence, for the use of government funds to organize protests against the government was then hardly an officially sanctioned mode of "community organization." They decided to organize the rent strike behind a "smokescreen" of small community groups set up by MFY and provided with paid "organizers". In late December and early January, MFY officials organized groups of tenants, gave them storefronts and operating expenses and assigned to them paid community workers---neighborhood people on MFY's payroll who had experience in the civil rights movement---who were to do most of the work connected with the strike. In addition, they contacted tenants organizations, civil rights groups and social fraternal organizations (such as the Congress of Puerto Rican Organizations), which had organized rent strikes or expressed interest in them and asked them to join with the newly formed "tenants" groups in a coordinated rent strike on the Lower East Side that would be partially subsidized by MFY's funds. The invitations were accepted, and on January 11, 11 organizations, representing the most diverse social and political perspectives one could imagine,³⁶ met

36. The groups participating were The University Settlement Housing Clinic, the East Side Tenants Council (these two were Metropolitan Council on Housing affiliates) the Educational Alliance Housing Clinic, the Presbyterian Church of the Crossroads Housing Clinic, the Downtown CORE Housing Committee, the Integrated Workers (Progressive Labor Party) Housing Clinic, The Housing Clinic of the Council of Puerto Rican Organizations, the Stanton Street Housing Clinic, The Community House Tenants Association Housing clinic, and the Negro Action Group (the last 3 were groups set up by MFY).

at MFY headquarters and agreed to work together to create a massive rent strike on the Lower East Side.

GRAY AND COORDINATION

The task of coordinating these local rent strikes and giving them a unified political impact proved to be a difficult one. While there was considerable sharing of information about methods of organization and an effective coordination of legal services, there was no successful attempt to define the goals of the movement on a citywide level and to devise tactics in which members of the participating organizations could effectively combine their energies. Much of the movement's potential for coordinated action was debilitated in power struggles between leaders of the various rent-striking groups. Perhaps the main axis of conflict was between Jesse Gray and the Metropolitan Council on Housing, a federation of housing organizations formed in the middle fifties to protect rent control and organize support for the construction of low-income housing. Early in the strike, the Met Council, whose leaders regarded themselves as "experts" on the political dimensions of housing problems, made tentative efforts to set itself up as a clearinghouse for rent strike information and to incorporate the rent strike into its own legislative campaigns. It invited Jesse Gray to become the leader of a citywide rent strike coordinating committee, which it proposed to establish. Gray, however, rejected their offer. He did not want his leadership of the movement diluted by what he called a "white middle-class organization." After ten years of organizing without recognition, he was not willing to share his newly won prestige with an organization that he regarded as being out of touch with the rising spirit of race consciousness and nationalism in the black ghettos.

He decided, thus, to coordinate the movement himself. He spoke at rallies in behalf of groups organizing rent strikes in all parts of the city, and had numerous private conferences with rent strike leaders to discuss with them techniques of tenants

organization and related problems of housing law. And in the press conferences and news broadcasts which his press agent arranged for him, he dramatized the slum conditions which gave rise to the strike and the movements' immediate aims in a forceful and ominous way, setting off a wave of short term reforms by the city before the strike had even approached its projected strength. On February 12, rent strike leaders were invited to a mass meeting in Harlem to form a Citywide Committee for Decent Housing, which would coordinate protest to force the city and state governments to act against the slums. At this meeting, Gray put on one of his better performances. In a colorful speech, he called for a March on Albany to "remind Governor Rockefeller that Central Harlem and areas like it are part of the state of New York and that he should stop trying to avoid his responsibility by blaming others all the time for the terrible housing conditions."³⁷ He angrily assailed city officials, asserting that Mayor Wagner was "spineless," and his chief housing expert, Julius C. Edelstein "was a sorry creature." "To get housing code enforcement in the city," Gray concluded, "citizens had to plead, pray, beg, and hold special church services." Other speakers joined the orgy of angry rhetoric. Rev. Browne, leader of the Stryker's Bay Tenants Council, and a strong supporter of the Harlem rent strike, called for a long fight against the enemies of public housing, and declared that Governor Rockefeller headed "the list of finks because he has no low rent housing program."³⁸ But when the speeches ended, only two proposals for direct action, and rather mild ones at that, were ratified by the delegates-- to join the March on Albany for a \$1.50 minimum wage with a tenants parade to demand code enforcement and the construction of more public housing, and to begin a "Rats to Rockefeller Campaign," which consisted of a drive to send rubber rats to the Governor

37. The New York Times, February 16, 1954, p. 59.

38. Ibid., p. 59.

along with form letters from tenants urging the Governor to support legislation to provide emergency repairs in slum housing.

The hopes voiced by the strike's leaders a few months before, that the movement would mobilize the population of the ghettos for mass action to force a comprehensive rehabilitation of the slums seemed strangely remote from the debate now taking place--the proposals ratified were an extension of the "responsible" methods that tenants organization had engaged in for years without bringing basic changes in the conditions of the homes. There was no initiative (from Gray or anyone else) for a drive to force public authorities to commit themselves to a systematic program of slum rehabilitation that would make use of the disruptive powers of the black masses. Gray was the man everyone looked to for leadership, but he seemed unable to visualize a way of maintaining the militancy of the Harlem movement within the context of a coalition of groups. His rejection of the Metropolitan Council on Housing as comfortable and middle class seemed ironic indeed, for the new "militant" coordinating group that he had formed began by appropriating its methods. The irony was apparent even to Gray. At future meetings of the "citywide committee for decent housing," Gray himself, involved in a campaign against the police in Harlem, rarely showed up.

In the last weeks of February, the aura of cataclysmic power that had surrounded the rent strike in its early days had largely faded away. The press seemed to lose interest in the movement. Reporters no longer anxiously kept track of Gray's predication of how large the strike was going to get, and muckraking articles about slum conditions and inefficiencies of the buildings department seemed to go out of fashion. From February 11 onward, no article dealing with the strike appeared on the front page of the Times. The city government ceased issuing promises to appease the movements' leaders and the aroused conscience of the public. The Mayor's last dramatic gesture to the

strike came on February 8, when he announced the beginning of a one million dollar anti-rat campaign to help rid the slums of pestilence.

While the public authorities resumed their habitual complacency toward slum conditions, the rent strike leaders found their attention pulled further and further away from political questions. There was a clear shift in perspective of the rent strikes from citywide to a local level in this period, and a growing concern with legal and technical problems that had been ignored in the beginning of the strike. The mass meetings in Harlem which had confirmed and inspired the high aspirations of the movement, were now held infrequently and had poor attendance. In many parts of the city, indeed, the rent strike began to resemble a social service operation rather than a militant protest.

THE COURTS AND THE MOVEMENT

The Community Council on Housing had entered the strike without clearly defining its attitude toward the legal system. It did not have much confidence in the legal process through which striking tenants could get repairs (section 755 of the buildings code) but it was unwilling to boycott the courts entirely, for it had promised tenants that there would be no evictions. In the early stages of the strike, the organizers had paid only perfunctory attention to the legal procedures required to win a "755"--which included filing forms for inspections with the buildings department; checking that violations were actually recorded after inspections; and subpoenaing records for the court--they were trying to get buildings on strike quickly to give the movement political leverage. In many cases, observers noted, organizers simply called a meeting of tenants, told them to stop paying rent and left, reminding them to call the Community Council's office when they received a disposses.

The confusion of the organizers about the role court action would play in the movement was increased

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by two favorable but conflicting decisions handed down by lower court magistrates in late December. On December 30, in the first court decision affecting the Harlem rent strikes³⁹ Judge Guy Gilbert Ribaud ordered 13 striking tenants in two Harlem tenements to pay rent into court until the landlord repaired outstanding violations, asserting that conditions in the buildings were "shocking, and should be repaired as soon as possible."⁴⁰ This reaffirmation of the applicability of 755 was accompanied by a statement declaring that the court did not condone rent strikes; it was illegal for the tenants to withhold rent except in cases involving "real and so called constructive eviction and where hazardous violations exist."⁴¹ One week later, however, a decision was handed down in a Brooklyn court which went far beyond Judge Ribaud's dictum and broke down many of the guidelines which the organizers had set after the earlier decision. Judge Fred Moritt, after hearing the case of five striking tenants who argued that their living quarters were not fit for human habitation ruled that "any act or default on the part of the landlord which deprives the tenant of the beneficial enjoyment of his premises, constitutes, in the eyes of the law, an eviction. A wrongful eviction, by the landlord, whether partial or total, has an effect of terminating the tenant's liability for rent."⁴² This meant, he later explained that in "extreme cases, the landlord is not entitled to any rent until the conditions are remedied . . . If it takes the landlord two years to make the repairs, he gets no rent for two years. Period."⁴³ This decision, which was not based upon section 755, differed from Judge Ribaud's in two significant respects; it did not require the tenants to pay their

39. Under New York City Housing Law, tenants cannot initiate action in court against a landlord for grievances constituting a "constructive eviction," they must wait for the landlord to send a disposses and then contest the disposses in court.

40. The New York Times, December 31, 1963, p. 7.

41. Ibid., p. 16.

42. Ibid., p. 7.

43. Ibid., p. 25.

rent into court, and it did not entitle the landlord to back rents for the period that the violations were in existence.

Both the Ribaud and Moritt decisions seemed to suggest that the movement could get repairs for individual tenants through court action. But neither decision, as it turned out was representative of the kind of treatment the strike was to receive in the housing courts. Once cases began to appear in large enough numbers to be free of publicity, the housing court judges, a breed notorious for their subservience to the party machines, showed strong resistance to the use of the court as an agency to supervise repairs. In some cases, judges made no attempt to hide their contempt for the tenants and their opposition to the rent strike, and didn't try to separate their legal arguments from their personal biases. But more common was a strict adherence to legal technicalities on the part of "objective" judges, which, given the nature of the housing laws and the peculiar problems of the low-income person in a court situation, proved to be a frustrating and confusing barrier to effective action.

In the housing courts, it was common, for example, to grant parties in the case adjournments, when their cases were not sufficiently prepared or relevant witnesses such as buildings department inspectors were absent. When low-income people were a party to the case, the seemingly innocent power of adjournment took on new importance--the power to adjourn was the power to destroy. For most of the striking tenants, living on the edge of subsistence burdened by economic and familiar responsibilities, a court appearance was a major sacrifice which had to be arranged far in advance by the organizer. If after extensive planning and preparation, and the loss of a day's salary on the part of the tenants, the result was only adjournment, the tenants, generally anxious and fearful to begin with, might begin to question whether the yet to be achieved

gains of the strike were worth the price of the disruption it wrought in their personal lives. Landlords, fully aware of the subversive effects of adjournments on the morale of a tenants committee, would often purposely leave their cases unprepared, or demand that new witnesses be called in, who were not present at the first hearing. Many judges, insensitive to the differential impact of the adjournment on landlord and tenants, would grant the landlord's request and become an unconscious party to his harassment--others, no doubt, less innocent in their intentions saw in this an inconspicuous and "safe" way of frustrating a movement they despised.

In addition, the civil court judges interpreted 755 in a way that made it difficult for all but the most carefully briefed tenants committee to win a case. Virtually without exception, they rejected the procedures of the Moritt decision; they would only accept as evidence "violations of record" subpoenaed from the buildings department. When tenants offered verbal testimony about conditions in the building or photographs of violations, they were told that such information would not affect the outcome of the case. This meant, in effect, that the strikers were dependent on the cumbersome and quite fallible machinery of the buildings department at every point in the strike; they had to get an early inspection, make sure that the inspector took down relevant violations, see whether they were actually recorded at the Hall of Records (which cost two dollars and required a trip downtown) and subpoena the inspection sheet from the Hall of Records on the day of the trial.

The organizations sponsoring the rent strike soon learned that the only way to get inspections on a workable basis was to put pressure on high officials of the buildings department for an arrangement that entirely bypassed bureaucratic channels. Gray had done that early in the strike, and was able to get on the spot inspections in Harlem buildings merely by making a telephone call. But even so, there were

problems in arranging the mechanics of an inspection. At the time of day when the inspector arrived, most of the tenants in the building could be out, and only a fraction of the violations would be recorded. It was necessary to arrange a time for inspection mutually agreeable to inspector and tenant, but city laws didn't make room for such an arrangement. The inspector would often arrive unannounced and find most of the tenants absent or unwilling to let him in. Moreover, there was no guarantee that the violations would be recorded once the inspection was made. Inspectors were notoriously corrupt and amenable to bribes, and would often slant their inspection reports to favor the landlord. Finally, there were huge delays in recording the violations once they were reported by the inspector. At the buildings department computer which processed inspection reports, information was held up for 13 working days by backlog.⁴⁴

THE FAILURE OF LEGALISM

It was common thus, for striking tenants to appear in court without buildings department records to back up their cases, or with records which did not truly reflect the nature of the conditions in their building. Judges, using a "strict construction" of the doctrine of constructive eviction, would declare that the evidence presented was insufficient to warrant issuing a 755, and would order the tenants to give back rents to the landlords and resume regular payment. Such a decision, the "final order" greeted a large number of the striking tenants whose cases appeared in court. The lower East Side Rent Strike was losing three-fifths of its cases during March and April, and improved its performance only slightly later on. None of the other rent striking organizations seem to have done much better. The one exception was Brooklyn CORE, which found the Brooklyn courts more responsive to tenants interests than those in other boroughs.

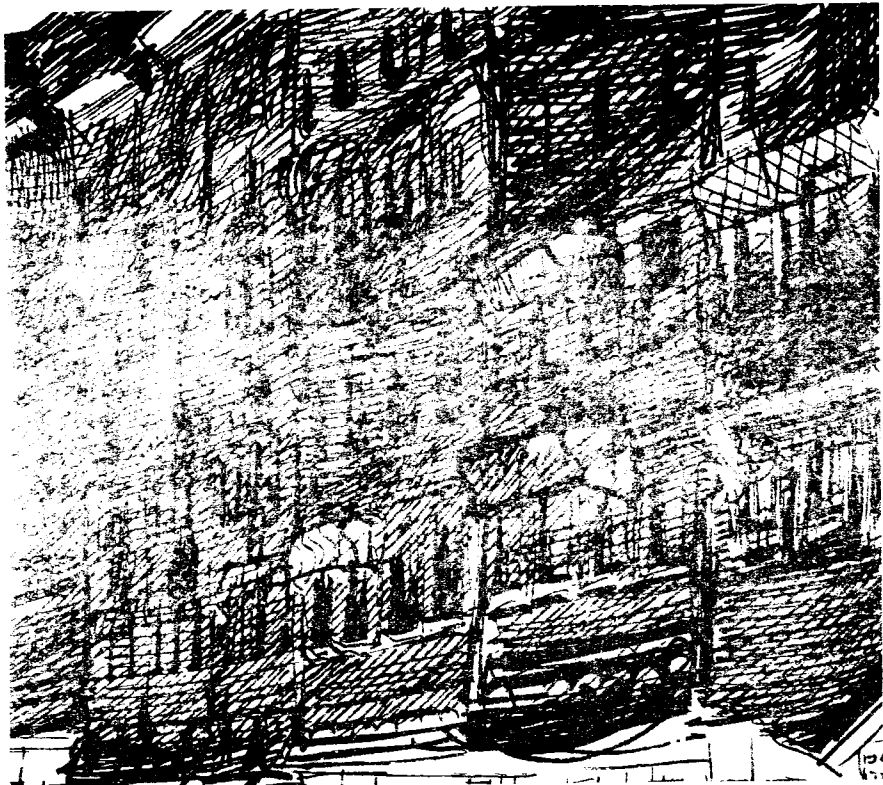
⁴⁴. The New York Times, January 21, 1964, p. 1.

Even when the judges actually granted a 755, it was by no means certain that conditions in the building would be significantly improved. As the law was interpreted, the landlord was only required to correct violations recorded on Buildings Department forms. Since these records were often incomplete because of inefficient or corrupt inspections, some of the worst violations in the struck buildings were declared outside of the court's jurisdiction. In addition, the procedures which the court used to enforce its order were often unreliable. To receive his rent, the landlord had to establish to the judges' satisfaction that he had removed, or would remove all violations of record. But most judges were reluctant to assume the responsibility of acting as a fulltime administrator of repairs, and tried to get the parties to settle out of court as quickly as possible. In cases where a building required extensive remodeling to meet the standards of the court, they were prone to grant the landlord a trial period after which he would receive his rent if he made a reasonable percentage of the repairs. But all too often, such trial periods served as an excuse to end jurisdiction, and landlords were able to stop repairs with impunity when they came to a halt.

There were many instances, where a "court victory" for the rent strike resulted in token repairs. Even if administered by men with the best of intentions--which it was not--the court system was poorly designed to supervise a massive program of repairs in slum housing. For the rent strike groups, taking a case to court was like piloting a ship through a minefield: at any moment, a hidden obstacle could appear and destroy the whole effort. The organizers, led by the early course of the movement to expect a "revolutionary" transformation of the slum environment, found their energies absorbed in legal preparations which yielded intermittent and unsatisfying results. When they were busy arranging court appearances, supervising inspections, filling out buildings department forms, subpoenaing records and conferring with lawyers, there was little time for the street rallies, the leafleting and the building organization which seemed to shake the slum population out of its apathy, and which made the rent

strike such an exciting thing to be a part of in its early stages.

In Central Harlem, where buildings had been organized most hastily and hopes of creating a mass movement had been highest the emotional let-down evoked by the advent of litigation was particularly marked. The Community Council's attempt to simultaneously perform the functions of a militant political movement, designed to force major reforms from the power structure, and of a traditional housing clinic, working to improve conditions for individual tenants, began to falter badly once legal perspectives and legal problems became prominent. But even those groups which had committed themselves to a legal perspective from the start, such as Brooklyn CORE and Ted Velez' East Harlem Tenants Council, eventually discovered that they could achieve their aims more effectively by organizing tenants to use the city agencies to achieve repairs. Regardless of whether court cases were won or lost, there was a huge disproportion between the amount of time and energy which they consumed and the limited results obtainable. Exhausted by the endless routine of court appearances, frustrated by the impossibility of actively involving slum tenants in complex legal procedures, unable to sustain the militant atmosphere of the early days, one group after another abandoned the rent strike. While Jesse Gray became involved in a campaign against police brutality and corruption, Brooklyn CORE - which had organized 400 tenant councils and 200 rent strikes - abandoned tenant organization entirely and applied its energies to the formation of an independent political movement known as the Brooklyn Freedom Democratic Party. By the fall of 1964, little or nothing was left of the rent strike movement in New York.



CONCLUSION: RENT STRIKES IN PERSPECTIVE

Most of the groups which had participated in this movement did so both in order to improve housing conditions in the slums and also to create the basis for lasting changes in the political attitudes and behavior of slum tenants. To what extent were either of these goals achieved? On the first count, the rent strike had a mixed record. Its short term gains were fairly impressive. Most of the buildings which were on rent strike won a number of minor improvements as a result of court victories or informal agreements with landlords who wished to avoid litigation. The strike was particularly effective in dealing with "emergency" situations such as leaks, gaping ratholes, and lack of heat and hot water. Such complaints were not too difficult to deal with on a temporary basis, and landlords were often willing to bear the small expense of patching up a wall or fixing a boiler, in order to avoid public exposure as a slumlord, or a court appearance which involved the risk, however

small, of "having the book thrown at him " and being forced to make major repairs. In areas where the rent strike attained massive proportions and attracted the attention of the media, even unorganized buildings experienced a temporary improvement in services.

But though the immediate grievances often were dealt with, the rent strike, in the vast majority of cases did not change the basic conditions in the buildings which continually created emergencies--thin and flimsy walls, archaic plumbing and wiring systems; lack of adequate building service. What good did it do to patch up ratholes in a wall that could be gnawed through in a few hours by the rats that made their home in the garbage ridden foundation of the building? Or to fix a single leak in a pipe system that was rusty and decayed? To be made liveable, these buildings required substantial rehabilitation--at the very minimum, new walls, a new boiler and new wiring system, and a floor to roof cleaning and extermination. But the cost of such repairs was staggering. In five buildings which the city took into receivership, Real Estate Commissioner Lazarus told the Times, the total sum required to remove all violations was \$97,139.28. At an operating profit of \$6,401 a year which the buildings yielded with their present level of rents, "it would take about 24 years to amortize the \$97,139.28 investment with 4% interest. The city, he concluded, could not deal with the worst slums unless it was ready to operate by a policy in which "humanity comes before economics." If the rent strike did not achieve major political reforms, its effect on slum conditions would be entirely transitory.

The political achievements of the rent strike, however, were not substantial. There were three main formal improvements in housing procedures which the rent strike brought about: (a) the initiation of a million dollar rat extermination program; (b) the addition of 50 inspectors to the buildings department; (c) and the passage of three new laws

legalizing rent strikes. These programs were hastily devised by Mayor Wagner in the early months of the strike to meet the insistent clamor of the movement's leaders and the press for "action against the slumlords."

The first two were slight improvements in a system of administering slum properties that was clearly inadequate; but the third, the new rent strike laws seemed to offer the hope of a dramatic change in the structure of landlord-tenant relations. Drafted under the supervision of Bruce Gould, the head lawyer for the Harlem rent strikes, they seemed to define a procedure through which rent withholding could be made a controlled and standardized process for the rehabilitation of slum buildings. Among the major improvements made over Section 755 were provisions enabling the tenant to initiate action in the courts, rather than waiting for the landlord to sue for eviction; allowing the court to appoint a third party to administer repairs, rather than entrusting the job to the landlord; and enabling tenants to buy fuel with the rent money three days after the strike had been initiated. The laws, thus, removed the danger of eviction from the rent strike procedure, and assured tenants that repairs would be comprehensive if a favorable decision were issued. They were regarded by housing experts as the Mayor's one meaningful concession to the rent strike, designed to remove the radical extralegal dimension from the tactic while making it a sure and effective device for achieving repairs.

Once the bill was passed, however (in the summer of 1935), tenants' organizations discovered that it was extremely difficult to use--cumbersome, expensive, and far from foolproof. There were far more documents to serve under the new laws than under 755, which made the landlord the initiator of the suit. The minimum cost of a "new law" rent strike for the tenants was \$500, at standard legal rates. Unless sponsored by a wealthy organization or provided with free legal aid, no slum building could initiate such action. The new law, thus, has been used quite

sparingly, only in fact by groups receiving large grants from the poverty program or from private foundations. For the unorganized, unsubsidized poor who compose the vast majority of the slums' inhabitants, the new law did nothing, illustrating once again the depths of the chasm separating the poor from the democratic process.

The greatest gains made by the rent strike were not in the form of new laws, but in changes in the administrative procedures of the city housing agencies. During the rent strike, the organizations such as the Department of Buildings, the Department of Health, and the Rent and Rehabilitation Administration, were subjected to extraordinary pressures to improve the quality of Code enforcement. To preserve their reputation, and perhaps their jobs, officials of these agencies were forced to make radical innovations in their procedures, which enabled them to meet the rent strike's demands for more efficient service. Tenant groups involved in the rent strike were granted "hot lines" to the heads of agencies which enabled them to get on the spot convictions and quick rent reductions--special phone numbers were set up for tenants who lacked heat and hot water, and a study was begun by the city to devise a plan to streamline and unify city agencies dealing with housing complaints. Lower level officials were instructed to keep close contact with militant tenants organizations and to aid them in every possible way.

The rent strike movement thus had a salutary effect on slum housing conditions in the short run; but did not change the basic economic relationships which made for decay and poor service. The major changes wrought by the strike were a general improvement in building code enforcement machinery and an increased interest in reform and innovation in housing in the community at large, but it did not bring the kind of massive rehabilitation programs that were needed to give the poor real protection from the dangers of tenement existence. This failure was crucial. The earliest organized tenants

groups in New York had understood that there could be no justice for slum tenants as long as low income housing was operated by the private enterprise system. But these groups, like the Harlem rent strike, won improved public regulation of housing rather than changes in ownership or massive rehabilitation programs, and did not change the fundamental conditions of life in the thousands of old law tenements which stood then, and stand today as a blight on the face of the city.

As regards the strike's effect on the level of social action in the communities where it took place, its results were even less substantial. The rent strike did not convert large numbers of slum tenants to social activism, it did not "radicalize the ghetto." Organizers in all parts of the city were struck by the extreme difficulty of getting tenants to participate in any of the movement's activities outside of the strike itself. At rallies, street meetings and demonstrations, there were usually fewer tenants than organizers and curious students--this was particularly true of Grey's famed "mass meetings" which drew extraordinary numbers of middle class activists, but few tenants. The tenants committees formed by the organizers to administer the strike in individual buildings proved to be highly unstable units. Although the strike had raised hopes of developing a permanent matrix of tenants committees to keep up the buildings after the movement had subsided and to serve as reserve units of organizational strength to be mobilized for other protests, none of the groups was able to maintain these committees as functioning units beyond the duration of the strike. Their failure mirrored that of major tenants groups in the past, who had tried to apply principles of labor organizations to housing and "unionize" tenants in individual buildings. Both the Tenants Defense Union of 1919-1920 and the Citywide Tenants Union of the 1930's had declared it their goal to organize into permanent organization "every renter in the city", but had fallen absurdly short of this goal. Even among the most "organizeable" ethnic and socio-economic groups--

tenants house committees were a most difficult form of organization to maintain on a stable basis.

ERRORS OF THE MOVEMENT

Whether or not a different kind of rent strike movement could have produced more stable organizational forms remains an open question. What is certain is that, both in terms of organizational involvement and political impact, the rent strike movement made a serious error of judgment in attempting to secure immediate improvement through the agency of the courts. For the courts, did not, by and large, deal with the tenants' grievances. Many cases were lost entirely and cases that were won usually resulted in token repairs. But more importantly, involvement in court action put strains on the organization of the rent strike movement which prevented it from attaining the size, flexibility or internal solidarity required to force government action to rehabilitate slum buildings. The city, state and federal governments were the only bodies which had the financial resources to subsidize comprehensive repairs in slum housing--they were the ones whom the rent strike had to force to act, not the slumlord. The rent strike movement should have given priority to those of its attributes which had the most influence on political authority.

There were three main qualities of the rent strike that contributed to its political effectiveness. First, its size. The larger the rent strike grew, the more politicians perceived in it a threat to the public order, or the danger of a broadly based radical movement arising to undermine established political relationships. Second, militancy. The more the rent strike broke laws, or massed large numbers of people together in volatile situations the more politicians felt the danger of a contagion of civil disorder to other groups and other issues--a breakdown of the peaceful "rules of the game" in which they were used to operating.

Third, rapport between leaders and followers. The more stable the movement's organization was, and the more closely its participants were linked to its leaders, the more politicians grew afraid that agitation would be lengthy, and would spread to other issues when the rent strike ended.

Court action, however, hindered the rent strike movement severely in each of these areas. It prevented the rent strike from attaining optimum size because it absorbed so much of the organizers' energy in paperwork and mechanical problems relating to court appearances such as arranging transportation for tenants and subpoenaing records. The time spent filling out forms, conferring with lawyers, and arranging transportation for the day in court could have been spent on activities which expanded the strike. In addition, when the organizers got involved in court action they were unable to devote as much time to the organization of demonstration and rallies which had given the rent strike the aura of mass movement in its early days. Involvement in court action seemed to impose a non-militant psychology on the rent strike's leaders and subtly steered them away from mass action or civil disobedience. The kind of massive resistance to evictions that characterized the rent strikes of the twenties and thirties did not take place in the Harlem rent strike. The most publicized instance of a resisted eviction involved only ten people--a far cry from the 4000 people who massed before an Olinville Avenue Building on rent strike in 1933. Finally, the technical responsibilities associated with court action prevented the organizers from using their time with the tenants for political education or activities which strengthened tenants' organization. Some preliminary surveys by the School of Social Work of tenants involved in the rent strike, show that there was very little contact between organizers and tenants and that very little of the rent strikes' meaning was communicated to the tenants. The organizers, moreover, had very little success in getting tenants to participate in related protest activities, and this was an important reason why government officials felt they

could safely stop making concessions after the first few months of the strike.

The rent strike, thus, by getting involved in court action severely compromised its strength as a political protest, but it did so in large part because it did not have a clear conception of itself as a political protest. The rent strike began suddenly and spread haphazardly--it had an epidemic quality. Many organizations rushed into it without knowing anything about housing, or without previous experience in organizing low-income people. Without a clear strategy to guide them, and without real confidence in their ability to stay with the movement, they were pushed into the safe and legitimate style of organizing, which would not put themselves, or the tenants, in danger. They did not know enough about housing work, or perhaps about American society in general to realize that major economic changes could not be effected by the courts. A certain naive and totally unjustified confidence in established institutions, characterized the organizers, many of whom were white college students and professionals. Unsure of their own commitment, at once afraid of and patronizing to the people they were organizing, and subtly beholden to the bourgeois notion that reason prevails in the chambers of power --they made of the rent strike an elaborate form of social work.

Mark D. Naison

Comment

Mr. Naison has written one of the first accounts of Jesse Gray's Community Council on Housing. He is apparently familiar with many of the facts concerning the rent strike movement after it got off the ground. There is, however, an elusive quality to the author's work which frustrates me. He discusses the rise and fall of numerous tenant movements in New York City, and finally narrates the history of the most current attempt of radicals to address themselves to the housing issue. I am confused as to why he bothered to write this paper in the first place, since he never explicitly states any significant conclusions. If his task was merely to record the failures of the left he has done so admirably. But if he wanted to draw some lessons from this history of tenant-city-landlord struggles, he has failed.

Naison's major criticism of the rent strike is its lack of definition of goals. He maintains that the movement would have been relevant, and perhaps even successful, if it had avoided the courts in preference for a campaign for government aid to slum housing.

I

The Community Council on Housing (CCH) originally

sought to build a tight cohesive politically conscious (read: radical socialist) base in a limited area in Harlem roughly between Fifth and Eighth Avenues, and 108th and 125th Streets. The rent strike was one of many tactics to aid in building this base. Gray also emphasized discussion sessions with tenants in buildings; court suits when necessary; mass meetings; and electoral campaigns. Certainly before October, 1963, Jesse Gray and his organizers were building that radical base. Naison apparently sees no significance in this dimension of the story.

The rent strike tactic was implemented as the cold weather set in, in the late fall of 1963. Gray and the Council organizers managed to pull strikes in buildings where the Council was known and respected. The total was not more than 16. The second group of tenants to go out on strike was not as familiar with the ideas of the CCH and Gray, but nevertheless education programs and building councils had been implemented. The total in November was not more than 50.

It was at this point that there was a shift in emphasis. The decisions of Ribaud and Moritt, coupled with gestures of cooperation from state and city agencies (the "hot line" to the office of Rent and Rehabilitation Administration, and the decision of the Department of Welfare not to penalize "clients" who withheld rent) allowed the rent strike movement to expand. The courts' decisions and Welfare's permissiveness were strong points around which people could be persuaded to withhold rent. A paradox developed in which, as Naison points out, the court action diverted the rent strike movement, but as he fails to note, the strength of the movement depended on it. Down at the block level, people had to be assured that they wouldn't be out on the street. Further, all of this took place within the context of increased press coverage and the involvement of many white radicals and liberals. The rent strike movement became the public domain, and Gray sacrificed local organizing in buildings

for the creation of a spectacle of thousands of tenants tying up the courts, the city administration, and the slumlords.

Practically speaking, the failure of the rent strike movement began when Gray's organization decided to go outside the bounds of the tiny locale in which it built its base. The complication of publicity, coordination of a citywide movement and the attendant fighting between various leaders for power, plus the bottleneck of court cases, compromised the initial vision of the Community Council on Housing. For Naison to state that the movement had no goals is a half-truth. To be accurate, the Council had an objective--building a radical base for political action--which was unfortunately sacrificed for expediency and opportunism.

II

Naison suggests a simple alternative for the rent strike movement: massive federal aid to slum housing. This suggestion reflects his failure to draw conclusions from the history of the struggles of American radicals. The rent strike, he argues, could have been an effective strategy designed to pry monies out of Washington. Naison seems to assume that the good society is the great society. Characteristic of many radical movements and organizations of the 20th century is a tendency to define solutions for this nation's ills in terms of a strong national government. Naison's answer follows in that tradition. Radicals, in fact, have been stalwart supporters of national reform programs which have accelerated the development of corporate capitalism, a multitude of complicated detents between the private economic sector and the national hierarchy, and a centralization of authority and decision-making which has become oppressive to all citizens.

It would seem that radicals now have to seek programmatic solutions in another direction. The growth of strong radical locally-oriented

organizations with demands for self-rule and control, rather than national and state hegemony, is imperative if the current generation of American radicals wishes to seriously challenge and change this nation. Self-determination, and local ownership and control over neighborhoods and buildings, speak both to the problems of poor people and to the larger issue of the kind of governmental structure radicals would like to see established in this country.

Naison is a prisoner of his own narrative-style of history. Thus he can relate the facts and the outcomes of struggles, but little more. It will be up to other historians to analyze Naison's facts toward an understanding of 20th century radicalism.

Robert Gabriner

A Paperback Approach to the American Radical Tradition, II

Editor's note: The following is the concluding portion of Mr. MacGilvray's two part article.

A brilliant study of what happened to the radical thrust is presented in James M. McPherson's The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and the Reconstruction (Princeton, #72, \$3.45), while the classic radical account is W.E.B. Du Bois' Black Reconstruction (Meridian, M170, \$3.45). The post-Civil War period is further illuminated in Staughton Lynd, ed., Reconstruction (Harper, \$2.25). For the political phase and an earlier Johnson gone wrong, see Eric L. McKittrick's Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction (Phoenix, P153, \$2.95).

Part of the painful legacy of the Civil War with which radicals had to contend may be read about in Rayford W. Logan, Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson (Collier, 03449, \$1.50); Ralph Ginzberg's 100 Years of Lynchings: A Shocking Documentary of Race Violence in America (Lancer, 74-805, .75¢); and Thomas F. Gossett's Race: The History of an Idea in America (Schocken, SB106, \$2.95). The thoroughly corrupting aspect of racism may be seen in the ruin of a potentially great Southern radical related by C. Van Woodward, Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel (Galaxy, GB102, \$2.50). But the radical reply to racism was nobly

made in W.E.B. DuBois' The Souls of Black Folk (Crest, R699, .50¢).

The rampant exploitation of the period which absorbed much radical effort is well described by Matthew Josephson in The Robber Barons (Harvest, HB47, \$2.25), and his The Politicos (Harvest, HB59, \$2.95). Immigrants were lured with lies and brought in droves to be exploited. Their part which added to the radical tradition is beautifully told by John Higham, Strangers in the Land (Atheneum, #32, \$1.95). One phase of the radical effort to aid them is set forth in Ray Ginger's Altgeld's America: The Lincoln Ideal Versus Changing Realities (Quadrangle, QP21, \$2.25).

On the agricultural front a grass roots revolt flaired. See: Solon J. Buck, The Granger Movement: A Study of Agricultural Organization and Its Political, Economic, and Social Manifestations (Bison, BB155, \$1.50); John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party (Bison, BB111, \$1.75); George B. Tindall, ed., A Populist Reader (Torchbooks, TB3059, \$2.25). For the continuation of America's agrarian struggle, read Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, Twentieth Century Populism: Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939 (Bison, BB175, \$1.85).

INDUSTRIALISM AND SOCIALISM

On the industrial front rebellion also made itself felt. A key crisis for radicals, growing out of the 8 hour day fight, is presented by Henry David, History of the Haymarket Affair (Collier, 03124, \$1.95). The Governor who took the radical side and was crucified for it has his story told in Harry Bernard, Eagle Forgotten (Charter, #116, \$2.85). A strike of huge proportions is described in Almont Lindsay's The Pullman Strike (Phoenix, PL55, \$2.95). During it a significant labor leader was converted to socialism. He became the radical leader who captured the imagination of Americans as no one has been able to do since. His life bears

close study. Read Ray Ginger's Eugene V. Debs: A Biography (Collier, BS21, \$1.50).

From this ferment also arises the militant direct actionist leader of the Industrial Workers of the World who has left another radical classic, William D. Haywood, The Autobiography of "Big Bill" Haywood (New World, NW59, \$1.95). A famous I.W.W. martyr of the period who was shot by a firing squad in Utah was the folksinger Joe Hill. For him see: Philip S. Foner, The Case of Joe Hill (New World, NW54, \$1.45); P. S. Foner, ed., The Letters of Joe Hill (Oak, \$1.95); Barrie Stavis and Frank Harmon, eds., The Songs of Joe Hill (Oak, \$1.00); and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, I Speak My Own Piece: Autobiography of the "Rebel Girl" (International, If4, \$2.95), who was an amazing radical in her own right.

Around the century's turn, a surprising number of intellectuals became actively involved. One such was Jack London who helped found an organization the direct ancestor of Students for a Democratic Society. For him see, P. S. Foner, ed., Jack London: American Rebel (Citadel, C143, \$1.95). An anti-imperialist critic of America who would be a delight to have around today has his say in Janet Smith, ed., Mark Twain on the Damned Human Race (Hill & Wang, AC54, \$2.25). An eye-opening study of him is P. S. Foner's Mark Twain: Social Critic (New World, NW9, \$1.85). A great left-wing journalist of the period may be heard in Ella Winter and Herbert Shapiro, eds., The World of Lincoln Steffens (Hill & Wang, AC53, \$2.45), and another in John Reed, The Education of John Reed (New World, NW3, \$1.45). One of the great humanitarian figures of our time also shared the radical faith: see P. S. Foner, ed., Helen Keller: Her Socialist Years (New World, NW62, \$1.55). Also worth examining here is Louis Filler, Crusaders for American Liberalism: The Story of the Muckrakers (Collier, O3222, \$1.50), and the anthology, Arthur and Lila Weinberg, The Muckrakers (Capricorn, #246, \$2.45).

Revealing also at this time is the radical political effort. For it see Howard Quint, The Forging of American Socialism (Bobbs, AHS24, \$1.95); David A. Shannon, The Socialist Party of America: A History (Quadrangle, QP38, \$2.45); the documentary anthology of H. Wayne Morgan, ed., American Socialism, 1900-1960 (Spectrum, S85, \$1.95); and an interesting critical reconstruction, Theodore Draper, The Roots of American Communism (Compass, C137, \$1.95). Anti-radicals were also active as witness William Preston, Jr.'s Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of the Radicals, 1903-1933 (Torchbooks, TBL287, \$2.45), and a superb account of yet another "witch hunt," for "Reds" this time, Robert K. Murray's Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920 (McGraw-Hill, 44075, \$2.95). A great strike of the period is examined by David Brody, Labor in Crisis: the Steel Strike of 1919 (Lippincott, \$1.45). Its Leader was an I.W.W. who later became a Communist and tells his story in William Z. Foster, Pages from a Worker's Life (International, IPL, \$2.50). Useful here too is Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, Labor's Untold Story (Marzani & Munsell, P.10, \$2.50), which takes in opposition to radical trade unionists.

One of the watersheds of the post World War One period which rallied intellectuals to a radical cause is splendidly surveyed in Louis Joughin and Edmund M. Morgan, The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti (Quadrangle, QP7, \$2.85), and may be felt emotionally in Marion D. Frankfurter and Gardner Jackson, eds., The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti (Dutton, D62, \$1.85). Also helpful, especially for students of literature, is Walter B. Rideout's The Radical Novel in the United States 1900-1954 (Hill & Wang, AC81, \$1.95), while Daniel Aaron's Writers on the Left (Avon, W103, \$1.25), is a valuable study of intellectuals in the 1930's. For a view through a great pair of intelligent eyes, try Edmund Wilson, The American Earthquake: A Documentary of the Jazz Age, The Great Depression and the New Deal (Anchor, A382, \$1.95).

RECENT RADICALISM

For more recent history involving the radical tradition, the following provide insight: William A. Williams, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (Dell, 9002, \$1.55); David Horowitz, The Free World Colossus: A Critique of American Foreign Policy in the Cold War (Hill & Wang, H33, \$2.45); Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom: the Montgomery Story (Perennial, PL5, 65¢); Malcolm X and Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (Dell, 5174, 95¢); Howard Zinn, SNCC: the New Abolitionists (Beacon, BP213, \$1.75); Elizabeth Sutherland, ed., Letters From Mississippi (Signet, T2943, 75¢); Sally Belfrage, Freedom Summer (Crest, T908, 75¢); Scott Nearing, The Conscience of a Radical (Social Science Institute, \$1.00); Hal Draper, Berkeley: The New Student Revolt (Grove, BC103, .95¢); Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale, eds., The New Student Left (Beacon, BP240, \$1.95); Jack Newfield, A Prophetic Minority (Signet, T3140, .75¢). Anti-radical activity of most recent variety may be seen in two works of Fred J. Cook, The FBI Nobody Knows (Pyramid, N1214, .95¢), and Barry Goldwater: Extremist of the Right (Black Cat, BC61, .75¢).

As you can readily perceive, the American Radical Tradition is quite accessible in paperback editions. To be sure, good pickings still remain in hard-cover. Here is the deliberately hidden history of our country which the Establishment wants forgotten. Knowledge of it can prevent errors and guide action. It can inspire and make converts to the radical cause. Let's be aware of it. Good reading!

Daniel MacGilvray

A Leaflet: The Genius of American Politics

Last year Jesse Lemisch was denied renewal of his contract as Assistant Professor of History. Lemisch, a left-wing activist whose scholarship focusses on the role of the common man in colonial and later American history, was told in explanation: "Your convictions interfere with your scholarship."

In 1953, Daniel Boorstin, preeminent colonial historian at the University of Chicago, in testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), said the following about convictions and scholarship:

Mr. (Morgan M.) MOULDER. Can you give us some statement as to how you expressed your opposition (to the Communist Party) since that time?... (Boorstin had testified to leaving the Party in 1939.)

Mr. BOORSTIN. Yes, sir.

My opposition has taken two forms: First, the form of an affirmative participation in religious activities....

The second form of my opposition has been an attempt to discover and explain to my students in my teaching and in my writing, the unique virtues of American democracy. I have done this partly in my Jefferson book (The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson, 1948)...and in a forthcoming book called The Genius of American Politics, which is on the presses at the moment.

I do feel that the most effective way to fight Communism--the one effective way in which I may have some competence is by helping people to understand the virtues of our institutions and their special values as these emerged from our history, and I have tried to do that.

Mr. (Gordon H.) SCHERER. Professor, do you feel today that an active member of the Communist Party should be a teacher in our public schools?

Mr. BOORSTIN. No, sir.

Mr. SCHERER. Do you feel that he should be a teacher in our colleges?

Mr. BOORSTIN. In any area where I have any expert competence, that is, in the area of the humanities and social sciences, my answer would be no.

(U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, Communist Methods of Infiltration (Education), Part I, 83rd Congress, 1st Session, 1953, pp. 51-52, 50, 59-60.)

This is not reprinted in an effort at mudslinging. We do not question Boorstin's right to his scholarly orientations; nor his right to explain his orientations and motivations to a congressional committee. (The human and moral appropriateness of doing so to HUAC in 1953 is another matter.) We think, though, that four important reflections can be based on this testimony.

- (1) The scholarship of at least one mainstream social scientist, by his own testimony, is written with a political purpose, and this purpose is to aid the American side in the Cold War. It is probable that the same is true of many other mainstream social scientists.
- (2) In Boorstin's case the assertion of a political perspective through scholarship and teaching was not at all gentlemanly or tolerant. It went so far as to assert the legitimacy of excluding certain alternative perspectives. Again, the same was and is true of many besides Boorstin.
- (3) Scholarship and conviction are not exclusive values. A scholar's choice of subject and treatment, and his attachment to certain hypotheses, are inevitably influenced by his convictions--or lack of conviction. Certainly these influences must be subjected to criteria of objectivity and evidence. There will always exist a certain tension between conviction and scholarship. Probably there are no universally valid guidelines for resolving it.
- (4) Thus, talk of "convictions interfering with scholarship" in the case of one scholar is hypocritical. What must be noted is that certain scholarly biases--mainly those which favor the status quo--are tolerated, even praised by the profession, while others--mainly those which question the status quo--are excluded. Any claim that Lemisch lost his job at the University of Chicago because his convictions interfered with his scholarship, but that Boorstin retains his job because his convictions do not, is bullshit.

Books on the American Labor Movement, 1877-1924

- Louis Adamic, Dynamite; The Story of Class Violence in America (NY, 1931; rev., 1934; reprint, Gloucester, Mass., 1960).
- Harry Barnard, "Eagle Forgotten;" The Life of John Peter Altgeld (Indianapolis, 1938).
- Samuel Bernstein, Essays in Political and Intellectual History (NY, 1955), pp. 169-182.
- _____, The First International in America (NY, 1962).
- Paul Brissenden, The I W W; A Study of American Syndicalism (NY, 1919).
- Wayne G. Broehl, Jr., The Molly Maguires (Cambridge, 1964).
- Henry Joseph Browne, The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor (Washington, 1949).
- Robert V. Bruce, 1877; Year of Violence (Indianapolis, 1959).
- J. Walter Coleman, The Molly Maguire Riots; Industrial Conflict in the Pennsylvania Coal Region (Richmond, 1936); also published as Labor Disturbances in Pennsylvania, 1850-1880 (Washington, 1936).
- John R. Commons, et al., History of Labour in the United States, vol. II (NY, 1918).
- Robert J. Cornell, The Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902 (Washington, 1957).
- Robert D. Cross, The Emergence of Liberal Catholicism in America (Cambridge, 1958).

- Henry David, The History of the Haymarket Affair; A Study in the American Social-Revolutionary and Labor Movements (NY, 1936; reprint, 1958).
- Chester McArthur Destler, American Radicalism, 1865-1901; Essays and Documents (New London, 1946; reprint, NY, 1963).
- Richard Drinnon, Rebel in Paradise; A Biography of Emma Goldman (Chicago, 1961).
- Paul H. Douglas, Real Wages in the United States, 1890-1926 (Boston, 1930).
- Foster Rhea Dulles, Labor in America (NY, 1949; rev., 1960).
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(Continued from inside front cover)

AMERICA to contact us at once. We are now seeking Associates in various cities who are interested in making a commitment of time, intellect, and perhaps money to the end of shaping and improving our content and form.

As the reader will note, Vol. I, No. 3 is far more readable than previous issues. We look towards steady improvement and request of our readers suggestions and criticisms -- but add frankly that this problem, like many others, can be solved only by financial contributions. If you think RADICAL AMERICA is or can be important, we ask you to help us in any way you can.

Lastly, we apologize for the lateness of this issue. The events in Madison made it temporarily impossible to reach our deadline. It is understood that subscriptions will be filled by number and not by time limit.

Our Contributors

ROBERT GABRINER, now a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, worked with Jesse Gray before and during the 1963-64 rent strike campaign; DANIEL MACGILVRAY is a graduate student at Rutgers University; MARK D. NAISON, now a graduate student at Columbia, organized rent strikes in East Harlem in 1963-64, and has since done tenants' organizing on the West Side; JAMES WEINSTEIN, an editor of Studies on the Left, has recently had his DECLINE OF SOCIALISM IN AMERICA, 1912-1925 published by MR Press.

