

The New York City Rent Strikes of 1963–1964

Joel Schwartz
Montclair State College

The New York City rent strikes of the early 1960s were failures in the struggle to mobilize poor people. For decades social settlements and neighborhood radicals had practiced rent bargaining. However, the 1963 civil rights campaign tipped the balance, resulting in a reckless organization of rent strikes to force landlords to make repairs. Radicals mobilized few of the poor, but their “unions” inadvertently provided many with entrée to the city’s liberal bureaucracies, most notably, the New York City Housing Authority.

The New York City rent strikes of 1963–64 were among the most controversial events of a turbulent decade. By any standard, they failed both as mass movements and as influences on housing policy. Michael Lipsky’s careful study of Jesse Gray’s Harlem upsurge documents the inability of rent withholding to force landlords to repair dilapidated tenements, much less to shape government programs to rehabilitate or replace the slums.¹ Nevertheless, many community organizers still find them inspiring examples of indigenous power. Much of the ambiguous legacy stems from participant-observers who first portrayed the strikes as radical movements emasculated by the bureaucratic inertia of liberal government. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward saw the strikes as rank-and-file outbreaks throttled by the middle-class paraphernalia considered necessary for poor people to institutionalize power. Fervent advocates of direct action caught up in (when they were not providers of) “movement” propaganda, Piven and Cloward

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understandably took the tenant *levée* as fact and found its failure in the inhibiting impact of movement bureaucratization.² But after twenty years, it should be possible to take a more dispassionate look at the strikes, to examine the actual numbers that participated, to look at the varied reasons why tenants joined together and withheld rents, and to examine critically the aims and assumptions of rent-strike strategy. Considering the grandiose claims still made for this form of community organization, such an analysis remains as relevant today as the events seemed exhilarating and revolutionary in the 1960s.

The New York Tradition of Rent Bargaining

During New York City's long history of tenant activism, radical words often masked pragmatic rent withholding for limited ends. Throughout the century, particularly in 1904, 1918–20, 1931–32, tenants had formed short-lived “unions,” picketed and otherwise coerced landlords, and refused to pay rents. But these outbreaks occurred in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods, where tenants hurled *shtetl* insults against specific, local landlords. Sidewalk demonstrations were really intracommunity bargaining, well understood by tenants, landlords, and the mediating Tammany and Socialist district leaders, all Jewish. The more disruptive eviction protests during the early Depression evidenced these underlying circumstances, even if high vacancy rates briefly emboldened the tenants' hand. However, radicalism quickly subsided after city politicians intervened with informal stays and more permanent statutory relief. The prototype, Section 1446a of the New York State Civil Practice Act, defined a Multiple Dwelling Law (MDL) or health violation in a pre-1901 tenement as a possible “constructive eviction,” which entitled a tenant to a stay of summary eviction proceedings as long as he deposited rents to the court. With Section 1446a and subsequent measures for “legal” rent strikes on the statute books, neighborhood tenant organizations resumed more effective rent bargaining. This transformation was accelerated by the New York City Housing Authority's low-rent projects in the late 1930s and the imposition of Office of Price Administration (OPA) rent controls in 1943. Tenant organizers soon discovered that their first priority was to provide access to Housing Authority apartment waiting lists and entrée to the OPA borough rent offices. Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, local tenant groups, many operating out of American Labor Party (ALP) clubs, plied this humdrum counseling at weekly rent “clinics.” The most aggressive ALP clubhouse, run by East Harlem Congressman Vito Marcantonio,

annually handled hundreds of federal rent forms and thousands more applications for the Housing Authority's waiting lists.³

Harlem ALP maverick Jesse Gray constantly chafed at these conventional channels. An ex-National Maritime Union radical, Gray had organized a series of local protest groups (at times called the Harlem Tenants Council or Harlem Tenant and Welfare Council) and regaled ghetto rallies with his tilts against landlords. But the scant success of his Harlem Tenants Council came within the rent-control system, by its expediting applications for reduced rent at the Harlem Rent Office. Nowhere is there any evidence that Gray resorted to rent strikes beyond occasional withholdings sanctioned by Section 755 of the New York State Real Property Actions and Proceedings Law (Section 1446a recodified in 1962). His forte was the outrageous publicity stunt, like a 1954 protest against the eviction of a woman confined to a wheelchair. Often he boasted a network of block committees and 200, or 300, or 400 "house leaders." But these were the tactics of a political adventurer in a Harlem no-man's land—the Fourteenth Assembly District, filled with crumbling tenements and overshadowed by the Housing Authority's 1,500-unit Stephen Foster Houses (itself menaced by teenage gangs and "problem families"). Its political clubs, torn by factionalism since J. Raymond Jones's 1958 revolt against Tammany, could no longer provide effective services for constituents at the rent office or the Housing Authority. In 1959, Gray, already with contacts in the Stephen Foster Houses, led his Harlem Tenants Council to organize housewives in the six-story walk-ups on nearby 116th Street. They picketed four tenements and handed out leaflets announcing that they had gone "on strike" against rat infestation, while Gray boasted to the *Amsterdam News* that 6,000 in forty more buildings stood ready to join the rebellion. But as the city responded with earnest proclamations and a squad of health inspectors, the flare-up receded to the back pages of Harlem's tabloids.⁴

Gray's activities were simply the most flamboyant among a host of tenant operations sponsored by community groups, churches, and settlement houses in the 1950s. Most functioned within a liberal consensus for "community planning," which, in practice, meant easing the impact of site clearance for Title I or public housing. The Union Settlement's East Harlem Project (1957), an "experiment in community organization," worked through PTAs and tenant councils, "helping members first to approach and then to work with such authoritarian figures as school principals and housing managers."⁵ The Community Service Society's five-year East Harlem Demonstration (1957) vowed to go beyond community renewal to "the development among residents of neighborhood identification, self-esteem, and community action."⁶ Although the program contained a harbinger of the 1960s, the identification of "indigenous" leaders who could rally neighbors into effective

self-help groups, it still aimed at cooperative ventures with city planning agencies. Chelsea's Hudson Guild settlement and the Upper East Side's Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association both pioneered block-by-block tenant organizing (that proved effective enough to arouse the competitive ire of nearby ALP clubs), but they also sought local concessions from the Title I program.⁷ Even the upstart in radical social change, Mobilization for Youth (MFY), found itself mired in mundane tenant casework. Launched in 1961 as an innovative attack on gang delinquency on the Lower East Side, MFY planned to reach "unaffiliated," lower-class teenagers by sending workers to galvanize PTAs, churches, block associations, and tenant councils. At their storefront on Stanton Street, MFY community organizers ached to become wholesale "advocates" for a steady stream of welfare and tenant clients. But rhetoric aside, Stanton Street handled housing clients in classic casework style, one at a time with tenant complaint forms dutifully forwarded to the City Rent and Rehabilitation Administration (RRA). The MFY staffers saw themselves consumed by endless paperwork, tedious, often fruitless meetings with tenants, and monumental inefficiency of city agencies. For all its radical claims, MFY's storefront, like Gray's Tenant Council, remained caught up in the liberal rent-adjustment system.⁸

Civil Rights Radicalizes the Housing Front

What ended this tenant work as usual for Gray, ALP clubs, social settlements, and MFY alike was the accelerating Civil Rights Movement during 1963, which was unwittingly reinforced by Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr.'s administration. Harlem's Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) chapter was typical of the new dynamism. Caught between the crosscurrents of civil rights and Muslim nationalism, New York (Harlem) CORE was forced to supplement its open-occupancy campaigns with sharp attacks on the ghetto's slums. In December 1962, when the chapter opened a housing clinic on West 125th Street, it announced that "CORE investigation teams will visit the buildings, call on residents, inform them of their rights," and expedite complaint forms to appropriate city agencies.⁹ By mid-1963, the clinic was helping to organize tenant associations. While it would still assist tenants at the RRA Harlem office, it was now ready to confront landlords with "direct action," including pickets and rent strikes. The chapter's aggressive minority had blueprints for organizing "street people" into a network of building and block councils that would "Mobilize Harlem." The June 1963 National CORE Convention endorsed such direct action, including rent strikes against slum owners, and National Secretary

James Farmer unveiled pilot projects for Newark and Bedford-Stuyvesant, where CORE organizers would confront landlords. A few days later, Mayor Wagner announced that city inspectors and punitive RRA rent slashes would “press the attack on the slumlord’s pocketbook.” When the CORE Community Relations Department subsequently extended the Newark and Bedford-Stuyvesant effort to Harlem, with CORE’s own “roving picket line,” the City Buildings Department a week later unveiled its first “cycle” inspection of slums since the mid-1930s! Heralded by City Hall, inspectors prowled through Jefferson Avenue in Bedford-Stuyvesant and West 111th Street in Harlem, accompanied by curious tenants. Jesse Gray took this cue to step up his own pickets against Harlem landlords and to threaten massive demonstrations at City Hall.¹⁰

At MFY, this direct action radicalized the social work tradition. Cooperating more aggressively with tenant groups, Stanton Street resorted to pickets, demanded meetings with city commissioners, and advised on withholding rent to get needed services. The crisis atmosphere also hastened the creation that fall of the MFY Legal Services Unit and political scientist Frances Fox Piven’s Tenement Housing Program. Legal Services was envisioned as a network of clinics where volunteer attorneys would dispense advice on welfare, consumer, and tenant rights, such as unfair evictions from public housing. The Tenement Housing Program, on the other hand, revealed MFY’s impatience with storefront casework and near despair about building code enforcement. The program’s heart would be a central file of housing violations, gathered from the storefronts and cooperating organizations and arranged by address and landlord. It would permit MFY to focus on the worst “slumlords.” It would also make feasible surveys of prevailing rents (compared with RRA ceilings) and health inspections of selected buildings. As an inducement for compliant landlords, the MFY staff also planned a consultation service on available rehabilitation programs and municipal loan funds. By October 1963, the Housing Program had taken on a professional coordinator, three full-time Hispanic community workers, and seven student volunteers to work with the clinics and the central file. But insiders still complained that direct action was used only “sporadically” and chafed that the MFY housing program had “no overall plan.”¹¹

By fall 1963, under the growing intensity of the Civil Rights campaign, this impatience finally ignited. On one level it flared as impromptu rebellion against summary eviction proceedings in the Magistrates’ Courts. Scores of tenants, most without legal counsel but inspired by black protest, claimed they no longer owed rents for rat-infested rooms or that “Welfare” told them they did not have to pay. Only a few of these defenses were indulged by the judges. On another level, however, organized groups soon vied to be “the first” to apply the new advocacy.

The claim could have been made as much by the beleaguered New York University CORE on the Lower East Side as by Jesse Gray. In February 1963, NYU's student chapter, at 198 Eldridge Street, began to inspect seven vermin-infested pre-1901 tenements at 203–215 Eldridge and filed for rent reductions and repairs with the RRA and the Buildings Department. The city did nothing for months, then briefly inspected and summoned the landlord into Criminal Court for a nominal fine. Concluding that the city was “incapable of fast, decisive action against slumlords,” chapter radicals demanded systematic rent withholding. The moderates urged a firm legal basis for acts that could prove “disastrous both to our image and reputation.” They pinned hopes on a Section 755 defense or an Appellate Court cognizance of new grounds (vermin infestation, for instance) for a “constructive eviction.” Meanwhile, organizers gained pledges from ninety-four Puerto Rican and black tenants for a November withholding and reassured the one-third on welfare that they need not pay rent where tenements had MDL violations. The CORE volunteers from prestigious liberal Democratic law firms and James Farmer arranged with city officials for a tough, rehearsed prosecution. But the preparations, the tenant witnesses, and photographic evidence were wasted by inept prosecutors and mixed-up court dates. When the case finally got top-drawer attention—from Assistant Corporation Counsel (and a Liberal Party leader) Simeon Golar—the outcome was a mere \$300 fine. Still the landlord had enough. He relinquished two tenements to his creditor and then approached CORE to take over the others! Weary from the efforts, the NYU chapter had nonetheless stumbled on the remarkable prospect of unnerving a whole class of “slumlords” on the Lower East Side. The radicals urged CORE to send to other landlords the message “that we do not mean to pick on just one or two of their buildings, letting them do as they please with the rest.” These were heady days, particularly with the news of the strikes spreading through Harlem.¹²

During the early 1960s, Jesse Gray had restyled his Harlem Tenants Council into the “Community Council on Housing,” but only the name had changed. It was still Gray and a few unpaid, part-time “organizers”—still, as Mark D. Naison reported, an “informally run operation that teetered on the edge of bankruptcy,”¹³ and those same blocks in the Fourteenth Assembly District, specifically, East 117th Street. After a mid-October 1963 protest at City Hall, Gray decided to lead sixteen of “his” buildings on strike. Activity soon overflowed at the CCH storefront; and at a mass rally in early December, Gray claimed fifty-two buildings, with almost 3,000 tenants, ready to join the movement. While city leaders rushed inspectors and arranged drastic RRA rent reductions, Gray was assembling a “Rent Strike Coordinating Committee” of Harlem religious and political VIPs. From time to time he held rallies, set up more paper coalitions, and got token support from New

York CORE and local labor leaders. But his pickets, his eviction protests, and his confrontations with the police remained pseudo-events for the media. On December 30, eviction proceedings against thirteen tenants at 16 and 18 East 117th Street were heard in court, accompanied by Gray's raucous entourage and eager reporters. When the city magistrate, at the urging of Gray's attorney, accepted the applicability of Section 755 and ordered rents paid in escrow, Gray jubilantly pronounced the support of 300 more buildings with 1,000 joining by January 15!¹⁴

Gray spent early 1964, however, juggling these claims, while chiding the Wagner administration to come up with substantive reforms. Regarding the Harlem strikes as the most explosive episodes in a city wracked by civil rights demonstrations, Mayor Wagner virtually endorsed "legal" rent withholding. He proposed to consolidate housing inspection agencies and sent to the state legislature an agenda for more inspections, more housing courts, stiffer MDL penalties, plus a bill to transfer escrow rents from the courts to the Department of Real Estate to pay for repairs. Gray was the hero of the hour at the January 1964 meetings of tenant leaders that kicked off strikes on the Lower East Side and at city rent control hearings (having staged the day before one of his vintage stunts to dramatize Albany's responsibility for ghetto housing—a "Rats to Rockefeller" campaign). Soon enough, his unverified claims about the "spreading" strike jaded his media contacts. At the same time, the Wagner administration was applying what Michael Lipsky has characterized as deft, symbolic gestures toward the slums. When Gray demanded action, City Hall obliged by sending attorneys against the 117th Street malefactors and slapping jail sentences (later reversed) on the managing agent and his lawyer. The Buildings Department invoked the new City Receivership Law to take over 16 and 18 East 117th Street, the tenements that had touched off Gray's strike. By then, Gray was also caught up in name-calling feuds with the police commissioner and in a controversy over alleged radicals in the city antipoverty program. By spring 1964, the Community Council on Housing was sorting through court papers that liquidated the last strikes.¹⁵

Tenant Direct Action Proliferates

Gray's example, however, had inspired tenant direct action throughout Harlem. For the radicals in New York (Harlem) CORE, now in their own East River CORE chapter, this meant plans for disciplined community organization. They envisioned "group area teams" of ten workers

per block to stir grassroots issues and contact “gangs, street people, numbers runners, and anyone else whose presence on the block is conspicuous.”¹⁶ By late March 1964, the chapter claimed to have brought fourteen buildings (with a tenant population of 1,962) on rent strike and to have organized tenant councils in another eleven (with 1,100). But its greatest success was in the 2,100-unit Robert F. Wagner, Sr., Houses, where the chapter’s picket lines won stays against “unfair” evictions and attracted tenants already mobilized by local school boycotts into a “firm, democratic” project council. In the East Harlem barrio, Ted Velez, a young City College graduate and social worker, claimed that his two years’ contact with Jesse Gray had helped him and a few friends to set up the East Harlem Tenants Council on East 123rd Street in 1962. Boasting his own network of building and block captains, in early 1964, Velez resorted to Section 755 rent strikes on East 123rd Street to pressure landlords to make repairs. Gray’s influence also helped push Reverend Norman Eddy’s East Harlem community group, the Metro-North Citizens Committee, from the “Christian witness” of rent counseling to street demonstrations and rent strikes. During 1963, MNCC had nurtured a modest “dues”-paying membership, a Thursday night rent clinic, and volunteers who scouted the tenements to detail building violations. In early 1964, Eddy met with Jesse Gray and other tenant radicals and boned up on the Section 755 defense, but he remained carefully distant from those whom he regarded as too inclined “to bring the housing system to its knees.”¹⁷

Gray’s apparent triumph also settled Brooklyn CORE’s ambivalence toward ghetto organization. Up to 1962, the chapter’s middle-class blacks and Jews had concentrated on open-occupancy pickets with growing uneasiness about their failure to “reach the Negro masses.” But in late 1962 and early 1963, members staged noisy demonstrations about garbage pickup along Gates Avenue and job discrimination at the Downstate Medical Center. In September 1963, a CORE “task force” began canvassing Bedford-Stuyvesant and found tenant committees impatient with the Buildings Department’s cycle inspections and ready to withhold rents. The chapter began to organize buildings and negotiate with landlords. “We had reached the point where we did it systematically,” recalled Major R. Owens, head of Brooklyn CORE’s Housing Committee. “We’d move into an area—a whole block and canvas the block, distributing leaflets, explaining what the program was all about.”¹⁸ To get quick referrals from the Buildings Department, Brooklyn CORE lived up to its “well-known reputation for taking direct action against city agencies,” as demonstrations at the borough rent office cut the response time on CORE’s cases down from two months to two weeks. With the first, spontaneous strikes at 104–112 Rochester Avenue, CORE quickly got the Buildings Department to document “horrid” conditions and the RRA to impose one-dollar rents.

In court on December 13, Brooklyn CORE's attorney successfully gained a Section 755 rent diversion until the violations were corrected. With that, CORE's new Rent Strike Co-ordinating Committee dispatched volunteers with detailed organizing kits complete with interviewer sheets, city rent-reduction forms, and membership blanks for the "Community Tenants Council." Organizers were told to emphasize the strike's legal rationale "to obtain a [court] ruling of 'constructive eviction' " to cut off rents until landlords made repairs. After the landlord served dispossession notices, CORE organizers would distribute applications for rent reduction, request immediate "cellar-to-roof" inspections from city departments, and even schedule a photographer's visit to individual apartments. To defray costs, CORE urged membership in the tenants council at a two-dollar annual fee. Yet, by late January 1964, the tenants council counted less than fifty members, although in late February, CORE was claiming that fifty-one buildings (400 families) had gone on strike.¹⁹

Frustrations on the Lower East Side

On the Lower East Side, MFY's Community Organization staff seized on the rent strike as an ideal instrument to involve the "indigenous"; their real concern, however, was to prove the extent of their insurgent intentions to civil rights and radical groups who sniped at MFY "paternalism." Goaded by NYU and Downtown CORE, and by tenant advocates from the Metropolitan Council on Housing (Met Council) and Progressive Labor, MFY's rent clinics on January 11, 1964, launched the "Lower East Side Rent Strike" (LERS). Ambitious in scope, it was the closest thing to the radicals' dream of a general rent strike. Organizers agreed to deploy a few Trotskyites, Progressive Laborites, and MFY staffers, perhaps thirty in all, to the tenements north of Houston Street, from Third to Fifth Streets. NYU CORE, supplemented by the University Settlement and the East Side Tenants Council, would send twenty-six regular organizers and five more on weekends to Eldridge and Forsythe Streets, from Delancey to Houston. The Puertorriquenos Unidos and the Stanton Street clinic would "work" Seward Park Extension and expected eight to ten buildings to go out imminently. Some leaders expected the strikes to force beefed-up inspections, fines, and perhaps jail sentences for landlords. A few talked about foreclosing on absentee owners. Others wanted an expanded City Receivership Program or new laws to place struck buildings under the aegis of the Housing Authority. An MFY leader suggested that tenants could influence the improvement of local schools or garbage pickups. These

divergent goals were papered over by a general euphoria, during which Met Council pledged twelve volunteer lawyers coordinated by a young, antipoverty attorney, Richard Levenson, and an MFY organizer offered generous financial support. A project of formidable proportions seemed under way.²⁰

Kicked off with an evening street rally, a roaring bonfire, and publicity releases claiming that seventy-five buildings would soon “go out,” the movement was already faltering. The Puertorriquenos Unidos claimed ten of the seventy-five buildings, but only one had actually struck, with another “willing to.” The NYU CORE and the University Settlement could only report “contact” with forty, and Progressive Labor with another twenty-five. By early February rent withholding had proceeded in just ten (with no estimate of individual tenant accounts). The MFY grew uncomfortable with Stanton Street’s radical image, while CORE had misgivings about Progressive Labor leaflets at LERS rallies. Mid-February brought claims of sixty-seven buildings on board, but strike captains worried over a lack of momentum. University Settlement’s Frances Goldin suggested that building delegations descend on the RRA or picket the commissioner’s home. Speaking for the legal staff, Levenson reminded the leadership that Section 755 defenses depended on posted MDL violations by the Department of Buildings, which meant that the LERS would have to schedule visits by city inspectors. Black activist Leroi McCrae ventured that the LERS should take on no more buildings unless 50 percent of the tenants were already withholding or MDL violations had already been posted. Attorneys Levenson and Nancy LeBlanc, joined by Frances Goldin, seconded this pullback. Less than three weeks after the bonfire, the Lower East Side Rent Strike had ended active recruitment of tenants.²¹

The LERS was soon desperate to hold on to the tenant support it already had. On March 11, Levenson complained that legal defense was stymied by tenants who failed to show up for court cases—even for their own dispossession proceedings. Speaking for the organizers, McCrae conceded that LERS had begun with “a splash” of claims, but his force was “now going back to do the detailed work” among tenants.²² Levenson insisted that his ten lawyers, busy on different cases, could not also schedule court appearances, transport tenants, request inspections, subpoena MDL violations, gather photographic evidence, and keep track of endless court adjournments. He wanted an LERS court coordinator. The LERS tried to scrounge up a paralegal, but not until late March did the lawyers reorganize their own apparatus and rotate their court appearances on definite days. While some radicals talked about political reprisals against one “Slumlord Judge” (which unnerved the attorneys), Levenson placed the blame elsewhere: “The rent strike organizations, especially those with national affiliations must begin to produce lawyers. This panel is insufficient to handle the

volume of rent strike cases. One or two out of five cases are won by tenants (pay rent into court or dismissal). Three of five cases lost (rent paid to the landlord)."²³ And he repeated, "CORE, NAG [Nonviolent Action Group], Univ. Settlement, must produce lawyers, especially national organizations."²⁴ Adding that "everybody agreed that the weakest part of our system is the sad shape of our own building files," Levenson wanted systematic dispossession folders, with detailed MDL violations, subpoena receipts, and notarized photographs. By the first week in April, the legal staff served notice that it could no longer continue without more volunteers, particularly from CORE. During that week, only two evictions were dismissed and one settled compared to nearly fifteen decided for the landlords. Levenson could report no successful Section 755 defenses. A week later, the Council of Puerto Rican Organizations resigned from the LERS, while CORE's further involvement was eclipsed by its planned demonstrations at the New York World's Fair.²⁵

With the departure of the Puerto Ricans and CORE, the balance in the LERS shifted toward the white, middle-class activists from the East Side Tenants Council and Met Council, who never did care much for the rent strike tactic. They quickly phased out the loose, federated LERS for a new coalition, the Lower East Side Tenants Action Group, that would feature a solid organizational chart, an executive secretary to oversee daily operations, and finances based upon per-capita assessments, with costs for MDL searches and Buildings Department subpoenas borne by tenants. Backing away from further commitments to the tenement withholders, LESTAG Secretary Esther Rand made clear her focus on "immediate" contests over Title I site removals.²⁶ The LESTAG Rent-Strike subcommittee, dominated by MFY's Stanton Street organizers, did attempt to carry on the effort, but its late June 1964 meeting showed how little had been accomplished in the previous months. The subcommittee hashed over the same organizational charts, complaints about RRA foul-ups, and organizers' frustrations: "When tenants get together they talk but don't appear when they're needed—for tenant delegations and actions. Once repairs are made tenants stop helping rent strike organizations. Need to have special organizers' meetings to develop tenants who are ready to do more than attend tenants' meetings. We need more community workers."²⁷ Despite these attempts by MFY's storefront, the LERS was dead.

The fervor had also ended for the students at Downtown CORE, where the strikes had taken root on the Lower East Side. By May, at Downtown CORE's first triumph, 203–215 Eldridge Street, the camaraderie was gone, as the "people got scared off." The chapter, in any case, was consumed in support for the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project (an obsession after the murders of three SNCC workers, including Michael Schwerner, a Downtown CORE founder) and by a Lower East

Side voter registration drive. An MFY observer, oriented to systematic community organization, concluded that “amidst the casual drift in and out of volunteers,” whose offers of service were wasted by the apparent indifference of chapter leaders, “not much happens in housing.”²⁸ That summer, Downtown CORE launched another tenement drive, “Operation East Side,” with pep talks to an earnest team of twenty. Like the decentralized SNCC effort in rural Mississippi, they were told to fan out on designated blocks, “work” their assigned buildings, and act “on his own initiative as much as possible in working towards solving the individual problems of the building.”²⁹ At this juncture, an organizer’s question, “What was meant by ‘organizing’ a building?” elicited further confusion: “Was the purpose of CORE merely to get the landlord to make repairs, the city to inspect, and possibly to have the rent reduced or were the people being organized for something more?”³⁰ The MFY observer was appalled. Another mid-August session at the CORE loft seemed equally aimless: “Monday evening was no different than many of the past evenings at CORE: people drifted in and out, new faces and familiar ones, chaos, disorganization, fine talk about the way CORE was going to organize itself, and the neighborhood, and nothing really happens.”³¹ By late August, ostensibly because of voter registration, Downtown CORE’s door-to-door tenement activities were at a standstill.³²

Tenant Radicals and the Routine Demands of the Poor

Why did the rent strikes fall so short of their goals? Despite all the glib talk that radicals need only move in among the poor and arouse their angry solidarity, tenant unions proved monumentally difficult to organize. The Stanton Street Tenants Association, prominent in Piven and Cloward’s account of the welfare rights upsurge on the Lower East Side, never gained much hold on the neighborhood. After MFY organizer Luisa Montes, a thirty-year-old Puerto Rican, sent inquiries to patrons of the Stanton Street storefront in February, 1964, forty-five tenants convened, elected a slate of neighbors, and agreed to meet every Friday night. But despite Montes’s attempts, the association failed as a real participant group. Montes, with a few trusted subordinates, ran a tough, no-nonsense operation. She avoided Welfare Department voucher cases and shunted petty consumer complaints to neighborhood lawyers. She would take on only “major” quarrels with landlords and remained cynical about the need to goad apathetic

tenants into collective action. During a typical day, August 4, 1964, she saw nine walk-in clients, who wanted help on everything from union pensions to getting rid of junkies lounging on a tenement roof. In between, she was on the telephone, bargaining with landlords, encouraging tenants, and prodding the RRA. Major victories never occurred, nor did a rush to join. Montes's own data for a Ford Foundation audit reported that from January through June 1964 (during the LERS), the Stanton Street Association dealt with 170 tenants in eighty-two buildings, but could claim an active membership of only twenty, with twenty-two inactive.³³

These militant catalysts of poor people against grasping landlords and callous city agencies managed little mobilization of the poor chiefly because they were swamped by their routine requests—to provide access to these very agencies. The Stanton Street Association became a one-stop convenience center for a host of community services. During the summer of 1966, 45 percent of its cases involved applications for public housing, compared with 26 percent for building violations and rent overcharges. It also dispensed welfare advice, sponsored English and sewing classes, and obviously filled a social void on the block. Organizer Daniel Kronenfeld proudly pointed to MFY's most successful, indigenous organization, the Puertorriquenos Unidos, half food co-op and half block-action group founded by a local tenement "super." But at its core were those "expressive" activities that MFY considered crucial to the lives of lower-class Hispanics: "On a Friday night [one organizer reported in June, 1966] when there is to be a meeting, those attending (10, 20, 30) may be present at the club for between two or three hours and the actual meeting can take anywhere from seven minutes to over an hour. During this time it is not unusual for people to walk in and out participating when they are present. Very often meetings are quite dull—few add to what the officials announce and then when it is over everyone will start joking and talking, drinking coffee, playing dominos, etc."³⁴ Militant East River CORE, which took up tenant councils and rent strikes as a basic tool of its Harlem mobilization, left an equally dismayed postmortem on such grass-roots institutions: "Tenant councils have not proved to be long-lasting because their only reason for existence has been redress of grievances. Consequently, when the immediate grievance is removed or compensated for, the councils collapse. *Programs must begin with and be based on social and recreational activities.* Forming a neighborhood club of teenagers to hold dances and play basketball is much more likely to create a permanent influence in the community than organizing a tenant council. Likewise block associations and women's clubs."³⁵

Few tenant leaders could anticipate the extent to which they became the unacknowledged agents of the New York City Housing Authority, although such had been the painful experience of tenant groups at

least since the ALP clubs in the 1940s. By the mid-1960s, the city was landlord to more than one-half million, and the waiting list for coveted apartments had grown to over 100,000 families, a vast undertow of the city's poor. While radicals carped at the Authority's "sterile," "institutional" facade, its sheer size and more than 100 projects guaranteed a wide variety of apartment sizes, locales, and neighborhoods, which provided real housing mobility within its huge domain. No wonder a large proportion of inquiries at MFY storefronts concerned help with Housing Authority application forms and with Welfare Department payments of project security deposits and rent. The Puertorriquenos Unidos was overwhelmed by such requests. Its most notorious mobilization was not a strike, but a sit-in at Housing Authority offices to demand quick processing of applications for apartments in the projects. This unlikely symbiosis continually weakened tenant militance. Gray's early influence in the Fourteenth Assembly District rested on an organizational base in the Stephen Foster Houses. Compared with the drudgery of canvassing dreary, six-story walk-ups, East Harlem CORE preferred the easy gains that came from negotiating with the project manager at the Robert F. Wagner, Sr., Houses. Furthermore, city housing and development agencies could always dangle impressive development plans, like the one that took the steam out of Ted Velez's East Harlem militants and another that decisively drew the Metro-North Citizens Committee from rent strikes back to community renewal.³⁶

Membership in a tenant council rarely signified a determination to withhold rent, even under the "legal" strikes made possible by Section 755. The MFY confronted a pervasive timidity, particularly among the elderly and among those who sublet—both in large numbers on the Lower East Side. Major Owens commented that the Brooklyn CORE's work was inhibited by the tenant belief in the "myth of the landlord's invincibility."³⁷ The Stanton Street Tenants Association struggled constantly against an ingrained wariness that seemed hardly affected by the LERS. Throughout the summer of 1964, Stanton Street was representing four rent withholders at 142 Suffolk Street (while sixteen others refused to go along) and eight more (half the tenants) at 33 Willets. In late July, twelve tenants at 146 Norfolk filled out city rent forms to prepare for withholding; but within days Montes learned that those tenants "now had hot water, which they had not had when Luisa first began to deal with their buildings, and didn't want to seek any further repairs through the Stanton Street office, 'because they've heard we're Communists.'"³⁸ Indeed, the strikes' most salient characteristic was the disproportion between exhaustive efforts and limited outcome. The brief united front among those adjoining tenements on Eldridge Street was the result of the NYU CORE's ten months of intensive canvassing and one stubborn landlord. For at least twenty

months, Gray had picketed and marched over the Fourteenth Assembly District, particularly 117th Street, and produced few solid buildings and far fewer strikers. In Brooklyn, where CORE had demonstrated along Gates Avenue for half a year, the major response came from tenants politicized by the chapter's job demonstrations at Downstate Medical Center. Whether Gray's opportunists, NYU CORE's impulsive students, Brooklyn's older, methodical professionals, East River's militants, or MFY's social work radicals, organizers mobilized few strikers, probably no more than 2 percent of tenants living in those intensely canvassed blocks.³⁹

Tenant Unions in Search of a Strategy

This meager success at grass-roots mobilization reflected the quality of direction at the top. Tenant leaders could not decide, much less act, on the merits of what might be called the "structural" versus the "territorial" approach to organizing the tenement poor, and they never overcame the fallacies of both. Ghetto boundaries and the self-proclaimed writ of groups like Brooklyn CORE or the LERS inspired confident teams to settle in and "work" specific blocks, raise the critical consciousness of tenants, and build neighborhood solidarity behind a strike. This territorial approach not only romanticized the rebellious potential of the poor but overlooked the diversity and degree of disrepair of the housing stock, the differences between lease holders and sublettors, families and single occupants, the working poor and those on welfare, and between those resigned to substandard walk-ups and those aspiring to enter the city projects—all crucial differences that pervaded the typical slum block. These differences meant that tenant unions could never be organized along the industrial lines of the workplace. They also produced infinite mischief when tenant leaders sought the standard Section 755 redress in the courts. Varied, complex patterns of landlord ownership, compounded by the decentralized municipal court system and idiosyncratic judges, produced a crazy-quilt pattern of misplaced evidence, bureaucratic delays, and endless adjournments. Such legal chaos frustrated organizers who yearned for decisive justice and disgusted tenants who wondered why some neighbors on strike were ignored by their landlords, some had to settle, and still others were evicted.⁴⁰

From time to time, rent strike leaders professed the "structural" approach: to organize all the tenements controlled by a single, interlocking ownership and thus threaten a landlord's entire rental income. While Jesse Gray occasionally flirted with the idea, it positively enthralled

radicals on the Lower East Side. The East Side Tenants Council (largely made up of old ALP activists) had tried to organize occupants of the scattered tenements owned by Morris Dankner. Their efforts gave plausibility to the sharp focus planned for the MFY housing file and provided the background information behind a bitter NYU CORE press release in the fall of 1963: "Members of the chapter have spent hours in the Hall of Records determining the relationship of slumlords . . . to each other. We have found that there are about twenty-five slumlords who indeed control and hold over 80% of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. They are intrinsically intermingled with dummy holding corporations, financial eye-winking, failure to maintain buildings, etc., and they all hold slum properties."⁴¹ In fact, the chapter had conducted no such research, but was convinced it had found its own genuine slumlord on Eldridge Street. Nor did MFY, armed with its housing file, ever adequately investigate the alleged interlocking control of neighborhood properties. The idea of a landlord Gordian knot grew with the organizers' impatience on the Lower East Side. As early as mid-December 1963, NYU CORE attorney George Schiffer soberly assessed what the organization had stumbled into on Eldridge Street. The chapter's experience showed the limits of "uncoordinated, unsupervised activities by a local group"⁴² and of street demonstrations that lacked a legal follow-up with city administrators. Organizing more than a handful of tenants was proving a vast undertaking. Any realistic campaign against the slums would take "an immense, coordinate effort of National CORE chapters and every competent professional and semi-professional we can lay our hands on."⁴³ Yet Schiffer drew back from that immense mobilization to suggest an alternative "attack on the basic 100 landlords." Even that struggle, Schiffer warned, would require coordinated, persistent legal and financial effort. It would require negotiations on the part of "mature, National CORE people," and it would take "several years."⁴⁴

Few rent strike organizers were armed with such caution. For all their claims about understanding the poor and their needs, radicals plunged into tenement organization with little firsthand knowledge of tenement residents, their housing problems, or their aspirations. Lured by the glamour of direct action and the excitement of ghetto rebellion, they never saw that rent strikes to force repairs of dilapidated slums seemed senseless to people struggling to move uptown or into public housing. This is not to argue that the rent strike was entirely futile. As in previous decades, strikes for limited objectives, backed by effective tenant bargaining power, and aimed at nearby landlords with much to lose, were eminently practical. This more modest structural approach remained a powerful weapon, when used with adequate preparation and deliberation. The territorial approach also had potential, when taken on by radicals willing to dedicate years to "the movement"

and make tenement organizing a permanent career. In the final analysis, the rent strikes were abandoned on all sides—victims of an impatient upward mobility in the 1960s. They were abandoned by tenants who pursued different avenues of housing mobility, by self-styled radicals seeking other, more fruitful crusades, and by thousands of small landlords who finally had enough of the newfangled harassment and simply abandoned their buildings.

Notes

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