

UNITED TENANTS FOR
COLLECTIVE ACTION, INC.

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Nearly one thousand acres of Detroit's inner-city slum housing exists in defiance of the law and the right to human dignity; but is encouraged by landlords; condoned by city government; and largely ignored by public officials and by the people who elect them. Accompanying this physical deterioration of housing is a feeling of frustration and despair by tenants. Their repeated attempts to have a voice in the decisions which determine their living conditions have been met with equally repeated denials and rejections by landlords. Their cry of despair has fallen on deaf ears.

Origin:

As a result of angry despair, a group of tenants, headed by Fred D. Lyles, Jr., banded together in July, 1967 to protest their poor housing conditions. The initial approach of picketing the landlord was later abandoned for the more direct approach of rent strikes. The landlords soon realized they could not evict tenants for nonpayment of rent; that before they could legally collect rent, their buildings must comply with the Code. The embryonic development of United Tenants for Collective Action had begun, utilizing Detroit Building Code enforcement as its main arm of strength.

Actions:

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Background:

Detroit, famous as the Motor Capital of the world and the epitome of industrial progress, and as a result of surging expansion, has--in reality --created a hell on earth for thousands of its citizens. They are the exiles of the prosperous society, subjected to housing and environmental conditions that destroy their aspirations and self-respect; and expose them to health and safety hazards, rodents, vermin and like dangers. These conditions represent a shocking contradiction to the principles of human dignity and the American concept of "equality and justice for all."

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managing control of 17 buildings containing about 900 units. To facilitate the management of these buildings, UTCA formed an adjunct nonprofit organization, United Tenants for Collective Management, Inc. in July, 1968.

UTCA felt that the management agreement allowed the slumlord to escape his responsibility to improve dilapidated buildings which he had thoroughly milked. On the other hand, it gave UTCA and UTCM fantastic opportunities to gain further control of and, in fact, ownership of inner-city apartment buildings to undergo rehabilitation. These opportunities were realized by the creation of two further adjunct nonprofit organizations: The United Tenants Development Company, Inc. in October, 1968; and the United Tenants Rehabilitation Company, Inc. in December, 1968.

This cooperative enterprise is already involved in the rehabilitation process. The Development Company is coordinating the rehabilitation of buildings in which managing control has been gained, and the Rehabilitation Company is coordinating the rehabilitation of nine buildings for which ownership was acquired in December, 1968. The rehabilitation project incorporates the utilization of inner-city resources as much as possible--- architects, contractors, suppliers and labor. Financing is being administered by a well known local funding organization.

Equally important to the success of this coordinated approach was the Tenants' Rights Legislation adopted by the Michigan Legislature which became effective October 1, 1968. A second massive rent strike was launched to coincide with the effective date of the new legislation. Between October 1 and October 15, 1968, approximately 50 buildings joined UTCA by withholding rents.

Retaliation?

Tragedy struck UTCA during the interim between the first and second rent strikes. While working in the UTCA office, Fred D. Lyles, Jr., President, was shot with a high-powered rifle. Today the identity of the culprit is still unknown. Fred remains in Veterans Hospital and, at best, will probably

be crippled from the shoulders down for life. But the movement did not falter after the attempted assassination of its president. UTCA strengthened its organizational efforts and moved forward with renewed determination.

At the present time, UTCA is one of the few, if not the only organization in Detroit which is so totally attuned to and involved with the people whom it serves; that all its actions, purposes and responses are molded to the needs and desires of the poor. UTCA looks forward to the day marked with permanent improvement in the physical conditions of life in the inner city. Pride, self-determination and community spirit must be engendered among those presently crushed by their oppressive environment.

It must be demonstrated that the law is a powerful instrument for constructive change when properly understood and utilized.

In time, UTCA hopes to become a more broadly based community service organization. Its unique capability for direct household contact with thousands of inner-city residents may enable it to become a clearing house for municipal services by maintaining a contact and referral operation. Conceivably, it could employ a staff of instructors in home economics, child care and the fundamentals of personal hygiene and family health.

Future:

UTCA continues to address itself forcefully to almost every aspect of the urban crisis, for its primary purpose is the rehabilitation of both housing and people. The two are so interdependently related that there can be no chronological priority; a deficiency in one will insure a deficiency in the other. People must grow in pride and self-awareness, simultaneously with the improvement of their life situation, or there will be an inevitable re-emergence of that same condition. There is no question here of preconceived guidelines to impose on the community. The community has expressed its need.

UNITED TENANTS has acted and will continue to act.