

WHAT'S WRONG WITH DETROIT?

by Gloster B Current

A few weeks ago Detroit's modern police commissioner, John F Ballenger, looked at his charts of crime and aggressions, then calmly announced that racial tension had virtually disappeared. The quiet and accomodation of Negro and white people since the riot of 1943 has caused the authorities and many persons interested in race relations to assume that racial friction has virtually been eliminated.

While there is serenity on the surface, due to palliatives that have been given to still the pains of inequality, racial discrimination and community apathy to basic social ills; there is enough unrest and dissatisfaction seething under the surface to bode ill for the future.

There's nothing wrong with Detroit, except that few people want to take action to improve the racial situation. Although, there was much talk after the riot of attacking problems of housing, employment, civil liberties, recreation and education, very little progress has been made by the new organizations which came into being intent on solving the problems, or by the old organizations, most of which have been ineffective on controversial issues.

It was generally agreed that the riot was traceable to two main causes: lack of housing facilities and discrimination in employment. Civil liberties, police brutality, and similar problems played a minor role in the conflict.

Of the two major problems, one -- employment -- has been eliminated for the time being. A stringent labor market has improved the employment situation. Today, there are 75,000 Negroes employed in Detroit war industries -- virtually full employment for the group.

According to the War Manpower Commission's report in September 1944, job openings for Negroes have risen in Detroit. "In the Detroit area," said the WMC, "job openings rose slightly from 65,253 in August to 65,944 in September." For non-whites the report stated:

"Detroit placed 3,625 non-white workers during September compared with 3,585 in August, an increase of 1.1%. The placement of non-whites in Detroit during September compares favorably with the record achieved in September 1943 when only 2,554 non-white workers were hired.

The number of placements of non-whites increased in the Automobile industry from 560 in August to 708 in September; iron and steel, 1,032 in August and 1,198 in September; food products, 57 in August and 105 in September. Other industries in which placements of non-whites continued to rise were: transportation, trade, service, and government. A decrease in the placement of non-whites was reported in construction, 145 in August and only 506 in September; ordinance, 924 in August and 764 in September."

Manpower requirements for war industries in the Detroit area indicate a continuing need for non-white workers. Thus, while the employment situation has been eased, housing for Negro war workers is still non-existent.

The Housing Problem

The ninth annual report of the Detroit Housing Commission starts auspiciously with a picture of the daily line-up of applicants at the War Housing Center, where applications are placed for housing. The color of the applicants readily indicates on which side of the scales the housing problem in Detroit is weighted. In 1943, the Center received as high as 3,000 applications a month. Speaking of aspects of Negro housing, the report stated:

The development of war housing, together with the Homes Use Program, has served to alleviate the housing situation for white families. However, the terribly despezate housing

situation of Negroes has remained in the foreground. This extreme need has gradually become more crucial due to several factors.

For the past three decades there has been a constantly increasing Negro population, which has been accelerated in the present war-time plant expansion. In 1919 Negroes comprised 1.2% of the population, rising to 9.2% in 1940.

Total population for Detroit as of November, 1943, is estimated at 1,875,000, and a conservative estimate of population of Negroes in Detroit at 9.6% of that figure would bring the Negro population to around 180,000 or about 42,000 families. The 1940 Census shows a total of 34,872 dwelling units occupied by Negroes, one half of which were substandard either as to physical conditions or occupancy. To take care of the newcomers who have migrated to Detroit in the past few years, a need of 7,000 additional dwelling units is indicated. Of the substandard homes occupied by Negroes a great majority are so dilapidated as to be considered no better than no housing at all.

Despite the extent of Negro migration, there has been no building or expansion for this group. Their housing problem goes back to the twenties and thirties when the Negro population increased and restrictive covenants prevented their residential expansion. Today the same fear of residential encroachment exists. The only sources of housing for Negroes at the present time are the public war housing program and a few cases of governmental conversion.

Although the Housing Commission thus admitted the critical situation of housing for Negroes, it timorously stated that the "main difficulty in the programming of public housing has been the selection of sites." Reaching right into the crux of the housing difficulty in Detroit, they declared that "the primary factor has been the racial pattern of the neighborhood. Racial tension in the city has been acute for some time and the outbreaks of June 21, (1943 riot) were an expression of this tension. The situation is due in part to inadequate housing and recreational facilities for both groups and especially for Negroes. But it is a vicious circle. The facilities are lacking because of racial tension, and the tension exists partly because of the lack of housing and recreation. The simple facts are that it is nearly impossible to locate housing for Negro occupancy in any of the presently vacant areas in Detroit without stimulating oppositions."

Who Created
the Dilemma?

When the Detroit Housing Commission raises the question that it is impossible to locate sites for housing of Negroes without arousing oppositions, it indicates that the democratic process in Detroit has become so confused that the only solution is continued tension and conflict. For this intolerable situation, the mayor, who incidentally, appoints the Commission, is entirely responsible.

Early in 1943 the Detroit Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People importuned the Housing Commission to declare a mixed policy of housing war workers in Detroit. It was argued by the Association that many other communities throughout the nation have a democratic housing policy and in them, people of all races and creeds are living together without friction. The Urban League presented information to the Commission substantiating this contention. Representatives from the CIO, the Post War World Council and the Detroit Council of Churches took a similar position.

Mayor Edward J Jeffries, Jr, took the view that there could not be interracial housing in Detroit, nor could sites for housing be located in neighborhoods which would change the neighborhood characteristics. On April 29, 1943 the Mayor proposed to the Common Council the following policy which was approved informally and later adopted by the Housing Commission as Detroit's policy on Negro housing:

"The Detroit Housing Commission will in no way change the racial characteristics of any neighborhood in Detroit through occupancy standards of housing projects under its jurisdiction."

What Has Been
the Result?

The interpretation of this policy has been to further aggravate the housing situation which was admittedly critical at the time of the riot; was admittedly one of the main causes of the riot; and is still a producer of tension today. No appreciable amount of housing has been built for Negro war workers,

while the need of white workers has been met. Although the War Manpower Commission needed and still needs additional workers to man the war machines, the situation as far as Negroes is concerned has become increasingly hopeless.

In 1944, 18,000 Negroes made re-applications to the War Housing Center for housing. From November 1943 to November 1944, 14,466 new Negro applications for war housing were received. Of this number only 1,731 were served through accommodations in either public housing or conversions, while 12,735 were unserved. In one month, October 20 to November 20, 1944, there were 2,700 new applications by white and Negro people. Of this number 2,157 or 79.8% were Negro.

Picture the plight of the Negro veteran. 16,334 Detroit Negroes have been inducted into the armed services. Of this number 2,762 have been released. 215 of these Negro veterans applied for housing between the period of September 1 - November 20 and as yet, are unhoused.

The figures quoted in this article were obtained from the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council in Detroit, whose director, Edward Connor, stated recently:

"A serious housing crisis exists in the Metropolitan Detroit area and the housing shortage is recognized by everyone who has attempted to locate living quarters during the last several months. The shortage is particularly acute for Negroes. The facts are brought out by the recent report of the United States Census Bureau, following its vacancy survey of the Detroit area, which disclosed an alarmingly low vacancy rate of one percent in dwellings available for whites, with no vacancies for Negroes.

"The health menace resulting from this overcrowding and the unsanitary living arrangements, the resulting loss in efficiency by thousands of war workers, the growing tensions arising out of the situation are creating an increasing handicap to vital war production which cannot be overlooked in this area which is responsible for over 12% of the total national production in war equipment and material."

With failure to solve the housing problem fast becoming a national disgrace and with fall elections approaching, Mayor Jeffries in December 1944 advised the Common Council that the Housing Commission had informed him that housing for Negroes had reached its limits within the policy which is operative and implied that a change must be affected if additional housing is to be built. Although the Mayor was responsible for the policy in the first place, he again threw the political fat into the fire and asked the Common Council to hold a public discussion on the matter. (With every indication pointing to Jeffries' running for his fourth term,) there is some hope that in order to appeal to Negro and labor voters, he will make a last-minute effort to solve the housing problem. His vacillation and negligence in the past, however, does not offer much hope.

What about other avenues of approach? The FPHA attempted to locate sites for Negro housing in Dearborn on an unrestricted basis. But the aspect of Negroes moving into "lily-white" Dearborn, home of the vast Ford Motor enterprises, caused the City Council and Mayor of Dearborn to rise in militant opposition to the invasion of their territory.

On November 16, Mayor Orville L Hubbard of Dearborn, called a special meeting of the Common Council for the next day to protest the proposed 400-unit Negro housing project. In strong language, the Dearborn Council condemned the proposal of FPHA, accused George Schermer, Detroit Administrator of the Federal Public Housing Authority, of failure to consult with the authorities of Dearborn and of violating the laws of Congress. Referring to an election held in September 1940, when the people of Dearborn disapproved public housing, the resolution termed the insistence of FPHA to locate the project "a direct interference with, and an invasion of the City of Dearborn..... a shocking abuse of Federal wartime emergency power....."

Dearborn resolved to fight the erection of the project with all of its governmental strength and forwarded copies of the resolution to every United States senator and representative. With the NHA trying desperately to secure its budget, this action

by a municipality fighting public housing because of the Negro question, became a political liability and thus far the project is not being pressed.

As an indication of what some citizens in Dearborn think of housing Negro war workers - 12,000 of whom are employed there at the Ford Motor Company -- the statement of Mayor Hubbard at a recent meeting in Detroit is appropos. In discussing the Dearborn' position, Hubbard told a group of leading Detroit citizens that "when you remove garbage from your backyard, you don't dump it in your neighbor's." The analogy was obvious.

In answer to the vicious statements of Dearborn, Schermer's office issued the following release, parts of which were garbled by the reactionary Detroit press:

The National Housing Agency, at the request of the FPHA, has reviewed the need for 400 temporary dwelling accommodations for in-migrant war workers in the Detroit area and has affirmed that it is essential to war requirements to build these units. Dearborn is being considered as a location for this war housing although a thorough study continues for possible alternative locations. The problem of providing shelter for in-migrant war workers is Metropolitan area-wide, involving all communities, including Dearborn, and on that basis consideration of sites in Dearborn is completely justified.

The suggestion that a site be developed in Dearborn grows out of the fact that not less than 12,000 Negro war workers commute to and from there daily from other municipalities of the Detroit Metropolitan area. While Detroit, Ecorse, Inkster, River Rouge and Royal Oak Township have absorbed all of the publicly financed unrestricted housing for war workers up to this point, Dearborn has none.

Confronted with these facts, the FPHA has surveyed Dearborn for suitable sites for a project and has consulted Mayor Orville L Hubbard and other city officials in accordance with established FPHA policy to determine whether the city would cooperate in trying to meet the acute war housing situation.

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Consultation with local officials and groups is resorted to in selecting war housing sites in order to take into account community plans and opinions, and, if possible, select a site with community agreement. Permanent peace-time public housing differs entirely from housing for war need. Peace-time housing is a community responsibility. The problem under consideration here, however, is provision of temporary war housing which will be eliminated when the war is over. This is necessarily a responsibility of the Federal Government in accordance with national military

requirements. The Federal Public Housing Authority is responsible for selecting sites for temporary war housing and it must exercise its own best judgment, after making every reasonable effort to achieve local agreement.....

After the riot there were several organizations which figured prominently in offering programs of action to solve racial conflict. Among them were the Detroit Victory Council, the Board of Education, the Council of Social Agencies, the Greater Detroit Interracial-Intercultural Fellowship, the Detroit Urban League, the Detroit Branch NAACP, and a newly formed Mayor's Committee --- later the City of Detroit's Interracial Committee.

The work of the NAACP is well known. It continued the role of agitating for change in the police department, for interracial and adequate housing, for enforcement of the civil rights laws and fought against all forms of discrimination. The Urban League assisted in the struggle for better recreation and housing. The Council of Social Agencies and the Detroit Council of Churches passed interracial codes and began to review the work of their agencies and departments with an eye toward improving race relations. The Board of Education launched an intercultural program. The Victory Council, composed of industrialists, labor and social workers, representing the broadest community grouping, worked to remove Detroit from the category of a critical labor area. In order to effect this program, it became interested in the housing problem and was instrumental in the opening of a project units at Willow Run, near the Ford Bomber Plant, to Negro war workers who had previously been denied by the FPHA policy of not mixing the races in housing projects in the area under its administration. Over three hundred Negro families are now living in the project side by side with their white workers who also work at the Bomber Plant without friction. Proving the contention that people who work together can live together in harmony.

The Mayor's Interracial Committee, appointed after the riot, and reorganized after the hectic race-baiting election of November 1943, according to some viewpoints, has been

the biggest disappointment. The Committee's choice of a director was unwise and as a result it has made little progress in the realm of effecting a program of better race relations. Mr Harold Thompson, the director, was formerly associated with the Detroit Trust Company. Although his heart is undoubtedly in the right place, his unfamiliarity and lack of background in race relations made him unfit for the gigantic task of solving Negro-white problems through a government agency. The N A A C P recently asked for his removal on those grounds and there is hope that he will be removed in the near future. The Mayor's Committee has done some good things, such as maintain a barometer of race trends. It organized a community reporting committee and sponsored an inter-racial banquet. But these have had little effect on the big problems of housing, civil liberties, discrimination and segregation in general.

The Greater Detroit Fellowship, the first group to go into action after the riot, has been bogged down during 1944 for lack of funds. Requests to the War Chest and Community Fund for assistance, to date has been to no avail because leaders of the Fellowship have been unable and unwilling to pledge to the Council of Social Agencies that the Fellowship's program of action might not be embarrassing to the War Chest and the Community Fund. The War Chest, which supports the Metropolitan Detroit Council on Fair Employment Practices, which also fights against discrimination, has had so many complaints from employer-contributors that it does not want to jeopardize social agencies who depend on the War Chest by adding another militant group.

The most energetic organization in Detroit at the moment active on the housing scene is the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council. Edward Connor, the director, a newcomer to Detroit, is one of the most resourceful men to come to the Motor City in some time. Under his direction the Council has taken an active part in the fight to locate sites

for vitally needed houses in Dearborn and Detroit. It has organized a special committee on Housing for Metropolitan Detroit composed of such persons and organizational representatives as: Clarence Anderson, Detroit Council, Fair Employment Practices Committee; Dr L L Bozin, Rumanian-American- Alliance for Democracy; Rev T T Brumbaugh, Executive Secretary, Detroit Council of Churches; J A Garrothers; Father J Lawrence Cavanaugh, Frances Comfort, Detroit Federation of Teachers; John Gallo, Ford Local #600, UAW-CIO; Dr Benedict Glazer, Ned Gorrell, Executive Secretary, Detroit Victory Council, Rev Charles A Hill, Chairman Interracial Committee, Detroit Council of Churches; William P Lovett, Detroit Citizens' League; Paul W McIntosh, Ferndale City Planning Commission; P V McNamara, Wayne County Federation of Labor; Stanley Nowak, State Senator; Jack Raskin, Civil Rights Federation; Edmund J Stafford, Chairman Housing Committee, Detroit Chapter, National Lawyers Guild; Sam Sweet, Chairman, Housing Committee, Wayne County CIO Council. The Urban League is represented by John C Dancy, its director, and the N A A C P is represented by the Executive Secretary.

As the year 1945 begins, it is easily apparent that the activity of 1944 was not enough to dent the housing situation. The defeat of Prosecuting Attorney William Dowling, who blamed Negroes for the riot, was heartening, but the Mayor promptly salvaged him from the dump of political oblivion by appointing him Corporation Counsel. Police Commissioner John Witherspoon, who before, during, and after the riot could not understand the Negro protest against police brutality and accused Negro organizations, their press and militant leaders of starting the riot, was replaced by former Welfare Superintendent John Ballenger, who has done a magnificent job overhauling the Police Department and improving the racial attitudes of the police through pre-service and in-service training. He has sought and secured the cooperation of Negro organizations and leaders and instituted a crime prevention program of real merit.

Until the housing problem is solved, the palliatives of better police treatment, of long-range programs by community agencies for future improvement of race relations through educational approaches and other activity will be of little benefit. An honest appraisal makes Detroiters fearful of the consequences when the soldiers come back and there is no housing -- when the lucrative war employment comes to an end and when the "crisis patriotism" which Carey McWilliams calls the wartime desire to remedy race problems, shall have passed away, and Detroit tries to cope with postwar problems.

Negroes, as well as other minorities, are going to remain in Detroit during the postwar period. Population trends unmistakably point to their remaining. Hence, the problems must be solved now if tensions are to be removed from the community.

What Must
be Done

First, the legitimate problems of housing, which were acute before the war and which have steadily increased, must be solved. It must be taken out of the realm of emotion and attacked by sincere and honest people, both white and black, working together. Politicians must no longer be able to make political capital out of this issue by continually dividing the people along racial lines in order to get votes. The good people of the community, the churches and unctious organizations must become more vocal in the questions of living together as neighbors. To do this people must continually be given the facts. Facts which refute the claim that Negroes depreciate property, that they are poor financial risks, that their crime and delinquency rate makes all of them poor citizens. Whenever a "controversial" issue is raised the opposition, although in a minority, is usually more vocal and organized. The good people, numerically in the majority, seldom present a united front. Hence the "racists" and opponents of democracy succeed in driving a wedge between Negroes and the many groups who are interested in improving conditions.

More people and organizations are needed to place themselves on record for a change in the status quo. We need more "astirdists" for democracy and less pacifism on the controversial issues.

There are other aspects to the problem herein discussed which cannot be discussed at great length here. One relates to postwar community planning. Detroit has in mind several projects for a great postwar city but standing in the way of such progress is the problem of housing Negro citizens who will be displaced by new community developments. Not only are there moral reasons for improving the living conditions of 200,000 Negro citizens, but practical community betterment demands it.
