

THE FIRST CONGRESS OF THE POOR

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Syracuse, N.Y.

When liberals and civil rights agitators comment on the condition of the American poor, they are quick to say that the poor require more jobs, equal educational opportunities, better housing. And the poor, on formal and public occasions, are equally quick to say the same. Both enraged by and ashamed of their poverty, they demand the right to conform to the cherished American value of individual achievement, however impractical the application of this value and the governmental measures that spring from it may be to their impoverished condition. So Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) mothers readily endorse resolutions calling for public programs to enable poor people to establish

competitive skills and thereby to become self-sufficient.

But privately, away from the drama of framing and passing public resolutions, abstract notions of upward mobility give way to more pressing and immediate matters: how to secure a bare standard of

living—minimal housing, food to eat, clothes to wear. In such conversations with the poor, the villain is not so much a faceless society that permits flagrant class and racial exploitation as it is the familiar agents of the social-welfare state who control their lives. That, at least, is one conclusion to be drawn from a hastily arranged national convention of poor people held in Syracuse, N.Y., on January 15 and 16.

The convention in Syracuse, which met at a Negro Elks' club in a portion of the old tenderloin not yet erased by urban renewal, was expressly called to condemn the current "war against poverty." The rallying cry was for "total participation of the poor," not only in the front ranks of the battle against poverty but in the company, battalion, regimental and divisional headquarters as well. In this vein, resolutions were passed asserting



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the right of the poor to join those already empowered to make decisions about such major issues of American life as employment, urban renewal and education. Curiously, public welfare did not appear on the list. Stating that they were fed up with being the object of government power, declaring themselves ready to participate as equals in local anti-poverty councils along with representatives of private agencies, churches, political machines, public agencies and business elites, the delegates voted to establish a nation-wide, independently financed organization of the poor to advance their claims—even as they wondered where they would get financial resources merely to continue agitating against the poverty program in their various localities.

The Office of Economic Opportunity defines as its target a 30 to 40 million American population living in poverty. About 300 bona fide poor people and 100 representatives of the poor showed up at the Syracuse meeting. Obviously, a demand for "total participation" from such a relatively small assemblage could be construed as a rather insubstantial manifestation of dissent. But such dissent may yet prove to be infectious as more and more anti-poverty administrators and professionals stiffen in their attitudes toward the involvement of the poor in the community-action programs being established all over the country. Meeting at first en masse and later in caucuses called "study groups," the National People's War Council made a plea for unity among "grass roots organizations throughout the country." They further resolved to support any community-action program that agitates against agencies of our "poor law" government.

Slogans such as "total participation" go much beyond the official rhetoric of Title II of the Economic Opportunities Act of 1964, which merely calls for the "maximum feasible participation" of the poor; and to the extent of that difference, this convention could be said to be outside the Establishment's thinking about how the poor are to be brought into the war against poverty. But this extreme stance is, in part, a response to the failure of the poor to attain even modest representation in many community-action programs. It is also a response to the fact that a few anti-poverty programs have been faced with the

present loss or future denial of control over their funds as a consequence of their thus far tentative assaults upon the *status quo*. These delegates, in short, had found the "power structure" more unyielding than they had been led to hope.

In Syracuse, for example, the activities of a university-sponsored, community-action program, using OEO funds, had quickly led the university to dissociate itself, under pressure from angry local public officials (especially Mayor Richard Walsh) who had become the objects of harassment. After just nine months of stimulating protests in housing projects and among blocks of welfare recipients, the nine neighborhood groups, formed with the encouragement of the Syracuse Community Development Association (SCDA), were able to obtain new refrigerators and stoves for all tenants in a public-housing project and won the right to paint apartments in different colors. But they soon found that they had also generated a backlash. OEO ruled that in future they would have to agree to become part of the Crusade for Opportunity—the Mayor's own "umbrella" organization of anti-poverty agencies and boards—or forfeit federal funds. Thus far SCDA has stubbornly refused. Distrusting any political deals that might ultimately limit its freedom to choose when, how and whom to agitate among or against, it has eschewed as well the time-consuming "appeals" procedures established by OEO, although it may yet have to resort to them if it wishes to remain alive in any form. SCDA chose instead to call for expressions of solidarity from other hard-pressed local groups across the country—as many as could make it to a People's War Council on a few days' notice.

Conventions of special-interest groups regularly take place in America, and their recommendations are often heeded. On that same weekend, in fact, the New York State Combined Council of Law Enforcement Agencies also met in Syracuse to register unanimous disapproval of civilian review boards. This group received considerable press coverage. *The New York Times* gave the National People's War Council Against Poverty a total of 3 inches, and few other papers did better. Yet this many poor have rarely convened anywhere in recent years to pass reso-

lutions about their ill treatment at the hands of government agencies, or about their children's educational problems, their detestation of police brutality, or their right to make decisions affecting their own lives. It was probably to be expected that a convention so hastily summoned would be insufficiently heeded, but the extent of that disregard is worth summarizing: although nearly all top officials of the Office of Economic Opportunity were invited to observe, none ventured to attend; Governor Rockefeller was also invited, but did not come or send a representative; nor did Senators Kennedy or Javits, or Syracuse Congressman Hanley; only one civil rights leader, George Wiley of CORE, was present; representatives from the national Citizens Crusade Against Poverty were also absent.

Of the poor who came, by Greyhound or chartered bus, or in the automobiles of their paid and unpaid organizers, nearly all proved their status as paupers by putting up with sleeping accommodations in the apartments of their fellow poor or on church floors. Many traveled to Syracuse on borrowed funds, some in borrowed clothes. Over the long weekend, a constant activity was passing the hat to assure that all would get home.

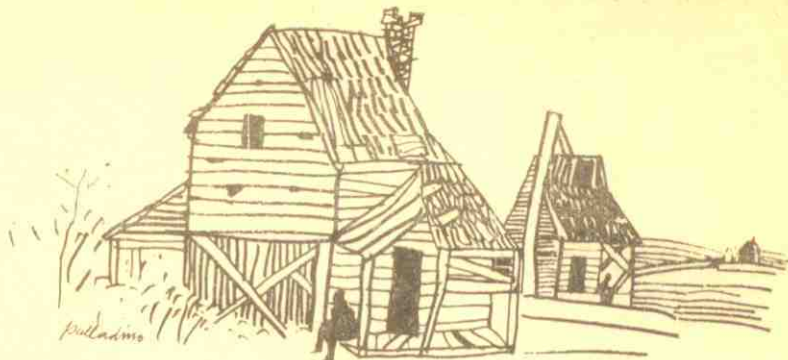
Home was chiefly the urban ghettos of New York, Buffalo, Newark, Detroit, Cleveland, Albany, Chicago and Lorraine, Ohio, but there were also contingents of the rural poor: a delegation of striking grape workers from Delano, Calif., under their magnetic leader, Cesar Chavez [see article by James Degnan, p. 151, this issue]; Arizona cotton pickers, freedom delegations from Plaquemine, La., a lone Nebraska Indian, a Mississippi Negro who had been activated to work in Cleveland by Students for a Democratic Society. Representatives of the Chicago Woodlawn Organization were in attendance, as was a group from Stryker's Bay on Manhattan's West Side. A dissident group came from an anti-poverty project in East Harlem and a large delegation from Mobilization for Youth on New York's Lower East Side. In Syracuse, ADC mothers from the Puerto Rican *barrios* of New York, aggrieved Negro migrants to the big cities from the rural South, exploited Mexican- and Filipino-Americans from the fields and vineyards, and hard-pressed Social Security

pensioners from Harlem practiced "participatory democracy" with white liberals and SNCC radicals, black-liberation militants, social workers, young Catholic and Protestant clergymen, and grandmotherly Negro women demanding reparations for the former slaves' "400 years of unrequited labor."

What could they all possibly have in common, aside from their economic plight? The satiric criticism of Dick Gregory, on hand to entertain, turned on race, but the chief grievances of the delegates were not racial as the convention came to voice them.

To understand the objectives of the War Council, it is not necessary to beat time to the penny-whistle blues of "total participation"; one need only consider the attitudes toward the poor manifested by such men as Richard Walsh, who was elected Mayor of Syracuse after first serving as Onondaga County Welfare Commissioner. As Commissioner of Welfare, he played upon the public's hostility toward the poor to advance his career. Under his administration, benefits did not notably increase or proliferate, but punitive measures did. Single men applying for relief were either ridden out of town or taken to the county almshouse; married men on welfare were coerced into work-relief programs below the minimum wage if they were suspected as malingerers; families were put on food vouchers as a punishment for fornication, or even for "mispending" inadequate welfare allowances; unconstitutional "after-midnight" raids were conducted to detect the presence of men in the homes of ADC mothers. Case workers, forced to become frauds investigators, worked closely with the county D.A.'s office, regularly intimidating raided welfare clients into relinquishing their constitutional protection against self-incrimination. Even today, the Onondaga County Welfare Department, according to one observer, is characterized by a contempt for the rights of the recipient which is equaled only in some Southern states. It is at least clear that the system of practices that Mr. Walsh engineered and supports in Syracuse violates many of the standards set by the American Public Welfare Association.

Although Mayor Walsh is a trained social worker who likes to boast that he is still doing graduate



work toward his Ph.D. in sociology, he said recently that agitation by the poor for reforms has been the cause of the recent upsurge of crime on the streets of Syracuse. Walsh's police force patrols the streets of the Syracuse Negro wards at night as if it were in Watts; indiscriminate stop-and-search procedures are regularly employed, and no active attempt has been made to recruit Negroes for the police. If Walsh has lately shown contempt for delegations of the poor organized by SCDA, he is at least consistent. It was Walsh—through his twin mouthpieces, the Goldwaterite *Post Standard* and the somewhat less antediluvian *Herald Journal* (both Newhouse papers)—who excoriated a small group of women who came to demand school clothing for their children from the county welfare office. They were, it was said, the ungrateful recipients of public charity. (It appears, ironically, that Mr. Walsh has received a sympathetic hearing from federal officials during the present controversy over SCDA, partly because he always makes himself available as an "expert" social worker to testify in Congress on rehabilitative legislation for the poor.)

But Mr. Walsh does not despise the welfare state. A middle-of-the-road Republican himself, he makes use of welfare-state powers to level Negro slums and to erect middle-income housing; to scatter the former residents of the ghettos without adequate relocation plans for what were once communities of people. Walsh—like many Americans—supports those aspects of the social-welfare state that suit his purposes.

For the poor to challenge the "poor house" assumption underpinning welfare statism in America is commonly regarded as worse than ingratitude. In one way or another, the poor have had to declare them-

selves defective in order to qualify for existing programs called Aid to the Disabled, Aid to Dependent Children, or Old Age Assistance. They are, therefore, not commonly endowed by administrators with rights; and that is precisely why Mayor Walsh and his various commissioners can treat their demands with contempt and condescension. How else is one to explain what happened when the delegation of nine welfare mothers, dissatisfied with their first meeting, descended again upon the county welfare office, this time accompanied by their organizers, to claim the school clothing which, according to state policies, is supposed to be standardized and uniform? They had previously been given varying amounts of money, according to their situations; they were now told that each would have to be interviewed "confidentially" to ascertain additional needs. But their further protests led only to arrests for trespassing on city property.

What happens in the Syracuse welfare system is endemic; it happens also in New York, Detroit and Cleveland. Nearly all the delegates to the Syracuse War Council with whom we spoke privately had the same unhappy relationship with institutions of social welfare, but few had been encouraged to do anything about it. Thus public welfare turned out to be the uninvited guest at the proceedings. It was nowhere listed on the formal agenda and only rarely came up at the various study meetings; but the fact that nobody volunteered to speak publicly of welfare did not make the deprivations it imposed, in infinite, painful variations, seem less real.

To the ADC mothers from Lorraine, Ohio, deprivation manifested itself in the bewildering way their benefits abruptly changed every month, raised for some and lowered for others, with no intelligible ex-

planations being given. To the earnest young settlement-house priest from Albany, confused and angry, it was in a system which had to be embarrassed with mass demonstrations before it would distribute surplus foods to supplement an unusually low schedule of cash subsistence allowances. To a Buffalo recipient it was in a system which distributed stamps instead of cash for food, and would not allow the recipients to use stamps to purchase either beer or cigarettes. To the striking Delano grape pickers, it was in the refusal of the Tulare County Welfare Department to grant aid to hungry families on the ground that they could find work in the strike zone. They also told of attempts by Tulare Housing Authority officials to evict rent-striking tenants who were protesting their inadequate living conditions.

If the Syracuse tenants nursed grievances against a Housing Authority which practiced random evictions and often refused to provide services for tenants, the Mexican cotton workers from Arizona had apparently not yet met up with any such institution, for they were living in a collection of shacks, called Guadalupe, on the outskirts of Phoenix. When their homes were inundated by a flash flood, they were sent to the Salvation Army instead of being given county relief. Mr. Walsh may complain to the White House that OEO money is being used to "sponsor class warfare," but officials like him are the ones who help create the grievances from which such conflict springs.

One could go on enumerating the abuses, injustices and inadequacies which were elicited from this somewhat timid and reluctant

clientele of the welfare state. Ultimately, these instances of abuse formed a selective view, a silhouette, of the part of the power structure that is immediately visible to the poor. Poverty councils speak of retraining and civil rights workers of job discrimination, but a young Negro from Cleveland told us: "Right after Christmas they just cut a whole lot of us off welfare without anything," and a delegate from Mississippi told how you had to "sell your house, your car, just about everything you owned before they would give you welfare, and then it wasn't ever worth it." "I don't want your welfare," screamed one angry black militant, as if receiving welfare were a degradation every bit as real to him as Jim Crow. A social worker reported that welfare recipients in Syracuse were kept so ignorant of their rights that only a handful of them used the formal appeals procedures available to them under law. Even when there were no complaints which could be brought against welfare policies, there were continual grudging assertions by the poor: "It's not enough. . . ." "It's not the way to treat people." "They'd rather not give it out if they can help it. . . ." "They threaten you if you got a man in the house." "If they [the housing project managers] find paper on the ground with your name on it more than once they will fine you \$5." "They tell you to buy school clothing for your boy and then they give you \$5." "They [in Arizona] won't give us anything for our families when we earn more than \$5 a day in the cotton fields." A young Negro from Syracuse, whose large family required supplementary financial assistance even though he was fully employed,

told us: "I never knew I had a right to get anything. . . ."

But if their sordid and insecure dealings with the social-welfare state were the chief interest which skilled grape pickers and unskilled ADC mothers seemed to have in common, the poor were not told what to do about it. They were not told that attorneys could be used to compel welfare officials to provide lawful benefits. Indeed, some of the organizers who accompanied the poor seemed hesitant to urge such tactics lest they induce an even greater dependency among those who were already defined as over-dependent. Because of SCDA's attacks upon the welfare state, some significant changes in government practice have begun to occur in Syracuse; but, in general, most delegates from other areas seemed unable to outline similar strategies of social action. It was as if the poor and their militant allies chose to believe that the despised welfare state might some day wither away, when the evidence mounts that it becomes a more powerful influence over the lives of the poor with each passing week.

To the extent that the War Council did not confront that fact squarely, it can be said that this meeting of the dissenting poor—for all its impressive and orderly procedures, tactics and proclamations—failed to produce a strategy that could transform a dissident faction into an effective movement. At Syracuse speakers called for the unification of "the urban poor with the rural poor in a national campaign." Unless the battle plan includes some such frontal attack upon the "American way of public welfare," the campaign may be ambushed *en marche* by a computerized society.