

CONFERENCE WORK PAPER

BY: Mrs. Bessie Smith

1. FIRST IMPRESSION:

The first time I heard about "maximum feasible participation" of the poor, was when I attended the first meeting of Area Board 3 in March 1965. Mr. Cyril Tyson, the Executive Director of the United Community Corporation (UCC), was there to explain the Anti-poverty Program as he thought it should be set up in Newark. Mr. Tyson said that the "War on Poverty" was a new experience; that the only way to create a meaningful change was for the participation of the poor in programming and decision-making both at the Area Board level and outside the Poverty Program in city agencies (Welfare Department and Legal Aid Services.

I had heard about the Anti-poverty Program before, on television, when President Johnson talked about it. My first reaction was that it wouldn't mean anything to me and to other poor people other than another social agency where there would be hand-outs and some would be helped, but most wouldn't be. I didn't have any faith that it would be the kind of program that Tyson was speaking about.

Tyson's definition of "maximum feasible participation" made me feel that the War on Poverty might differ from the other social agencies. Because of the policy and philosophy that Tyson presented to us at that early meeting, some people began to feel that the "War on Poverty" was a program that would be able to help them; that it was something that they could take part in and actually help themselves.

2. FORMATION OF THE U.C.C.:

We watched the formation of the United Community Corporation at the city-wide level. The UCC didn't make me feel any different about the possibilities of the "War on Poverty" than I felt when President Johnson spoke about it. The report written by Councilmen Addonizio, Bernstein and Turner, which criticized the UCC and recommended bringing it under the control of elected city

representatives, stated that the UCC was formed by the Mayor, the Council, and that all "interested citizens over the age of fifteen were invited.

The report stated that being poor was "a state of mind". That's not true. Interested citizens were not invited to the meetings. No notice was given that the meeting was open to the public. The City administration, representatives from the social welfare agencies and representatives from groups such as CORE, the Urban League, NAACP, Church groups, the Business-Industrial Coordinating Council, formed the UCC. Local groups such as the Clinton Hill Neighborhood Council were excluded. Community organizations that were not popular with the city administration were not invited to participate. We didn't like this. About 150 people from the Clinton Hill Neighborhood Council signed a petition asking for a voice in the U.C.C. organization. It is interesting to note the people's aspirations were high at this time. From the formation of the UCC until the present, we have had to petition for representation of the poor. If the formation of the UCC was any indication of how the "Poverty Program" was going to work in Newark, it certainly wasn't going to have maximum feasible participation of the poor. The same old groups were running the thing.

In spite of what I saw in the formation of the UCC, Tyson's speech at the Area Board, led us to believe that his definition of "MFP" seemed to hold some hope that on the neighborhood level some of the people who needed the program would actually be involved in running it. The fact that in Area Board 3 we were already organized and had a united voice, made it appear that we would have an opportunity to get involved on the level of maximum feasible participation. We decided to organize in our area to do this. We didn't know exactly what form this participation ought to take. I felt it would mean people from the neighborhood being hired for the jobs of organizing the poor people into the "Poverty Program".

3. KEEPING THE POOR AT ARMS' LENGTH:

a. Staffing Local Offices.

We understood from the beginning that "MFP" posed many problems -- who was qualified, whether poor people would be able to suggest programs; to staff the area boards, work-out their programs and put them into effect. We thought that the Federal Government would provide experienced personnel at the beginning to do the technical work that couldn't be done by poor people and the "experts" wouldn't be administering the programs at the Area Board Level. They would be helping: doing a job based on what poor people felt would help wipe out poverty. We didn't think that experts should make the decisions. Experts aren't capable of making the kind of decisions for poor people that would change their living conditions. Only poor people can do that. I expected that if the government was sincere about the aims of the war on poverty, they would pay experts to work-out poor people's ideas and, at the same time, helping them and educating the poor people in the process so they could take over a lot of the things that the experts did.

We thought that maximum feasible participation of the poor meant the Federal government would make money available for programs developed by poor people and that poor people could organize themselves, with other interested citizens, to work-out their problems, coming to a decision about what's best for each community to wipe out poverty. Those decisions would be governed by a majority of poor people - since poor people would use this money. We felt that everybody who was more fortunate in this country would want others to share in their good fortune and would do everything they could to help in this ideal. But, I imagine this was just a dream. We've come to realize that this is not the thinking of the Federal government, the local administration, or the UCC. We think it will be a hard struggle for the poor to be involved in the program at all. Nobody, in Federal or in local administrative positions

wants the poor to govern their own "Poverty Program". These officials want a few of us to sit in and listen so they can say that they have poor people in the program. That's their definition of maximum feasible participation.

b. Programing.

What we saw during the first months of UCC's work is another example of keeping the poor at arms' length. All the programs and proposals acceptable to the UCC were introduced by the City Administration and other established Agencies. Some of these proposals, i.e. pre-school program and the Blazer Council proposal involved grass roots participation and offered some kind of grass roots control. However, the City Council of Newark exercised its "veto" over these proposals since they were not controlled by the Administration or consistent with the administration's policies.

The program that came out of Area Board 3, A Proposal for a Recreational Center, was first introduced to the UCC in June 1965. The Leaguers Inc. proposed a similar program and this program has been funded by Washington. But our recreation center proposal was finally approved by the Board of Trustees of UCC on February 17, 1966 -- eight months after we submitted it. We were recently told that our Program would be sent to Washington to be funded. We assume that it was finally approved because of the pressure we were able to put on the Administration. When all of us fight, as we did for the recreation center, and as we did when we stopped the Mayor from putting more City Administration people onto the UCC's Board of Trustees, then poor people get the feeling that maximum participation is "feasible". However, I think a lot of us see that the only way we can achieve change, even when the "War on Poverty" program is supposed to be doing it with us, is -- if we fight and keep putting pressure on. We still think there's a possible chance for "maximum feasible participation", but it takes a very hard fight to even get minimum participation.

Take the recreation center for example. We worked a long time on the Center proposal, and we took it through all the steps--first, making sure James Blair, Director of Community Action, UCC, felt it was satisfactory and met all the requirements. We then took the proposal to Area Board 3, where it was approved by the general membership. We received a letter from the UCC, stating we couldn't submit the proposal to UCC until our area board had a Board of Trustees. We drew up the constitution for Area Board 3 to include an executive Committee -- not a Board of Trustees. However, we had to call another general membership meeting, another month going by in which people tried to make a decision about the formation of a board of trustees. UCC said that unless we had a board of trustees, the recreation center proposal wouldn't be submitted. The general membership agreed to have a board of trustees, so we had to go through the procedure of electing this board. I don't have any idea why we had to go through that, except that UCC said that Washington would not fund a proposal for an organization that did not have a board of trustees. The fact that the UCC failed to inform us of these organization requirements in advance of the proposal means that they failed to provide expertise when we needed it. We had to set up a board of trustees before UCC would even consider the proposal.

4. THE ONUS OF NCUP -- THE UCC'S UNJUSTIFIED AND SELF-DEFEATING RESPONSE.

I guess we've been stubborn in Area Board 3. In spite of what we saw the UCC doing, we still went on fighting to participate fully in the program. The Newark Community Union Project (NCUP) an organization that we had formed in Area 3 before the "War on Poverty" came to Newark, led that fight and it was insisntently discriminated against by UCC. UCC has discriminated against NCUP by not hiring anyone from the organization. This has been the case despite the fact that NCUP people were active in the anti-poverty program and worked on their own to try to organize people into the program. These people

really are the only organizers doing anything in Area 3 to bring poor people into the program. Hiring policies weren't controlled by the local boards but controlled through the administration of the UCC. Area Board 3 had no voice in who would be hired to organize the people into the program. Tyson stated that he could see the day when the area boards would become independent and would hire and fire their own staff. He said this after the meeting in which the Mayor's proposal to add people to the Board of Trustees was defeated. Perhaps Tyson now believes that independence is possible since poor people have shown that they are determined to stand-up for the rights the Federal government gave to them. To date in Area Board 3, as far as hiring those individuals who have been active in organizing people into the program, we haven't received any help or encouragement from Tyson or anyone. When I spoke to Mr. Blair about hiring these people, he said he couldn't hire anyone from NCUP because they were "identifiable". I have no clear idea of what he meant by "identifiable". People view NCUP as troublemakers due to rumors used as harrassment to keep others from organizing to fight the administration. We feel that the UCC has failed to recognize and to implement what we believe is the most important aspect of the "Poverty Program" - involving the poor people themselves. Local grass-roots groups will always be attacked as trouble-makers. If the UCC accepts those attacks and doesn't hire local people because of what the City Administration has said about their organization, how will they ever involve the poor directly in their programs?

It's not only in the area of a hiring policy which the UCC rejects as "maximum feasible participation" of the poor. The fact that the UCC wouldn't hire NCUP people who were actively organizing poor people is quite important. In Area Board 3 these individuals were the only people working to get grass-roots participation in the program. As far as I know, the UCC never sent organizers out or went directly into the community to get people to

attend area board meetings. The UCC leaflets were sent to people who had signed up for UCC membership but none were sent through the area board to bring people into the Board. Any increase in membership was due to NCUP organizing activities. Those people who did get notices were those people already active in the Democratic Party and in local organizations included on the Board of Trustees of UCC. If NCUP hadn't organized new people, the area board's membership would have been just like the UCC's--representatives of all the regular organizations but no representation, let alone participation from the poor.

5. CONCLUSION:

There isn't time to tell you about the other ways in which our ideas for participation didn't work out. One that we had was to try to get people from the Welfare Committees of the area boards to sit on the advisory committees of both the city and county welfare departments, to point out that welfare checks were cut-off without reason, the poor people had to buy second-hand furniture at exorbitant prices, they were not allowed to have telephones. We haven't been able to get anywhere on this proposal and we haven't received any help from the UCC on it.

I have been so discouraged by our attempt with Area Board 3 to get any kind of decent participation by poor people. I have been disgusted by the OEO's attempts to limit and change the definition of "Maximum Feasible Participation" and I am beginning to feel that if these attempts succeed, the Anti-Poverty Program will have only scratched the surface of poverty -- and my attempts and all the other poor people's attempts to foster change will be wasted and useless. Area Board 3 is run by poor people from the neighborhood, and we have always had to fight -- not only against people from our own area who felt that poor people have no business running such organizations but also against UCC. They have isolated Area Board 3,

supposedly because it was dominated by "outsiders" (people in UCC call the SDS students "outside agitators").

It seems to me this is a type of harrassment to stop people coming into Area Board 3 as long as there are people active in the Area Board who are members of NCUP. Yet -- I have heard a lot of people say that Area Board 3 is the only one that has the grass-roots people running the programs and making definite decisions. Therefore, it means to me that if there is a local group like NCUP already in the neighborhood who are prepared to fight for the OEO's former definition of "participation" of the poor -- then they have some chance of getting some participation. However, if there is no local group in the neighborhood, there is no chance for participation of the poor, let alone "maximum feasible participation"; it is not promoted or sustained by UCC.