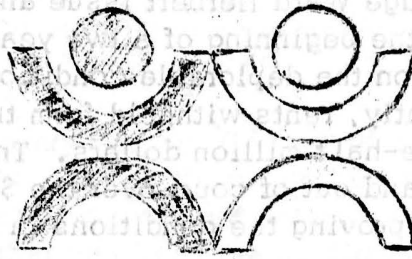


## UNDERSTANDING



### THE COMMUNICATION MEDIA FOR OPERATION UNDERSTANDING

44 Belmont Avenue, Newark, New Jersey 07103

824-3110

February 1, 1973

WELCOME BACK TOBY HENRY AND TOM COMERFORD THIS SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 4th,  
AT 11:00 A.M. AT STELLA WRIGHT HOMES TENANT ROOM, 254 PRINCE STREET,  
ROOM 1 R.

Let this be an opportunity to show where you stand!

Toby and Tom have spent the last month at Essex County Corrections Center in Caldwell because they believed in the people at Stella Wright Homes and were willing to give of themselves to change the inhuman living conditions there.

What have you been doing?

The newspapers would lead you to believe that the rent strike is over. This is not so! You cannot end a rent strike by refusing to deal with the people who are striking. This is what the Newark Housing Authority has attempted to do while Toby and Tom have been in prison. The rent strike continues - until people are able to live in decent housing.

We have had many requests for back copies of our Newsletter which have covered the Stella Wright Rent Strike. For the benefit of all we have put it together in this issue.

### THE STELLA WRIGHT RENT STRIKE

In September of 1968, Father Thomas Comerford, who a year later moved into the project, first went into Stella Wright Homes to meet the people and help them get themselves together. They started with clean-up campaigns, summer programs, family outings, movies for children and endless months of meetings held among the tenants to discuss the problems and try to instill life and hope and a new sense of responsibility. The tenants formed their own tenant association which now represents all the tenants. They met with the Newark Housing Authority, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Mayor, City Council, Police Department and countless others.

In March 1970, when all efforts went completely unmatched by the NHA and the other supposedly responsible groups, the Tenant Association voted to take what it thought was an ultimate step, to declare a rent strike beginning in April 1970. They put their rent money into a fund which was to be returned to them when the strike was over. The tenants would then be in a position to settle their own accounts with the NHA.

In January of 1971, the NHA had the three leaders of the Stella Wright Tenant Association, Toby Henry, President, Rev. Thomas Comerford and Edward Satterfield served with subpoenas. The NHA had Judge Ward Herbert issue an order forbidding them to collect any more rent. This was the beginning of a two year court battle which centered on the rent fund rather than on the deplorable conditions at the Stella Wright Homes. As was pointed out recently, rents withheld from the NHA in the past three years amounts to over one and one-half million dollars. The NHA has had the time and money to spend two years in and out of court over the \$95,000 fund but has not had the time or money to spend improving the conditions in the city housing projects.

The tenants continued to negotiate with the NHA and HUD, but were unsuccessful in having any of their demands met. Their concern at Stella Wright Homes was the lack of a security system, the need for a depopulation program to ease the burden of so many people having to live together in such a confined area, and tenant involvement in decision making.

In March of 1972, the strike leaders, after being threatened with jail by the NHA, made available to the Court and the NHA a full accounting of all funds it had collected during the course of the rent strike. It was up to Judge Herbert at this point to decide to whom the rent fund should be given. The Tenant Association then asked Judge Herbert to order the NHA to remedy certain of the conditions that are causing grave harm at the project. Judge Herbert heard arguments from both sides, said he needed time to think the matter over, and that he would notify them of his decision in the near future. They also asked him to come to Stella Wright Homes and see the conditions for himself. He said that he did not think this was necessary.

They did not hear from Judge Herbert again until October of 1972.

He then ordered them to appear in Court on November 17, 1972 and told them he would give his decision at that time. During the time from March to November, SWTA had been trying to negotiate with the NHA but to no avail.

Although they knew that they would be in contempt of court if they returned the money, Toby Henry and Tom Comerford realized that at this point Judge Herbert would surely turn the rent fund over to the NHA. Had there been any improvements in the nine months it took the Judge to order them back into court, they would probably not have reached the decision they eventually did reach. But waiting so long and having nothing constructive happen was so frustrating that they took the matter to the tenants who insisted that they return the fund to the people who had contributed to it. The tenants reminded the leaders that the fund belonged to the tenants and not to the Newark Housing Authority.

On November 17, 1972, the tenants once again went into court and listened to Mr. William Brach, the NHA lawyer give all the reasons why the NHA should have the fund turned over to them. The tenants' lawyer, Michael Callan, then informed Judge Herbert that the money had been returned to the tenants. This outraged Mr. Brach and he in turn persuaded Judge Herbert to order the three leaders to be arrested and held in contempt of court. He also demanded that the three lawyers representing them be held in contempt. The lawyers had nothing to do with the return of the funds and were not informed at the time that it was going to take place.

The primary concern of the NHA over the past two years has been the Tenant Strike Fund of \$95,000. They have allowed the strike to continue and have made none of the

essential repairs. HUD is equally to blame in this matter. The tenants have always been willing to negotiate. But still the elevators don't work, there are still suffocating fumes from the incinerators, children must play in the filth of the stairways. The City Health Department found 2,000 violations on a recent inspection of only one-half of the project.

On December 2, 1972, Toby Henry, Father Comerford and Ed Satterfield appeared before Judge Irwin I. Kimmelman, who ordered them to return to court on December 18th at which time Toby Henry and Father Comerford entered a guilty plea. Judge Kimmelman refused to sentence them on that day because he did not believe the guilty pleas had been entered to show remorse and he would not further their roles as martyrs by sending them to jail during the Christmas holidays.

On the previous Saturday, December 16, 1972, an invitation to many civic and religious leaders had resulted in a very encouraging "Day of Inspection" at Stella Wright Homes. As a result, a rally to support the tenants at Stella Wright was staged at Seton Hall University on January 11th. Over 300 people attended voicing renewed support to the tenants to assist in alleviating the inhuman conditions which exist in our public housing projects by forming the "Concerned Citizens Committee for the Stella Wright Homes."

Absent from this gathering were Toby Henry and Thomas Comerford, who on January 3, 1973, were sentenced by Judge Kimmelman, to 45 days at the Essex County Corrections Center in Caldwell.

Also found guilty of contempt of court on January 23, 1973, were Harris David, J. Michael Callan and Gerald Clark, the three lawyers who represented the tenants.

The lawyers are not guilty of contempt, they are guilty of trying to help poor people in their struggle for decent housing. They gave so much of themselves, became so involved, that it was impossible for them to do anything but give their wholehearted support to a cause they truly believe in. Now, they are facing sentencing and disbarment because they fought so selflessly to make life a little more bearable for their fellow man.

At no time did they advise the return of the money, at all times they advised against returning the money. They were not told that the money was to be returned to the tenants and would have made it clear that it should not be returned if they had known about it. Too much is at stake for Harris David, Michael Callan and Gerald Clark. People in the suburbs must realize that what is about to happen cannot happen. These men cannot be sent to jail when their only intent was to help others to a better way of life. Explain the situation to your friends.

We encourage you to write to Judge Irwin I. Kimmelman on the lawyers behalf and express your feelings in this matter. We simply want you to attest to their good character, those of us who know them are well aware of this fact. You might mention that they are a valuable asset to the community and that you are familiar with the work they have been involved in at Stella Wright Homes as well as the assistance they have given over the years to many poor folks. Address the envelope to their attorney:

Dickinson Debevoise  
744 Broad Street  
Newark, New Jersey 07102

Come to Court on February 15, 1973 - Essex County Court House - 9:00 a.m. - 10th floor - and show your concern and support for Harris David, Michael Callan and Gerald Clark, who are to be sentenced on that day.

History teaches us that laws were made to protect the rights of people. When they no longer serve this purpose, they must be changed. This traditionally has always been a slow process, but it comes to a grinding halt in the face of our rapidly changing social conditions. Only through a concerted effort on the part of all those who are generally concerned will we speed up this process.

Over five hundred meetings among the tenants themselves, two years of countle's court appearances, appointments with officials of Prudential, the Chamber of Commerce trips to Washington, picketing in Newark and New York express only some of the efforts on the part of the tenants.

We therefore urge all to become more knowledgeable and vocal in their spheres of influence, especially on a national level with our own senators. Write to:

The Hon. Clifford P. Case  
Senate Office Building  
Washington, D. C. 20510

The Hon. Harrison A. Williams  
Senate Office Building  
Washington, D. C. 20510

These inhuman conditions demand not bandages, but radical surgery.

What more can you do, you're asking? Attend Operation Understanding's Friday night bingo game. The purpose of this bingo is to provide funds for other forms of housing for the people of Stella Wright Homes. The government is now planning to cut back funds for this purpose. Therefore, it is even more crucial that we take some positive action.

Remember Friday Night - Montclair Bingo Hall  
408 Bloomfield Avenue (next to the Wellmont Theatre)  
Montclair, New Jersey  
7:45 p.m.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who were so generous in their contributions to Operation Understanding. We could not have continued without your assistance. Since our expenses have increased tremendously during the past few months, any further donations would be appreciated. We hesitate to ask for a subscription dues but a dollar or two from those who have not yet contributed would be most helpful.