

A House Divided

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Public housing advocates plan to occupy the Housing Authority of New Orleans office Aug. 28, nearly two years after Hurricane Katrina damage forced the partial closure of seven housing projects and shuttered two others completely.

The sit-in is part of an effort to save the developments from demolition.

At the same time, activist Mike Howells hopes the housing advocacy movement can be kept from destroying itself from within.

“We’ve made a lot of progress but unfortunately there is friction with the other activists who see this issue as their turf,” Howells said. “You have a lot of people trying to go off on their own path and it’s really atomized the movement. There’s a lot of passion and egos involved.”

Howells knows what he’s talking about. Twice he has been punched in the face by fellow activists who felt he overstepped his boundaries.

“I don’t want to be a punching bag, but in every political movement you have the threat of violence,” Howells said.

Activist crossroads

As the second anniversary of Katrina approaches, the public housing movement is at a crossroads. The unity that led to important victories immediately after the storm has disintegrated into turf battles, said Sam Jackson, a resident and organizer at the B.W. Cooper Housing Development.

“We have a lot of chiefs but no Indians, and that’s created animosity,” Jackson said. “I just want to be somebody who’s fighting for the folks who need to get back home.”

The main grassroots groups involved with public housing include Survivors Village, Residents of Public Housing, C3 and the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund.

Combined, the groups have won several major victories, including a June 2006 lawsuit that stopped the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development from demolishing more than 4,500 public housing units.

They also lobbied the U.S. House of Representatives to keep HUD from razing housing developments until alternative homes are found for the residents. The bill is now in the Senate.

Endesha Juakali is a founder of Survivors Village and resident of the St. Bernard Housing Development, one of the sites slated for bulldozing. He points out, however, that not one public housing building has been torn down and 2,800 apartment units will reopen by the end of the year.

“Everybody said it was a done deal,” Juakali said. “That’s what HUD said and the mayor and Oliver Thomas.

“But I think the people in D.C. don’t understand New Orleans. You let one person back in, give us that foothold, you’re gonna get 1,000 people who want in and that’s how you build a movement.”

Lingering tension

Despite these victories, philosophical differences and racial politics threaten to splinter the coalition.

At the heart of the turmoil is C3, an anti-war organization that successfully fought to reopen the Iberville Housing Development. Its leaders, Mike Howells and Elizabeth Cook, are white and have never lived in the projects. And this created problems.

During a July rally for the homeless at Duncan Plaza, Juakali disagreed violently with an alleged insult by Howells and laid him out on the pavement with a punch in the face.

The disagreement arose from a proposed agreement between St. Bernard residents and the AFL-CIO that called for the labor union to finance a St. Bernard redevelopment to provide at least 1,000 units in about six buildings with the residents on the policy-making board.

Juakali, who helped negotiate the tentative agreement, said Howells, a tarot card reader and French Quarter resident, accused him of selling out.

“Mike was ranting and raving, saying that C3 was the only group standing up for the people,” said Juakali. “They want to do socialism, create a new society and overthrow the government. All we’re trying to do is get our community back. But Mike didn’t want to hear it and said I was selling out, so I turned around and knocked him on his ass.”

Howells said his problem with Juakali is that the AFL-CIO proposal could result in a reduction in the number of units at St. Bernard. Howells said the best strategy is for all housing developments to present a unified front and demand every pre-Katrina public housing unit be reopened.

“People get tired after awhile with the struggle and make the mistake thinking the residents and working class can negotiate with the big boys,” said Howells. “They think strength comes from negotiation rather than the streets and when we forget that we’re most likely to get isolated and our butts kicked.”

Juakali said Howells may be able to stick it out until all the units have reopened because he has a house to live in, but St. Bernard residents have been locked out of their homes for almost two years and forced to live in trailers, cars or on the streets.

Choosing wisely

Groups such as C3 from outside the projects need to walk a careful line to avoid arousing animosity, said Ishmael Muhammad, an attorney and representative for the Residents of Public Housing.

Instead of a leadership role, they need to provide support, he said. But many seem more interested in publicity and getting their faces in the paper, Muhammad said, likening C3 efforts to those of Rev. Jesse Jackson.

“Jesse Jackson comes down here to do a march and to him the ‘hood is just a backdrop. He’s getting the credit and the money and the power, and that’s how people get used.”

Sam Jackson said Muhammad has no businesses telling public housing residents who to associate with, especially since Muhammad never lived in public housing.

Jackson was one of the first people to return to B.W. Cooper after the storm. He said C3 helped organize the residents to fight for their homes when no one else would help him.

The public housing movement was multicultural and free of turf wars and racial politics at first, Jackson said, until people like Muhammad got involved.

“Ishmael said that if this is about the residents it should be all black ...,” Jackson said. “We ain’t got no time for this crap because you’ll never get anything solved. And if you start bringing up these racial things, it’s time for you to go.”

Juakali said he welcomes outside groups. For example, he said Common Ground, a largely white organization, is a valuable ally that supports public housing residents.

But C3 is a different animal, he said.

“They think they know what’s best for us. They think black people are dumb and can’t lead ourselves. I have to admit they’ve been with us since the beginning and have supported almost everything we’ve done. But they’re anarchists in the worst sense of the word. We’re not trying to reconstruct the world. We’re just trying to get our community back. We just have very different goals.”

Help needed

Howells acknowledges philosophical differences but said public housing residents will need outside help to win the political struggle.

“I think it’s ridiculous when people are ticked off at a demonstration and say, ‘Just look at all those white people out there. They didn’t live in public housing.’ Why can’t public housing people have support from non-public housing residents?”

Jackson said the infighting angers him because too much is at stake. He works more than 13 hours a day at two jobs just to afford his family’s \$370 a month apartment at B.W. Cooper. •