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Not For Sale

By **Nijmie Dzurinko**

Published on: **September 01, 2006**

The Anti-Displacement Solidarity Committee of INCITE Philadelphia is creating a new model for solidarity organizing that combines direct support, political education, and media making in the service of poor people's neighborhood-based organizing. Our work aims to prevent forced displacement due to gentrification, eminent domain, tax foreclosures, and other methods of corporate takings.

Our committee was founded in October 2005 after several women who had attended the Color of Violence III conference (put on by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence in March 2005) started a listserv to begin connecting women of color in Philly under the banner of INCITE.

Some of these women were relatively new to both activism as well as the city of Philadelphia, and our list was soon ablaze with conversations about which issues to focus on, how to organize, and questions of accountability and privilege.

At a critical juncture when time pressures and a lack of focus were causing the initiators of INCITE Philadelphia to question whether the project was worth pursuing, proposals began to surface. Recognizing the potential power of a group of women eager to become active in Philadelphia organizing but lacking the framework and grounding to do so, INCITE Philadelphia began operating as a loosely affiliated network of committees with various focuses.

It was at this point that the Anti-Displacement Solidarity Committee (ADSC) was born. Our goals were: first, engage in self-education around the politics of housing by using a framework that is grounded in the movement to end poverty. Second, create infrastructure to support the neighborhood-based organizing of poor people to preserve their housing in the face neighborhood redevelopment and gentrification policies. Third, work in tandem with the newly formed Media Mobilizing Project of the Philadelphia Independent Media Center to fuse media making with organizing.

Community partner

Our primary partner in this work has been the Community Leadership Institute (CLI), which began in the West Kensington section of North Philadelphia in the mid 1990s, initially receiving "Empowerment Zone" funding through the city. Started by predominantly poor Latina women, CLI initially served as a leadership school for community residents, teaching block organizing skills, doing youth and voter outreach, and building civic capacity. The late Rosemary Cubas, a West Kensington resident, life-long activist, factory organizer, and founder of the Third World Coalition of the American Friends Service Committee, was one of the founders of CLI.

In April 2001, Philadelphia Mayor John Street unveiled the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI). Although NTI began with cosmetic changes designed to garner resident support (such as trash removal from vacant lots), the true endgame of NTI is a massive facelift for the entire city. The plan is predicated upon a class remake of many poor neighborhoods in order to stimulate private sector investment, increase the city's tax base, and push Philadelphia toward a more competitive rank in the global economy.

A cornerstone of the plan is to attract new development into Philadelphia neighborhoods through demolition and clearance in order to assemble parcels of land for development. This process is facilitated by a ten-year tax abatement on new construction and other developer grants and incentives. In NTI's first phase, five thousand properties were targeted for demolition. About 250 of these are owner-occupied.

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Shortly after the plans were announced, several Philadelphia neighborhoods, including CLI's neighborhood of West Kensington, began to feel the sting of NTI. Philadelphia's Redevelopment Authority (the property acquisition arm of NTI) announced plans to acquire and demolish the properties of seven families on Bodine Street. CLI organizers rapidly turned their attention to helping residents fight the seizure of their properties. Their funding through the Empowerment Zone was immediately terminated.

Since early 2002, the Community Leadership Institute has been unique among the few poor-led groups in our city that have successfully organized to fight the forced displacement of poor people from Philadelphia neighborhoods. As a former member of the Philadelphia Affordable Housing Coalition, CLI was a key participant in a campaign to ensure a \$15 million housing trust fund to support low-income housing in the city. CLI has also organized block leadership to become experts in housing policy and eminent domain abuse. They have taken on cases in the streets and in the courts on an individual, block, and neighborhood basis to strengthen organizing and help residents feel confident enough to fight. One of CLI's members, eighty-year-old Veronica Howard, who became involved after her own house was threatened, recently won the right to remain in her property after her case made it all the way to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

As the focus of their work changed, CLI became a beacon for residents throughout the city who began to receive notices that their properties were wanted. Its own membership greatly expanded to reflect the incredible diversity of their neighborhood base, working not only with Latinos with roots in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, but with African Americans, Bosnians, and other Eastern Europeans joining in as well.

Despite CLI's accomplishments and the threat they posed to the city power structure as a multi-racial group of poor people, CLI remained a tiny organization with only two staff members, operating on a shoestring budget.

Greatest assets

The ADSC has a mission to support the work of CLI and a growing network of neighborhood groups in the fight to preserve Philadelphia's neighborhoods as places where poor people can live and even own their own homes. One of the amazing things about our city is that there are approximately 92,000 homeowners in Philadelphia who are living on less than \$20,000 a year. The fact that there is still a relatively high rate of homeownership among Philadelphia's poor people is one of the greatest assets our city has.

Our work is grounded in political education about the macro-level forces that are bringing about the changes in Philadelphia and other cities. ADSC focuses on the relationships between the neoliberal economic and political order, the dismantling of social safeguards, and the devolution of federal responsibility to cities, which together result in fierce competition among metropolitan areas for business investment and high-income residents in order to support city budgets.

Housing policy has followed these trends by dismantling large public housing towers throughout the country under the federal HOPE VI program. The corporate sector and their allies in government have increasingly seen these towers as barriers to private investment in neighborhoods.

Neoliberal ideology views low-income housing through the lens of its potential to stimulate housing market values and private investment in the surrounding communities. This is accomplished by severely decreasing density—new developments in Philadelphia include many ranch-style homes with garages and driveways. Additionally, new policies target the not-quite poor (most new "low-income" developments in Philadelphia are targeted toward families with incomes of between \$40,000 and \$70,000) while still managing to fit federal and local guidelines for tax credits and other development grants.

ADSC's work is grounded in the belief that those who are most directly affected must lead the fight against these policies. As allies, we assist CLI and their growing network in several concrete ways. For example, we provide basic technical support such as the construction of databases and listservs, build community contacts to link to the network, produce outreach materials for use at community meetings and forums, and make connections between housing activists and researchers/scholars who can help decipher the complicated



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activists and researchers, scholars who can help decipher the complicated redevelopment plans and blight certifications. ADSC members also accompany residents to meetings to assist them when they advocate for themselves.

Media mobilizing

The final component of ADSC's work is through interfacing with the Media Mobilizing Project (MMP) of the Philadelphia Independent Media Center. This project is grounded in the belief that democratization of media is not enough, and to this end we are training a new cadre of media to understand how to frame issues to unite the communities who are left out of the neoliberal order's endgame.

Our committee liaises with the MMP to produce documentation of community meetings, interviews with displaced residents, and meetings between poor residents and city agencies and officials. These productions can then be used to inspire other neighborhoods to take action or to highlight successful strategies. In order to engage in this work, our members are trained in interviewing and audio and video recording, with a focus on background research, analyzing power relationships, and messaging. The majority of this work is not geared toward breaking into the mainstream media, but is actually a multimedia component of neighborhood organizing itself.

The MMP has created the first blog in Philadelphia dedicated to the issue of displacement and creating a new community vision for our neighborhoods. We have also produced several short video pieces with documentation of community meetings and actions as teaching and organizing tools for the growing network of neighborhood groups now becoming active. As the MMP expands, we will increasingly train members of neighborhood-based groups to build their capacity to use media to their own ends.

For the members of the ADSC, the committee has functioned as a place to become politically educated, to experience the fusion of theory and practice that is a hallmark of effective organizing work, and to go through a "loss of innocence" regarding the struggles of poverty as experienced through the fight for housing in the city of Philadelphia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

>Nijmie Dzurinko is a Philadelphia-based organizer and popular educator. She has been active in the youth organizing movement nationally and locally and is a founding member of the International Women's Peace Service, a human rights organization that operates in the West Bank. She continues her fight to prevent the displacement of unwanted populations through her current work. She is committed to building the movement to end poverty in this country and around the world. Check out the MMP blog at www.allforhetaking.org.