

# CAMDEN, N.J.



## CITY IN CRISIS

"Fasten your seat belts, you're about to enter Camden," is the title of a recent article in Philadelphia Magazine. Camden, N.J., is a stereotype of an urban center in decay. Ride through the streets and see block after block being torn down for "urban renewal" which in Camden's case is described as "Negro removal" by N.J. Community Affairs Director, Paul Ylvisaker. To Philadelphians riding to the Jersey shore or suburban Jerseyites commuting to their Philadelphia jobs, Camden is a town you pass through, trying not to notice the trash-strewn lots and delapidated houses on either side of the road.

Housing conditions are deplorable. The homes of the poor--mostly black and Puerto Rican--are being torn down to build fancy high-rise apartments or wide highways for suburban commuters and the trucks of the few remaining industries in Camden. There are not enough houses for Camden's 120,000 residents and still more homes are marked for destruction.

Camden is fast becoming a ghost town, as industry leaves and people remain unemployed or constantly fearful of lay-offs. While factories move to the suburbs, there is no public transportation to most of these jobs, thus Camden's unemployed remain unable to find work. Property taxes are high causing a mass exodus of those who can afford to move, leaving a wasteland for those who must stay. The streets are unrepaired and dirty throughout the city.

Camden's schools are overcrowded; the teachers are underpaid and generally unqualified to teach children

from ghetto areas. Graduates from Camden's high schools are prepared neither for vocation nor college. Over half of Camden's population is black and Puerto Rican, yet there is mere token representation in city government and its agencies. Black and Puerto Rican schools receive the least attention.

To date, there is no workable program to rebuild the city. On the contrary, the city government (through two administrations--Pierce and Nardi) has attacked the very people who are trying to alleviate the dreary conditions that plague Camden.

Beginning in May of 1968 when a demonstration for better housing was met by helmeted police, conditions have deteriorated. In the most recent case, police arrested four men and a woman on false charges of conspiracy and possession of narcotics and weapons. Four of those arrested were members of the militant Black People's Unity Movement (BPUM) which has consistently pressed the city to meet the needs of the community. People who challenge the status quo have been beaten, arrested, jailed, slandered, followed, and subjected to a court system allied with the city administration.

Not just the activists suffer from the actions of the police. Almost daily, black and Spanish-speaking--and white also--are stopped and harrassed. As a young mother from Cramer Hill, a white working class section of Camden, remarked recently, "Police brutality knows no color."

CONTINUED

SUMMER 1968

The housing demonstration in May led to a series of incidents. Camden High School students were attacked without warning by police. They were protesting racist conditions at their school, the firebombing of a black family's home in Cramer Hill, and the use of the other high school as a control center for riot police.

In July a group of whites (the Friends of the BPUM--FBPUM), which had formed to support the social demands of the BPUM, was attacked publicly by the Mayor and the Chief of Police. The city filed suit against the FBPUM to ban all future meetings and activity. It charged the group and 10 of its members with conspiracy to incite violence. Rev. Samuel Appel (Chairman of FBPUM), William Repshire, and Jack Gerswick, all actively working for social equality, were arrested and charged with such serious crimes as inciting (the FBPUM) to riot. These cases are being prosecuted on the testimony of a public Wallace supporter. (The three men were indicted by the grand jury in September, 1969.)

THE MILKMAN MURDER AND THE FRAME-UP OF CARL HARRIS AND LEROY ADAMS

In June 1968 three members of the BPUM and several other young black men were arrested and held without bail for the murder of a white milkman. The arrest of the three BPUM members was played up in the press as a public indictment of the organization. A peaceful demonstration demanding justice for the three was violently broken up by police (see front cover).

The trial was held in an atmosphere of fear and terror--each person, including the lawyers, being frisked as they entered the courtroom, casting doubts on the part of the all-white jury as to whether the accused were "assumed to be innocent until proven guilty." They were tried as a group despite protests from defense counsel. The court convicted another young man (who had pleaded "no defense") for the murder of the milkman. Two BPUM members, Carl Harris and Leroy Adams, were convicted of 2nd degree murder and given 20 and 25 years. Adams and Harris, strongly maintaining their innocence and total non-involvement in the tragic event, were convicted on the testimony of a star witness who contradicted herself repeatedly. Leroy Adams was in court at the time of the murder and Carl Harris was at home.

CHIEF MELLEBY DEFIES THE LAW

It is routine practice for Camden police to photograph demonstrators. Peaceful demonstrations by law-abiding citizens are consistently and brazenly photographed despite repeated efforts on the part of the South Jersey Civil Liberties Union to put a stop to such intimidating, unconstitutional practices. But the files

grow for police use in later prosecution of Camden's activists. In August of 1969 N.J. Superior Court Judge Robert Mathews ruled that all such photographs be destroyed and barred any further picture-taking of protesters. Camden's Police Chief, Harold Melleby defying citizens' rights of protection by law, stated on August 8, "We are not destroying any records--I don't care who said what." Subsequent demonstrations have been photographed by Camden Police.

FATHER GRIESMANN ATTACKED

Father Donald Griesmann, Director of Camden's Episcopal Community Center, has for years played a leading role in efforts to bring about decent housing in Camden. His report on housing conditions in Camden, a scathing indictment of the city administration and Housing Authority, was a great service to the people of Camden. Father Griesmann and an associate are now facing more than 30 charges of libel brought forth by Joseph McComb, head of the Camden Housing Authority, and by the Housing Authority itself.

THE RECENT EVENTS

The uprising on September 2 was not an isolated incident in Camden's history. It was the result of anger built up over the whole summer and the summer before. On September 1, without a warrant, policemen entered a home in the black community and seized two young girls. The next evening after the police and the mayor had refused to meet with the community to discuss the incident and the deplorable state of police-community relations, violence broke out. A white policeman and a young black girl were killed--the police say by snipers, the community says by the police.

Mayor Joseph Nardi refused a petition signed by the most respected civil rights, community, and religious leaders--including President of City Council, Elijah Perry--asking that the three policemen involved in the incident be suspended as a routine measure pending investigation.

As reported in the New York Times, Friday, Sept. 5, "... (State Commissioner of Community Affairs, Paul Ylvisaker) described Camden as a 'classic example of an urban disaster area' with a bad record of performance 'in responding to community grievances.'

"...(Director of the State Division on Civil Rights, James H. Blair) characterized leading city officials as 'insensitive' to the legitimate demands of the blacks and Puerto Ricans who together make up nearly half of the city's 120,000 population.

"...Mr. Blair said his efforts to ease antagonisms have been met with either delay or complete indifference. He said some blacks were so frightened of official reprisals that they refused to seek help from his regional office."



Chief Melleby (second from right) greets BPUM motorcade passing his house.

#### ARREST OF THE CAMDEN FIVE

September 8, 1969, BPUM Chairman Charles Sharp, Donald Davis, David and William Dunbar of the BPUM and Mrs. Donald Davis were arrested in pre-dawn raids and charged with conspiracy to incite violence, and possession of weapons and narcotics. Left in the wake of the police raid of the Martin Luther King Christian Center where Sharp was arrested was the near total destruction of the BPUM Industries, Inc., with damages estimated at \$50,000. Twenty-five factory workers (many of whom had been welfare recipients before the BPUM trained them in garment skills) were left unemployed.

The total bail for the four men was set at \$80,000. Mrs. Davis de-

scribes the raid on her home as terrifying to her 9 children who woke up in the dark of night to find rifles pointed at them. She describes the horrifying sight of police planting a package, later to be described as narcotics, under the corner of her mattress. The BPUM has a strict policy against narcotics and they were forbidden from the Center. It was common knowledge that the ceremonial (not illegal) weapons found -- spears, arrows, hunting knives, etc. -- were on display at the BPUM headquarters.

These raids, these arrests, these attempts to intimidate a justifiably angry community are carried out to create an atmosphere of fear and repression.

It is tragic when a city, bankrupt in its ability to solve the problems of the people, resorts to political intimidation and police terror in order to divert attention from the real problems of inadequate housing, too few jobs, poor education, spiraling taxes, poverty and racism.

The citizens of Camden need help. We would like you to do the following:

1. Write to:

- a. Governor Richard J. Hughes, State House, Trenton, N.J., asking him to intervene on behalf of the citizens of Camden and restrain Mayor Joseph Nardi and Chief Harold Melleby.
- b. Jacques E. Wilmore, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 26 Federal Plaza, New York, N.Y., asking him to investigate the situation and intervene on behalf of the citizens of Camden.

Send copies of correspondence to Camden Defense Committee (address below).

2. Distribute information about the crisis in Camden to your church, synagogue, trade union, school, youth organization, political club, civic or social organization. Invite our Committee to send a speaker to your group.
3. Support the Camden Defense Committee financially in its efforts to fight for justice for the citizens of Camden.

Camden Defense Committee  
314 Linden Street  
Camden, N. J.

Father Robert Weber, Chairman pro tem  
David Berger, Treasurer

I have written to Governor Hughes.

Enclosed is a contribution.

I have written to Commissioner Wilmore.

Put me on your mailing list

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City and State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

May 1968 Black people led by the BPUM and white supporters demonstrate for alleviation of housing crisis; HUD and city officials unresponsive. Continued demonstration met with riot squad.

-- House won for Shields family (family of 12) in white section of the city. House is fire-bombed; no prosecution.

-- Black students from Camden High march to City Hall protesting the firebombing, the conversion of the other high school into a police Control Center, as well as overall racial injustice at their school. Students attacked from the rear by police. Several injured. Seven arrested. City cordoned off by city and suburban police.

-- Whites form Friends of BPUM (FBPUM) to support efforts to improve social conditions. Among early activities was a non-violent training session led by respected pacifist.

June 1968 Milkman killed in black neighborhood. Several black young men arrested; three from BPUM. Police and press attempt to implicate BPUM in murder.

-- BPUM rally at City Hall to protest murder frame-up and the holding of the three men as political prisoners. Rally broken up with violent force. (See front page.) Seven hurt; three taken to hospital. Sherwood Sanders unconscious for a few hours, later charged with disorderly conduct and interfering with police. Sanders' mother filed complaint against the officer who beat her son. Officer acquitted.

-- South Jersey ACLU charge police with use of "unwarranted force."

-- FBPUM holds identical rally for justice for murder frame-up victims. Only two uniformed police in the area. BPUM Chairman Sharp later arrested for spitting on the sidewalk and verbal assault and battery.

-- Nine civil rights groups ask for Police Chief Melleby's resignation and State and Federal probes of Camden's police, charging that police violated civil rights of demonstrators.

-- Mayor names Melleby as Public Safety Director.

-- Blacks and whites (BPUM and FBPUM) get together for picnic. BPUM leaders followed by Camden detectives (into another county!) who then photographed the picnickers.

July 1968 Mayor and Police Chief file injunction against FBPUM and ten of its supporters to keep them from meeting. Charges of conspiracy to incite violence. Rev. Sam Appel (FBPUM Chairman), Jack Gerswick, and Bill Repshire arrested on similar, criminal charges. In the hearing, prosecution witness bases all charges on non-violent session held in May.

-- FBPUM, BPUM, and individuals file federal suit against mayor and police chief, charging them with interfering with the rights of citizens and attempting to drive a wedge between the black and white communities.

-- Sharp arrested for failure to register as a criminal. ACLU challenges law as unconstitutional. Sharp acquitted.

-- BPUM motorcade protesting Sharp's arrest passes Melleby's home. Melleby photographed on front step with shotgun. (See page 3.)

Fall 1968 Two BPUM members, Leroy Adams and Carl Harris, convicted of 2nd degree murder in milkman murder and given 20 and 25 years. All-white jury. Mass trial.

-- Special Grand Jury convened to investigate "racial unrest." FBPUM offers list of 33 witnesses to key events; none called. Mayor, Police Chief, and many other police called to give their side of the story.

February 1969 Red scare. Melleby accuses four FBPUM members as communists. Front page stories.

Spring 1969 Special Grand Jury presentment -- critical of general conditions in Camden and lack of community relations division in the police department, but somehow managed to commend police conduct during the previous summer.

-- FBPUM presents "People's Grand Jury" -- signed and notarized statements by many of the 33 potential grand jury witnesses. Document sent to State officials but no action.

June 1969 Sharp and David Dunbar (BPUM member) arrested. Sharp stopped to ask a black policeman why some youths were being arrested. They were charged with interfering with an arrest and assault upon a policeman. Dunbar was also charged with possession of a deadly weapon -- an Afro hair comb!

July 1969 N.J. State Superior Judge rules that all files on dissenters and activists be destroyed. Melleby publicly refuses to cooperate.

August 1969 Father Donald Griesmann (appointed to Housing Authority after much pressure from poor community) sued for libel by Housing chairman McComb and the Housing Authority itself. Griesmann's co-worker, Rev. George Nuckols, also sued.

-- Three FBPUM members indicted by grand jury on criminal conspiracy charges from summer 1968.

September 1969 Police enter black home without a warrant, attack and arrest two young girls. Community asks for suspension of police involved pending investigation; administration unresponsive. Violence breaks out. White policeman and young black girl killed.

-- Five arrested in pre-dawn raids. Charged with conspiracy, possession of narcotics and deadly weapons. Excessive bail: total of \$81,000. BPUM factory/ headquarters damaged excessively.

Camden Defense Committee  
314 Linden Street  
Camden, New Jersey