

PROPOSAL FOR AN INDEPENDENT
WESTSIDE/HARLEM COMMUNITY CONGRESS

December 1977

The following is a draft of a proposal calling for the formation of a Community Congress in the Westside/Harlem community. The Community Congress is to be an independent body made up of persons and/or groups active in community struggles for better education, jobs, housing, health care, welfare, better conditions for our senior citizens, etc. The purpose of the Community Congress is to develop an independent formation which will (1) serve as a communications network between independent activists, (2) coordinate political tactics, thereby lending support to groups and persons engaged in various arenas, (3) publicize community political activities to the entire population of the Westside/Harlem area, (4) where and when appropriate initiate political campaigns and events which speak to the overall interests of the community, (5) serve as a watchdog organization, scrutinizing the so-called 'independent' boards, etc. which are, in fact, typically patronage organizations.

Why do we need such a Congress? Is the time right? To answer these questions, we will look briefly at some hard political and economic realities.

The New Realities of the 1970's--and Beyond

There is a recognizable and seemingly ever-growing gap between the needs of poor and working people (as well as middle income people) and what this society is actually providing. We

seen witness to schools and hospitals closing down and
degrading quality of their services; to spiralling infla-
tion, the rise in unemployment, particularly for minority
groups, increasing transit fares, and so on. With Winter
on the march we recognize that no matter what claims we hear
of the economy improving, the glaring reality is that people
do not have enough money to buy what they and their families need.
This year's economy and tomorrow's economic prospects are very
different from the 1960's. Indeed, they are unique in the history
of the country. In the 60's money was more plentiful due largely
to four factors: the general Keynesian policy of deficit spending,
the boom years of U.S. Big Business profit-making in
the wake of World War II rebuilding of Western Europe and Japan,
and continued aggressive U.S. neo-colonialist activities.
The effects of these policies have been disastrous. They have
led us into the 1970's, to spiralling inflation and, here in New York,
to massive budget cuts (with the worst still to come). New
York, like other cities in the U.S., teeters on the
brink of bankruptcy as it struggles to pay off the debt service
on loans from the banks. Debt service is the money given to the
banks to pay both the principal and interest on loans which
cities (and states) may have borrowed. For years, cities
have financed public projects through such loans from the banks as
well as through bond sales--that is, through deficit spending.
In the 1970's, this dangerous economic process has been

exacerbated both by the high interest rates and by the large number of short term loans (high interest loans which have to be paid back within a few years), which were necessitated by the general contraction of the economy.

Today these loans have been and are being paid back at the expense of our children's education, through our declining living standards and through a deterioration in the quality of our public services.

Virtually everyone agrees that another boom period is nowhere in sight. The traditional use of military adventure as a way of bolstering the economy is as politically unviable to U.S. Big Business and Big Government as is continued deficit spending economically unviable. The national and international situation mitigates against the U.S. engaging in another Vietnam-like war. And the printing of more paper money (deficit spending) would only exacerbate the already spiralling inflation.

One response of U.S. Big Business and Big Government to this situation has been the formation of what is called the Trilateral Commission. The Trilateral Commission is made up of multinational interests from North America, Europe and Japan, and is primarily funded by Rockefeller money. The purpose of the Commission is to develop a new strategy for the capitalist world, given the unique and frightening (particularly for them) realities briefly depicted above. Their primary goal, of course, is to maintain capitalism (read: profits) at all costs. One of their

major critiques of current U.S. society is that there has been an "excess of democracy." They say that too many people are demanding their rights and insisting on a decent life for themselves and their children. They say we must "lower our expectations and demands in the core capitalist world." In other words, continued high profits for them means austerity and belt tightening for the poor, for working people and for middle income people. You only have to reach into your pocket to pay for groceries to know the reality of this. Carter, as well as ex-President Ford, the Rockefeller brothers and numerous members of Carter's current policy making staff have served on Trilateral.

Squelching Ferment

How does this changed political and economic situation affect struggles in our community? As we stated earlier, in the 1960's within an expanding economy, money flowed into the cities. Poverty groups, community agencies and community corporations were set up and funded. Clearly, it was in the interest of the government and Big Business to establish and fund these community agencies, which siphoned off legitimate protest and demands into 'safe' channels.

Through the setting up of these groups, jobs and money were dispensed, largely by the Democratic Party. This resulted in a temporary stimulation of the economy by putting more money in the hands of the consumers--though in the longer run, production is not stimulated but rather retarded by this

technique. Politically, the government was able to dissipate ferment by this procedure and when more was asked for than could be given, the government turned to some of its other techniques for dissipating ferment as it literally slaughtered many black militant leaders--leaders such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton and other Black Panthers--while often infiltrating and disrupting the progressive and people's movements.

By setting up community organizations, the government could control to a considerable extent what was happening in the community. For once these organizations were set up, they had to compete with one another for a limited amount of available funds, for a share of the pie. Even when money was flowing, the reality was that what these groups competed for on a local level (a bigger share) was largely determined at a higher level. Thus these groupings were kept isolated and divided, and as such their only real source of power, the organized united force of the people, was undermined. Rather than looking toward the community for power, and building organizations that could fight for change, these groupings looked more and more to the Democratic Party for favors and more money.

The Democratic Party as an institution accepts the economic priorities of this society. As such it serves Big Government as an institutional reconciliator, quieting ferment and conflicts both through the dispensing of jobs and the

promise of jobs, and by mediating between local groupings fighting for their needs--giving a crumb here, a crumb there, and so on.

While the Democratic Party had some goodies to distribute in the 30's, today only the crumbs remain. Carter makes lots of promises, but in an increasingly tight economy, these promises are seen as emptier and emptier, as the public opinion polls make plain. The Humphrey-Hawkins Bill is a good example of an empty promise. It calls for 4% unemployment but does not provide a single dime for a single job.

We are not saying that we should not work with the Democratic Party or with individuals in it. Indeed, not to do so would be to simply close our eyes to the dominant role it plays and influence it has amongst millions of people. Certainly any support that can be gotten, any political influence that can be exerted, any pressure that can be put on any agency in the interests of poor, working and middle income people is not only welcomed but necessary.

What we are saying is that reliance on the Democratic Party is a mistake, as is reliance on any of the existing institutions which are fundamentally committed to existing social, political, and economic priorities.

A New Strategy for Community Forces

As the promises become emptier and emptier, it becomes harder and harder for the government and the Democratic Party

to reconcile those competing for funds and those searching for an end to poverty and social decay. Thus, the basis for a new unity is quickly developing between community organizations and individuals; a unity independent of social institutions which are based on the priorities of profit before people.

There are many honest people working in the Westside/Harlem community, fighting, it often feels, against an unmoveable bureaucratized brick wall for quality education, for the construction of low-income large family housing, fighting to save local neighborhood health centers, fighting to institute needed community health and educational services, fighting for human rights at the welfare centers, and so on. The multinational and banking interests of this country have formed the Tri-lateral Commission to develop a new strategy with a familiar refrain--high profits for them, austerity for us. It is clear that we as progressive community leaders and representatives must also begin working together to develop strategies and tactics that will build a powerful force in the interests of poor, working and middle income people.

It is for this reason that an independent Community Congress needs to be formed. A Community Congress will work to bring a broadened perspective to already established organizations and individuals working in particular areas. It will enable groups and individuals to widen their base of support and will help them develop more far-reaching tactics which will

give each struggle greater clout. No struggle is isolated, divorced from other problems in a community. Isolated we fight for a crumb, together we have the potential to demand the whole pie.

A Community Congress would also serve as a watchdog committee over present community politics. In San Francisco, there is a recently developed independent citywide Community Congress which has had a major impact on recent local elections. In other parts of the country independent congresses are becoming increasingly influential.

On the Westside, Community Planning Board #7 recently held hearings on urban renewal sites. Made up of a majority of white middle class professional males, their plans did not meet the needs of the majority of the community, who require the building of low-income, large family apartments. Indeed, the Planning Board never even informed much of the community about these critical hearings. The Community School Board, for example, was never officially informed. Those of us who attended were told at the last minute by word of mouth. Yet, the decisions made by the Planning Board greatly affect the public schools, whose populations are dwindling. There were many concerned groups and individuals who came out to the hearings attempting (with some success) to put pressure on the Planning Board to build low-income housing. This pressure and the chances of winning could have been increased many times over if a Community Congress existed.

Re: Community Congress

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It is envisioned that a Community Congress will work in several ways. At the beginning it is hoped that the Community Congress will meet approximately once a month. At these meetings individuals and groups will give reports on activities they are engaged in and/or issues they are dealing with. There will be ample time for discussion in which suggestions can be made and coordinating tactics developed. The effect of such joint work should be of enormous value to those listening as well as to those reporting.

It is also envisioned that a newsletter will be mass distributed monthly to the community which will summarize reports and list upcoming events. This newsletter will be geared to reporting on specific grassroots work taking place and to issues that concern us all. Since many of us have access to production equipment, the cost should not be excessive.

What is critical about the Community Congress is (1) that it represent the interests of the community as a whole; (2) that it is independent of, though not alienated from, the so-called reform movement and the Democratic Party; and (3) that its members (individuals and groups) are representative of actual grassroots struggles taking place in the Westside/Harlem community. We are not eager to develop another stepping stone into Democratic reform politics. We are rather interested in building a genuine People's Congress.

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