

# making rent strike history in NY



Since 1967 Con Ed electricity prices have risen 330 percent and the utility company is now before the Public Service Commission requesting to do away with the special rate which they offered co-op residents in the late sixties.

Co-op City residents are proposing that their power plant be put to use. At full capacity it could also provide cheap electricity to several city-run schools and hospitals in the area which are now at the mercy of Con Ed's price hikes.

## Unity is the key

"We have learned from other's mistakes and others successes," said Charlie Rosen. "Other Mitchell-Lama are on strike right now. We are only a symbol of the problem."

Whether it is 48 families striking in the South Bronx or 15,000 families in Co-op City, he said, it is no less important or impressive an action. "Unity, unity of the tenants is the key. With organization, people's frustrations can be channelled into something more than cursing.

"If our leadership is jailed," he continued, "we have four strings of

leadership to take its place. The line of leadership goes right down to the individual building captains in all thirty-five buildings." (There are usually eight such captains to a building plus a floor captain on each floor, and the buildings are further organized into areas, headed by area captains.)

"In unifying," one building captain said, "all other considerations are out the window. I might resent you, my neighbour, for making noise at night, but I welcome your check each month. Our differences can be overcome."

Steering Committee 11, meanwhile was formed to lead tenant efforts to obtain state aid for their own and other Mitchell-Lama housing projects. It was treated to official contempt, broken promises and non-action wherever it sought help.

Hugh Carey, campaigning in 1974 for the Democratic nomination for governor turned out to be one of the biggest deceivers of all. Campaigning in Co-op City, Carey promised, if elected, to deliver state aid to relieve the cooperative's \$10 million deficit and thereby prevent rent increases. By virtue of this promise,

"Carey walked away with this community" in the election, said Rosen.

But Carey never carried through on his promise and to this day he has stood firmly behind the New York State Division of Housing in Opposing the rent strike.

## Organizing a dry run

During the summer of 1974, the Co-op City board proposed yet another rent increase. The five resident directors resigned in protest. In June, some 300 community organizations, building associations, senior-citizen groups and others met in Co-op City's 1300 capacity auditorium and formed Steering Committee 111, which then organized a one-month rent collection drive to test out the potential for a future rent strike.

In a showing of solidarity and determination, more than 83 percent of Co-op residents turned their September rent checks over to the steering committee instead of to the management that month. This dry run was organized, said Rosen, "to show people that they could unite and that the cynicism that most citizens have - that I'm willing to do something but no one else will do anything and therefore nothing can ever get done - could be overcome."

But in the spring of 1975, the Co-op residents were put to their first real test. In May the management announced that their proposed 25 percent increase was the first installment of an anticipated rent increase of 86 percent over the next five years.

The tenants responded with a second rent collection, as successful as the first. This time the checks were dumped on Governor Carey's desk in Albany, and a full-fledged strike was threatened for June if state aid was not forthcoming.

Still the state refused to move and on June 1 the current Co-op City rent strike began with 85 percent rent collection.

## Injunction, fines and threats

Immediately the state moved to crush the rent strike. The Co-op City board of directors resigned and was replaced by six state-appointed directors. Steering Committee 111 was hit with a court injunction designed to intimidate tenants and disrupt all organizational efforts.

The strikers defied the injunction. Stiff contempt of court fines were imposed on both the Steering Committee and its individual members - \$25,000 plus \$5,000 daily for the committee, and \$25,000 plus \$1,000 daily for individuals.

To prevent court seizure of the rent checks that were held in escrow, Rosen and the tenants' lawyers withdrew them from the bank and simply stashed them in

some hiding place, the location of which is a carefully kept secret.

"The only alternative we were given was 'either pay the increase or we will evict you'," explained Rosen to Larry Cox of WBAI. "We did have a leadership that was politically astute, and we called their bluff..."

"We said we'd like to know which politician was prepared to hire the army necessary to evict 60,000 people who are not going to willingly leave their homes... We computed that if they tried to do it legally through the landlord-tenant court in the Bronx, it would take them Monday to Friday, 9-5, six years to process the evictions..."

"Then they said they would foreclose on the mortgage," Rosen continued. "We told them that while we were very reluctant to lose the \$33 million of our investment, that perhaps they might talk to the First National City Bank who are the bond holders on the other \$400 million some odd dollars and see how excited they were about losing their investment. We said we would pin our hopes on First National City's determination not to lose profits - a good bet."

Riverbay also threatened to cut off the heat and hot-water service as the strike continued into winter, hoping to cow the more elderly tenants into submission - But the threat couldn't break the chain that binds this enormous community together and the cutoff action never materialized.

## Demands

Co-op City residents have pledged to hold out until their 22 point proposal is accepted by the State Division of Housing, proposals that would bring rent stabilization, self-management and a revision of the entire Mitchell-Lama housing law to improve the lot of tenants in housing projects throughout the city.

Many of the proposals contain creative ways to pull the housing development out of the hole that the state bureaucrats and profit-making corporations have sunk it into.

For instance, explained Rosen, "The developer built for approximately \$40 million, a total energy generating plant on site in order to develop our own electricity and be free clear of Con Edison. That was one of the insurances we had as people buying apartments here that life would be cheaper. But Con Ed told the people who developed the place that if we didn't put generators in they would give us a rate that would be equal to, if not cheaper, than self-generation.

So, in 1967, having already spent \$40 million for a total energy plant, the developers agreed to buy from Con Edison and never spent the other \$5 of 6 million to put in the generators that would be necessary to produce the co-op's own electricity.

## Hair Art Michael Thomas

Michael and Tom, formerly of the Macdonald Hotel, bring to you the best in Hair Fashion. With Pierre Vachon, Perm & Colour Technician (formerly of Edmonton Centre)

For A Limited Time  
Special 20% Discounts  
on Cuts and Blow Dry for Students  
Every Perm Redkins Biowave

Ph. 433-0023  
433-4143

8211 - 104 St.

## ANNUAL GRADUATION SPECIAL

Approximate Half Price

GARNEAU STUDIO

First Appointed  
Official  
Graduation  
Photographer  
in 1949

ONE LOCATION ONLY  
8619 - 109th Street  
(across from Garneau School)

439-7284 433-3967

## Garneau Studio

PHONE FOR APPOINTMENT



## MIKE SEEGER AND THE COUNTRY MUSIC CARAVAN INCLUDING

LONNIE YOUNG & SONS from  
Como, Mississippi  
- Afro-American cane fife and  
drum music.  
LILY MAY LEDFORD from Lexington,  
Kentucky  
- with MIKE SEEGER  
- traditional string band music.  
JOHN JACKSON from Virginia  
- Afro-American blues and  
ballads, hillbilly, contemporary  
country.  
BALFA BROTHERS  
- with MARC SAVOY from  
Louisiana - Cajun traditional  
Project Director - JOHN S. ULLMAN

THURSDAY,  
APRIL 1  
at 8:00 P.M.

SUB Theatre  
TICKETS: \$5.00 ea. Mike's Ticket  
Office/S.U. Box Office/and at  
the door.