

Furniture for Families

ACORN's first big campaign was the Furniture for Families campaign in September 1970. ACORN staff discovered that the state welfare regulations provided for a \$40 annual 'emergency assistance' allowance for each public assistance recipient. Could this \$40 be used to buy furniture for families who needed it? ACORN said yes. State Welfare Commission, Blaylock, and his legal advisors, said no.

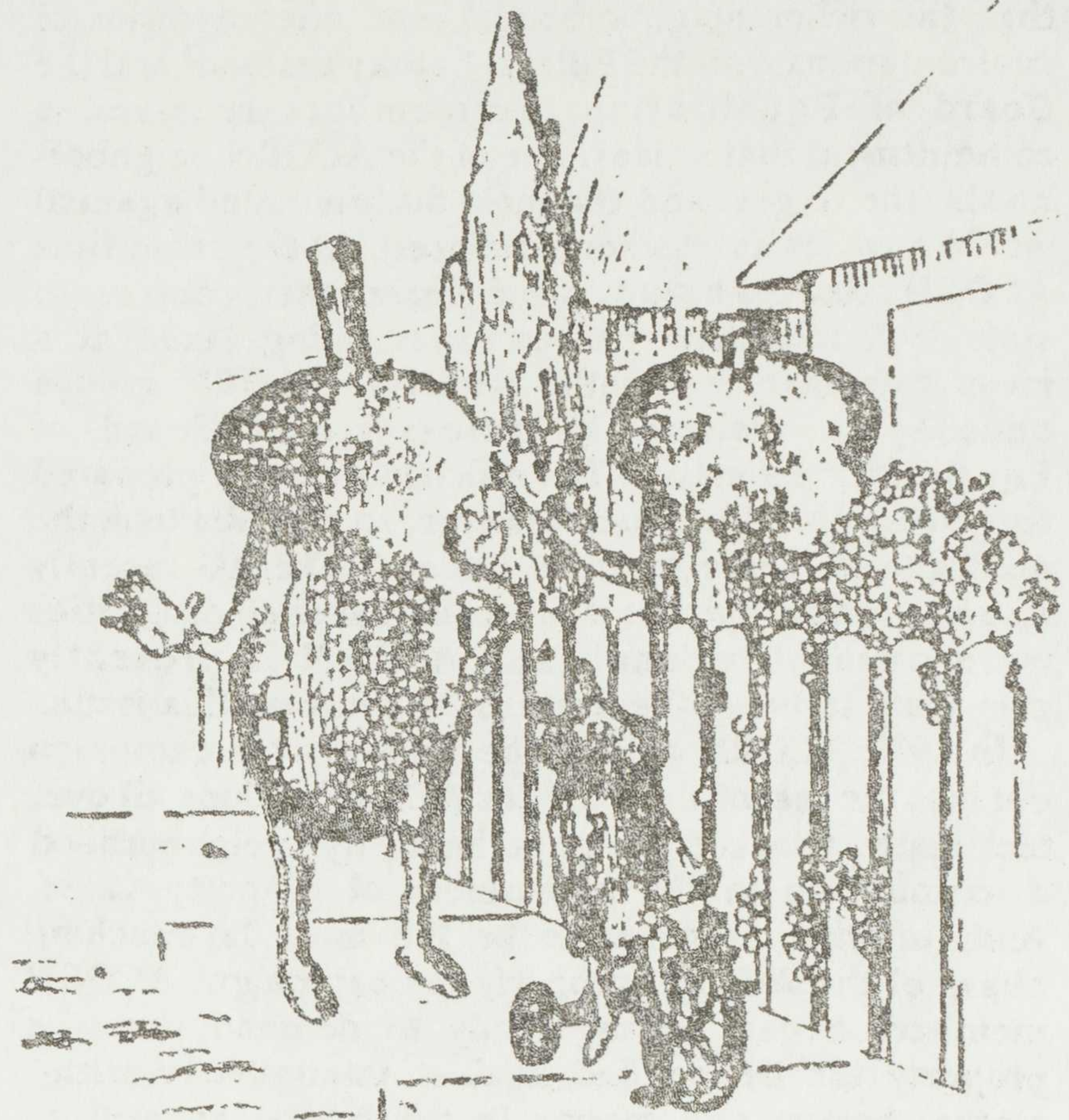
The local ACORN groups in Little Rock and North Little Rock chartered city busses and descended en masse on the Pulaski County Welfare office, determined to force Blaylock to change his opinion. The welfare office usually is overcrowded with lines of 'clients' making applications and inquiries. The addition of over 600 excited ACORN members packed the small building far beyond its capacity. The ACORN members passed out leaflets and their chosen spokesman crowded into the county welfare director's office and made their demands regarding the \$40 allowances and poured out other grievances as well, including bitter complaints of rudeness and unhelpfulness on the part of some welfare caseworkers. These demonstrations went on at intervals for several weeks. Blaylock and some of his aides came over and looked in on several of them.

The demonstrators then invaded the state Welfare Department's headquarters in the State Capitol complex, crowding the halls, singing and passing out accusatory leaflets. They packed Blaylock's office, where he received them calmly. A few state troopers, mostly in plain clothes, constituted the only official acknowledgement of the potentially explosive nature of the demonstrations. On at least one occasion the demonstrators moved over to the Capitol where Rockefeller received some of the leaders.

Blaylock argued that the \$40 emergency allowance could not be used for furniture and that even if it could be, there was not enough money available to honor all such requests. He also objected to the methods, and accused Rathke of misleading the ACORN members about the regulations and the amount of money available.

Six weeks after the mass actions began, the campaign ended suddenly in a solid victory for ACORN. What actually happened is still not clear, but it appears that Rockefeller came around to the position that ACORN's demands should be granted. Whether he did so because he believed in their cause, or because he wanted to put an end to potentially violent demonstrations involving hundreds of angry poor people, or because he was involved in a bitter re-election fight with Orval Faubus, is relatively immaterial. The Welfare Department agreed that a need for furniture could be considered an emergency in some cases, and a new independent state agency was established by executive fiat: Furniture for Families. It was charged with collecting used furniture, usually without paying for it, from anyone who wanted to give it away or sell it for a very small sum, storing it and in some cases repairing it, and distributing it free to any public assistance recipient who needed it, and delivering it, also free. Rockefeller appointed a Republican Party worker to head the agency and supplemented the salary out of his own pocket.

ACORN had then won its first major victory for the organization.



Property Taxes '73-'75

This long term campaign has focused on numerous specific property tax abuses as well as on several key systematic faults inherent to the administration and collection of property taxes in Arkansas.

The campaign began in the spring of 1973, with the discovery of highly favorable assessments received by several Little Rock political big-shots. It was decided that the best way to make property tax reform a statewide political issue was to generate large amounts of action and publicity on a couple of obvious property tax scandals. Consequently, the opening actions of the tax campaign included a Tax Tour (ACORN members and members of the press all jammed into a bus which drove to each of the more glaring abuses) and a press conference to call attention to the scandal which involved the biggest names and the largest amount of money.

These activities were followed up by detailed exposes of the often illegal and usually unjust activities of the various county and state institutions responsible for administering property taxes. The combined impact of these media events forced county school officials into committing themselves to arrange for the reassessment of large sections of downtown Little Rock property.

ACORN members spent the rest of the 1973 tax season (the summer) holding mass actions at the County Board of Equalization meetings, demanding and getting meetings with the State officials in charge of taxation, and forcing a number of very important reforms in the way the Board of Equalization does its business.

The following year, building on the general awareness of property tax abuse that had been created in 1973, ACORN moved directly against the more far-reaching biases that were built into the way the