Issues & Organizing in Communities of Color

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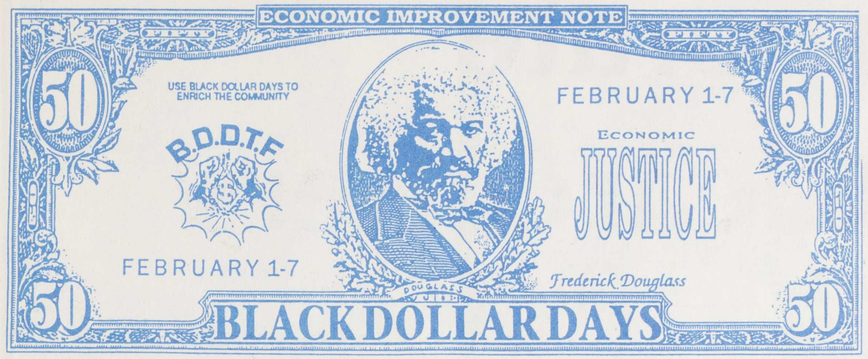
Hittin' the Bricks

Radical Reinvestment



For most community organizations, the issue of the inner-city economy is simply too hard a nut to crack. While the problems caused by poverty, unemployment, low-paying jobs and lack of opportunity are everywhere obvious, solutions are difficult, long-term, complex and rarely fall into the category of "winnable issues" around which campaigns can be structured.

As a result, economic development in low-income neighborhoods is seldom the focus of efforts by community organizations, whose primary motivation is to change the relations of power, and whose work takes place through direct contact and confrontational tactics.

It is rare to find an organization that has successfully combined the political objectives of organizing with economic development, but the Black Dollar Days Task Force in Seattle, Washington seems to have done just that. The Task Force's objective is nothing less than the revitalization of low-income African-American communities in Seattle, through a concerted campaign that aims to both change institutional policy and support private enterprise.

In the process, the Task Force has taken on one of Seattle's most powerful, wealthy and influential corporations — the upscale clothing retailer Nordstrom.

Reinvestment & Self-Help

The Task Force approaches the question of economic development from a perspective that acknowledges the need for self-help, but believes that corporate America must be forced to reinvest in the inner city. The Task Force has developed an organizing philosophy around the principle of "reinvestment," a concept that they have used to demand concessions from Nordstrom to Seattle's African-American community.

Reinvestment, under the definition given to the term by the Task Force, means a commitment to: 1) affirmative action in hiring, 2) granting sub-contracts to contractors of color, and 3) corporate donations to the community.

The Task Force's long-term goal is to shift the focus of economic development from the government — the usual target — to big business.

This year, at a community rally organized by the Task Force, 800 members of Seattle's African-American community voted to give Nordstrom the "Bull Conner Award," which recognizes the institution considered to have the worst "anti-African-American" policies. Bull Conner was the notorious Birmingham police commissioner who turned police dogs on civil rights demonstrators.

At a February rally at the downtown Seattle Nordstrom store, Task Force founder Dr. Robert Jeffrey forced Nordstrom co-president John Whitacre to accept the award "on behalf of the Nordstrom family." The Nordstrom corporation claims to be a national leader in the area of diversity, but Task Force organizers see Nordstrom as a prime example of a corporate attitude that pays only lip service to the concepts of diversity and reinvestment.

Bull Conner and Rodney King

The Bull Conner award is one of a number of tactics used by the Task Force in their efforts to force Nordstrom to put money back into Seattle's African-American community. "The aftermath of the Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles," says Jeffrey, who is interviewed on the next page, "shows what happens when corporate America does not pay attention to its responsibilities. It is a direct indication of what happens when you do not have reinvestment in the community."

Editor John Anner interviewed Dr. Robert L. Jeffrey, Sr. in July 1992.