

FRONTLINES



ACORN squatters break into abandoned house in Philadelphia.

Getting Down In Philly

Gloria Giles moved into her home in southwest Philadelphia last October in an unusual sort of way. She and a group of supporters from the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) pried the boards off the front window and crawled in. Giles, a 20-year-old welfare recipient with two children, is one of several dozen "squatters" who have recently taken possession of abandoned houses in Philadelphia. "Our neighbors were glad that somebody was moving in," says Giles. "They helped us clean it up and let us use their water and tools. A local store donated stuff so we could rehab it."

The squatter movement, which has swept through western Europe in recent years, has now come to the United States. Faced with skyrocketing housing prices and an increasingly tight rental market, low- and moderate-income families in this country have begun to take desperate action. Squatter campaigns have sprung up in Philadelphia, Detroit and St. Louis, spearheaded by ACORN, one of the most experienced and effective citizen action groups. According to an ACORN fact sheet, these campaigns are "designed to dramatize the

contradiction between the shortage of affordable housing and the thousands of empty houses that blight our neighborhoods." ACORN estimates that in Philadelphia alone there are 25,000 such vacant houses—property that is either tax-delinquent or owned by the city or the federal government.

ACORN wants this property turned over to low- and moderate-income house-hunters, instead of to real-estate developers and "urban gentry." The group is also asking cities to offer low-interest rehabilitation loans to bring down the cost of repairing these houses.

Philadelphia already has a "homesteading" program, designed to transfer abandoned

property to new owners, but the program has been marked by incompetence and corruption. During the program's first four years, the city gave out fewer than a thousand houses. "Many of them went to real-estate interests and cronies of City Councilman Harry Janotti, who [once] controlled the program," states ACORN's national representative, Madeleine Adamson.

ACORN activists campaigned for two years to reform the homesteading program. They negotiated with city officials, escorted local reporters down a street where only five out of 60 houses are occupied, staged a sit-in at the housing commissioner's office and marched on city hall. City officials kept promising action, but the turnover rate still lagged far behind the demand for vacant houses.

And so the squatting began. "We were tired of waiting for the city to give us a house," says Giles, who was living in a cramped three-bedroom house with her two children, mother, 21-year-old brother and 17-year-old sister before she squatted. "We were just too crowded."

"ACORN members are going to keep on squatting," vows the young woman, who is still active in the campaign, "until the city starts producing more property for the people who need it." □

Association of Community
Organizations For Reform Now

117 Spring St. Syracuse, N.Y. 13208