

# RIZZO'S HOUSING PLAN: DESTROY NORTH PHILADELPHIA TO SAVE IT

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by JOE LEWANDOWSKI

In the midst of the brutal Vietnam war, a small rural village was totally levelled in a matter of minutes by U.S. bombers. When questioned by reporters as to why it was necessary to bomb this tiny village off the face of the earth, a U.S. Army officer responded that, "We had to destroy the village in order to save it."

As strange, and contradictory and even demented as this statement may sound, it neatly sums up the housing policies of Philadelphia's own Frank Rizzo.

## RECYCLING AND REDLINEING

Frank is trying to "save" North Philadelphia and large portions of West Philadelphia by turning them into vast, glass-littered no-man's lands. This "scorched-earth" policy was clearly laid out in a 1973 newspaper interview with Bernard C. Meltzer, Rizzo's chief real estate advisor. Meltzer said that large areas of the city should be "written-off" and "recycled" because it was not worthwhile to spend any more money in these neighborhoods.

In plain English, Meltzer's proposal, which is now being put into effect, consists of leveling vast tracts of land in North and West Philadelphia by demolishing existing abandoned buildings, by encouraging further abandonment of property, and by cutting off all community funds to the area. These areas would eventually be developed for middle and upper-middle class housing similar to the way Society Hill was developed. This is what is meant by "writing-off" and "recycling."

The areas Meltzer referred to are almost exclusively Black and Latino communities. The planned demolition of these communities is the final act in a series of racist housing practices which evolved over the past thirty years.

North Philadelphia, along with other Black and Latino neighborhoods, has been condemned to destruction for a long time. As its Black population grew, banks and lending institutions drew a "red-line" around the area, making it difficult for families to secure mortgages. Insurance companies refused fire insurance and charged premium rates on regular home insurance.

Slumlords and speculators moved in and bought the properties that many low-income families could not afford, charging high rental rates while doing little or nothing to maintain the buildings. When these buildings were no longer fit for habitation they merely became tax write-offs and were abandoned by their owners.

City administration after city administration cooperated with this planned decay by withholding city services -- street cleaning, rat control, L & I inspections -- which were common in other sections of the city.

For decades North and West Philadelphia have been bled by the banks, real estate speculators and the politicians, but it is only in recent years that city planners have talked openly about their wholesale destruction and "recycling". Why now?

## CITY'S STRATEGY

Here are a few of the reasons:

a) In the past ten or fifteen years, hundreds of small sweatshops have either folded or left the city. The Black and Latin communities were a main source of cheap labor for these shops, many of which were located throughout North Philadelphia. With the decline of small industry, the city ruler's no longer need so many national minority workers.

b) With the loss of this industry, the city faces a shrinking tax base. It can't tax shops which aren't there and it can't tax workers who are unemployed.

c) The strategy of the city's rulers now is to attract corporate headquarters and service industries to the city -- more financial institutions, commercial enterprises, business industries. In other words, white-collar and executive jobs.

The idea many city planners have is to turn the area around Temple University in North Philadelphia into another University City. Demolition of large parts of North Philly would allow additional room for Temple expansion and would provide sites for academic and service-oriented industries with good access to center city. There would also be room for new housing catering to predominately white suburbanites who presumably would want to live close to their work.

This is not a startling new idea. Eight or nine years ago, John Gallery, the new city planning chief, was the architect of a planned Bicentennial world's fair type exposition right in the middle of North Philadelphia. If this plan had been carried out, North Philadelphia would be well on its way to being "recycled" to the upper-middle class haven that is still the object of Gallery's dreams.

The Bicentennial expo site was rejected by the federal government largely due to opposition from the North Philadelphia community which had exposed key figures on the Bicentennial planning commission as major landholders in North Philly who stood to make windfall profits from the Disneyland-like exposition which was planned.

d) Another significant reason to try to disperse the North Philadelphia community is its growing political potential. For years politicians of the Democratic Party regarded the Black community as controllable hip-pocket votes. But the past few years, especially the Rizzo administration years, have witnessed an increase in independent political activity by Black and Puerto Rican voters and community activists. The prospect of a well-organized, unified and independent force in the Black and Latino communities scares the bejezes out of both the Democratic and Republican Party regulars.

## TOO FAR GONE?

The claim by Rizzo & Co. that North Philadelphia is "too far gone" and "impossible to rehabilitate" is ridiculous.

There certainly is no shortage of available labor -- the rate of unemployment in North Philly hovers at around 50% or better. Tens of thousands of unemployed Black workers would leap at the chance to be trained in construction skills, to provide decent housing in their community and to take home a decent paycheck too.

Is the problem lack of money? How can a nation which spends over 30 billion dollars for advertising annually and another 90 billion dollars yearly for the Pentagon's deadly toys claim that it cannot house its citizens in homes with hot and cold running water, heat in the winter, and fresh paint on the walls?

What is bankrupt is the whole system of capitalism itself -- an economic system which turns a basic human need like housing into a money game for high stakes manipulated by the vultures in banks, insurance companies, mortgage companies, real estate speculators, slumlords and politicians. It is a system capable of sucking millions of dollars of profit out of the bare existence of a poor community for decades and then capable of rewarding its victims with destruction when there is no more blood to suck.

#### WHAT HAPPENS TO THE PEOPLE?

What will happen to the residents of North Philadelphia if it is leveled and "recycled"?

Four years ago, Meltzer, fidgeting slightly in his chair, said that he thought they should be "relocated". The word "relocated" sounds a lot like the familiar Vietnam war double talk. Remember? Vietnamese peasants, no longer trusted by their own government, were removed by gun point from their villages and "relocated" in camps. Or perhaps it brings to mind the plight of Black families in Rhodesia and South Africa who have been "relocated" to compounds far removed from their husbands, fathers and brothers who toil daily in the city's factories and in the mines.

But in the case of Philadelphia there is not even a camp, a compound, or a project to which "relocation" is planned. Rizzo opposes low-cost housing in predominantly white neighborhoods and the white populated suburban communities are opposed to it too. Without new low-cost housing being built in sufficient quantities, thousands of North Philadelphians have nowhere to go. The truth is that Rizzo and his city planners haven't got the slightest idea of where and how to "relocate" the families that are being displaced by the demolition of housing and they could care less.

#### FIGHTBACK GROWING

With their backs up against the wall, the residents of the neighborhoods under attack are beginning to organize a resistance to the powerful forces they face.

The Spring Garden-Fairmount section of the city has been an area "in transition" for some years now. A working class area with a large Puerto Rican and Black population, Spring Garden is one of the first target neighborhoods the city planners have chosen for "recycling". A number of speculators and developers have bought and renovated blocks of houses to be sold to middle and upper middle class buyers - usually young, white and pro-

fessional people who want housing close to their center city jobs.

With this influx of affluent homeowners, the poorer residents of the community find that they are being forced out of the homes and apartments they've had for years because of increased taxes, higher rents, and unscrupulous real estate speculation.

The present residents have no intention of moving and have organized a group called El Comite del P.U.E.B.L.O. (The Committee of the People) to deal with government officials, agencies, landlords, and real estate developers.

A multi-national organization which has broad support in the community, El Comite is capable of mobilizing several hundred people to a meeting. It is now drawing up its own plan for the development of the community which would remove housing from the hands of the speculators and absentee landlords and turn it over to the community to be supervised and developed.

#### SQUATTERS MOVEMENT

Another important development is the formation of a coalition of city-wide and neighborhood groups which has been formed around the squatter movement organized by Milton Street.

The North Philadelphia Development Corporation, which Street heads, has moved nearly 100 homesteaders into abandoned housing to prevent the buildings from being further vandalized and to allow poor people to have a chance at home ownership.

Street has been negotiating with the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the owner of many of the properties, for the legal transfer of ownership to the new tenants.

Street and other community activists are also turning their attention on the city housing policy and how that policy is being implemented through the disbursement of federal community development funds.

What is needed now is a city-wide movement that can respond to the inhumane Rizzo housing policy with unified, militant action. The development of El Comite in Spring Garden and the visible strength of Street's squatters movement, together with long-standing organizations such as the Tenant Action Group (TAG) and the Housing Association of Delaware Valley, may signal a new stage in the creation of a movement that could bring better housing to Black, Latino and white working class Philadelphians despite the best laid plans of Bernard Meltzer, John Gallery and Frank Rizzo.

## UAW LOCAL 813 TURNS THUMBS DOWN ON RIZZO

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While the labor big-wigs of the city's central labor council are having trouble making up their minds on how to respond to Frank Rizzo's concealed bid for a third term through changing the city charter, auto workers at the Hunting Park Budd plant made it crystal clear where they stand.

According to the *Concerned Members Bulletin*, the newsletter of the Concerned Members of UAW Local 813, the membership voted at their April meeting to send Rizzo a letter calling for his resignation because of his racist speech at Whitman Park. The motion, made by a member of the Concerned Workers, was adopted unanimously.

The newsletter summed up the arguments for the motion pointing out that:

*"Rizzo was trying to stir up race hatred in order to turn the white voters' eyes*

*away from his own failure as mayor-- a huge tax increase for homeowners after promising not to raise taxes and giving businesses a tax cut, a bankrupt school system that gets less city money than in most other big cities, and racism in giving out housing rehabilitation money which the US government now may withdraw from Philly. When it comes to corruption Rizzo offered Pete Camiel a deal in the bathroom and then failed a lie detector test about it, fired Lyn Abraham from the Redevelopment Authority for refusing to hire Democratic party hacks, and got a \$400,000 house from a city contractor for \$100,000. But Rizzo has not and will not do anything that really benefits either white or black people. Has he even slowed down the drain of jobs from the city? No. Has he cut down on crime? No. But he wants white people (2/3 of the voters in Philly) to forget all that and let him be mayor forever. That would hurt everyone in Philadelphia, not just black folks."*