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IT CAME FROM SOMEWHERE AND IT HASN'T GONE AWAY:  
BLACK WOMEN'S ANTI-POVERTY ORGANIZING IN ATLANTA, 1966-1996

by

DANIEL M. HOROWITZ

Under the Direction of Dr. Cliff Kuhn

ABSTRACT

Black women formed the first welfare rights organization in Atlanta composed of recipients and continued anti-poverty organizing for decades. Their strategy adapted to the political climate, including the ebb and flow of social movements. This thesis explores how and why that strategy changed as well as how the experiences of the women involved altered ideas of activism and movements.

INDEX WORDS: Atlanta, activism, poverty, community organizing, welfare, welfare reform, welfare rights, Hunger Coalition, Up & Out of Poverty

IT CAME FROM SOMEWHERE AND IT HASN'T GONE AWAY:

Black Women's Anti-Poverty Organizing in Atlanta, 1966-1996

by

Daniel M. Horowitz

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2014

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2014

IT CAME FROM SOMEWHERE AND IT HASN'T GONE AWAY:

Black Women's Anti-Poverty Organizing in Atlanta, 1966-1996

by

Daniel M. Horowitz

Committee Chair: Cliff Kuhn

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Georgia State University

August 2014

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated first and foremost to those women who dreamed of something more than what they saw. They were willing to lay down what they had for their family, and their family grew bigger every day.

I also dedicate this work to Rita Patel Garcia. Without her constant support I would have collapsed from multiple panic attacks a long time ago.

Lastly, I dedicate this to Joel Olson. If ever I think that intellectual life is not part of the struggle for freedom, I remember you. Dear comrade, you are still loved, remembered, and missed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Graduate work is a combination of collaborative effort and painful isolation. Perhaps this prepares one for the future. In my case, it is too early to tell. However, there are many who have absolutely helped me become a better thinker if not a better historian.

Dr. Cliff Kuhn has an excitement for history in general, and oral history in particular, that can be intimidating, especially if one hasn't done the readings that week. As the living Wikipedia for Atlanta history, it can also be intimidating to propose theories of historical processes involving the city. But just as one becomes a better chess player by losing to experts, I have been forced to develop better ideas when he poked holes in what I presented.

Dr. Kathryn Wilson continues to show me that history is about people and that we are not in the business of gathering abstract stories. Dr. Ian Fletcher convinced me that history was worth pursuing and that Georgia State was worth attending. He was right on both counts. Dr. Alex Cummings served as a patient reader as well as the first person to tell me my introduction needed much more work. His ruthless kindness made this a better thesis.

Ms. Caroline Whitters and Ms. Robin Jackson do more work than they should with fewer resources than they deserve. Whenever I panicked about some administrative catastrophe they were able to work it out, often in an afternoon, without breaking a sweat. An education is not limited to a classroom experience. They taught me a lot about navigation.

Dr. Christine Skwiot served as the gravitational center of much of my academic life at Georgia State University. I learned I did not have to love everything to be a historian. More importantly, she taught me that if used what I already learned I would write better history.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
AWRO	Atlanta Welfare Rights Organization
EOA	Economic Opportunity Administration
GHRU	Georgia Human Rights Union
GPRO	Georgia Poverty Rights Office
GWRU	Georgia Welfare Rights Union
Hunger Coalition	Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger
JOBS	Jobs Opportunities and Basic Skills Program
NWRO	National Welfare Rights Organization
PEACH	Positive Employment and Community Help
PPD	Poor People's Day
PRO	Poverty Rights Office
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SSA	Social Security Act/Administration
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
Up & Out	Up & Out of Poverty NOW!
VISTA	Volunteers in Service to America

## 1 INTRODUCTION

From 1967 through the mid-1970s Atlanta saw an explosion of anti-poverty organizations. Groups like Emmaus House, the Poverty Rights Office, Christians Against Hunger in Georgia, and the Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger worked at the city and state level. By the 1990s, however, only Emmaus House and the Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger (Hunger Coalition) existed. Of these, only the Hunger Coalition could mobilize statewide. Yet, anti-poverty organizations managed to mount stiff resistance to welfare reform at the state level in 1996. Although the reform measures did pass, a network of groups, led by the Hunger Coalition, was able to mitigate the damage done and even secure gains in some areas, such as food stamps. But 1996 is also the year that welfare was reformed, some say deformed, by the US Congress. What victories were secured in the state legislature were almost all undone federally.

This narrative of decline is typical of social histories involving movements. In this narrative groups form and quickly spread until they reach critical mass. People come together in days of hope and rage which lead to significant victories thought impossible just a little while before. Inevitably, however, the movement takes a wrong turn and dissipates as despair and disillusionment settle in. The historian is left to sort through the pieces and show that in fact all of this activity had meaning.

This is not that story.

This story begins with people on welfare coming together because of a social movement. However, while Atlanta activists knew about and were influenced by the national movement, they operated autonomously from it. In fact, although the Atlanta Welfare Rights Organization

identified as an affiliate of the National Welfare Rights Organization, the city was visited by a representative of the national group exactly once. The Atlanta chapter continued to operate, expanding both its ideological framework and membership base, long after the national organization collapsed. Does this mean that the city was not part of the movement? Of course, the answer depends on how we define movement, and this work wrestles with that question. The story of the working-class, black women who formed and led these organizations is more than the story of one movement, or several. Women like Ethel Mae Mathews and Sandra Robertson began their work in social movement and were active decades after its ebb. Despite a changing political trajectory that worked to limit anti-poverty activism to the “possible,” these women and many others continued to, borrowing Robin Kelley’s phrase, dream their freedom dreams.<sup>1</sup>

Originally this thesis began with a question about how the women involved in Atlanta anti-poverty organizing influenced a movement. That question, as research questions are apt to do, changed and multiplied. At its core this work still seeks to understand the relationship between movements and black women’s roles as activists, bridge leaders, and family members. Atlanta provides a perfect case study to answer these questions. The city saw a fundamental change in its political structure as the end of segregation also meant the end of the power structure, a loose governing agreement between white and black elite, that dominated the city for decades. Beginning in the mid-1960s, but taking hold strongly by the early to mid-1970s, the collapse of this power structure opened political space for black women. Of course, working-class, black women have always been a part of the political struggle of black people, but they have also faced socially imposed limitations on their participation. Although some women were able to move beyond those restrictions, many did not. The women in this story were in the right

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<sup>1</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

place at the right time. During the 1970s radical, anti-capitalist ideologies competed with liberal, reform-minded ones as activists across the political spectrum organized in working-class, black communities. The women of the AWRO and the Hunger Coalition navigated between these political blocs because they constituted a bloc of their own. They claimed and held a public space and used that space to state a view: poverty was not a natural phenomenon, there were solutions for it, and those who suffered from it would not be silent. This view was never popular, but it was heard.

### **1.1 Historiography of Welfare**

Welfare as we knew it was a product of the New Deal. Relief programs did exist before the passage of the Social Security Act (SSA), but these strictly local and state-funded programs were quickly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the Great Depression. The Social Security Act of 1935 created nine programs including Social Security, Aid to the Blind, federal grants to states for public health and aid to the disabled, and Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). The entry of the federal government into welfare did not change one key component of aid: it was not meant for everyone. In their overview of welfare Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward correctly point out that the Social Security Act was intended for only a small portion of the population. The law read that all non-disabled adults without children and those families with two parents could not receive aid.<sup>2</sup> But because the program was administered by state and local governments various factors from racial discrimination to budget levels meant that only a small percentage of those targeted received assistance. This inequality was far from accidental. According to one scholar, the discriminatory nature of welfare was part of its creation. Historian Linda Gordon's work on welfare documents a modern system based in inequality. As an omnibus

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<sup>2</sup> Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage books, 1979), 266.

bill the Social Security Act incorporated many of the various welfare models and ideas existing at the time but not on equal terms. The law created two sets of programs: those that were “generous and honorable” in who they served and how, and those that were “stingy and humiliating.”<sup>3</sup> Programs like unemployment compensation were viewed as primarily benefiting men who had earned the relief through their work. ADC, on the other hand, was for women who needed charity. This social division of aid was not an intentional focus of the law; rather it was based in the gender assumptions of those who framed it. Gordon shows that ADC was an uncontroversial measure of the bill when it came up for a vote because neither Congressmen nor their constituents saw problems with providing relief for needy children. Gordon’s point is that the unquestioned assumption of the legislation was that the children, and their mothers, were needy because they were helpless. The men receiving aid were honorable workers down on their luck, but they were capable of taking action and of being citizens; the women were charity cases because they were not capable of doing the same. This gendered division of SSA has continued to shape public attitudes to the various programs. Until the 1960s the welfare program was not generally regarded as a negative, but Gordon points out that this was possible was because the programs were separated. Those programs benefiting the “needy,” like ADC, kept the name welfare while the others became entitlements.<sup>4</sup>

The different programs included in the 1935 legislation carried general assumptions about the population they served as well as why that population needed aid. The crafting of Social Security was a difficult process but in regard to assumptions about poverty it was not a diverse one. The legislative process was dominated by men but women were very much involved. The first two decades of the twentieth century saw an explosion in reform efforts by

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 253.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon, 1.

middle-class, white women looking to aid the poor. Women like Julia Lathrop and Grace Abbott worked on reform efforts at both the local and federal level during their careers as social workers. Far from being alone, Gordon charts a network of dozens of other middle-class, white women reformers who used their experience working for child welfare in the twenties to help shape the Social Security Act. Their previous experience had informed state and local relief efforts and led to the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act in 1921, the first federal welfare program, and the creation of the US Children's Bureau. Their background also shaped what became Aid to Dependent Children.<sup>5</sup> Gordon does not believe it was an accident their experience influenced ADC rather than the other programs.

While the women did not share a gender with most of those who crafted SSA, they did share a set of assumptions that the poor were damaged people. Relief did not just mean meeting material needs, it meant fixing the poor. These shared assumptions were also gendered. Unemployed men were not damaged, they were victims of the Depression. However, single mothers, the primary beneficiaries of the state and local programs the ADC was based on, were broken. They were, after all, women with children but without a man, meaning their participation in the workforce was, at best, suspect. By being included in SSA as a program separate from those linked directly to work, like Social Security and unemployment compensation, ADC was stigmatized from its inception.<sup>6</sup>

The gendered stigmatization also allowed the assumptions about reform from the early twentieth century to carry into ADC. Social workers during the 1920s and before saw casework as a means of teaching the poor to become citizens. Poor people were physically and spiritually damaged by poverty and needed to be healed. The healer was a caseworker whose expertise

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon, 70, 76.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon, 185.

showed people how to “break with bad (immoral and/or self-destructive) behavior patterns.” This assumption justified a structure where caseworkers determined a family’s budget and policed their adherence to it.<sup>7</sup> These conditions of social control became part of welfare but not of entitlements. It enabled the state to police those receiving aid as well as to limit those who were entitled to benefits but not receiving them. This meant that getting the benefits the law said one was entitled to required a struggle. Engaging in this struggle, even to think about it, required a new language.

## 1.2 Putting Rights in Welfare Rights

Many organizers and activists over the years have written about the need to establish a right to rebel. This right is not necessarily about legality, although in cases like unions it was and is, but rather the moral legitimacy to make demands.<sup>8</sup> The term “welfare rights” has its origins in reform efforts of the early twentieth century, but the poor have been making demands on the wealthy for much longer. Gordon's structure of the evolution of this language of rights is helpful. She puts welfare rights claims into three categories: needs, earnings, and rights. Need claims resemble charity or a personal sense of duty. One cares for one’s child because the child needs to be cared for and there is a moral obligation of the parent to do so. One also donates to charity because the donation is needed. Earning claims are based on the claimant having earned standing through their work. Social security and unemployment compensation are treated as earnings claims since people pay into the system and feel entitled to get their money back. Rights claims

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon, 103.

<sup>8</sup> Although this observation is based on personal experience as an organizer, the sentiment is expressed in Saul Alinsky. *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*. 1st ed. New York,: Random House, 1971; Si Kahn. *How People Get Power: Organizing Oppressed Communities for Action*. New York,: McGraw-Hill, 1970; Kimberley A. Bobo, Jackie Kendall, Steve Max, and Midwest Academy. *Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy Manual for Activists*. 3rd ed. Santa Ana, Calif.: Seven Locks Press, 2001; and Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in *Revolution and the Rule of Law*, ed. Edward Kent. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

are based on citizenship or humanity. Gordon argues that welfare demands have encompassed all three types of claims, with needs being the weakest and rights the strongest. Social workers in the 1910s and 1920s justified their work by arguing it “was necessary to the social order” and a responsibility of government. Meeting the needs of the poor also met the needs of society. The politicization of needs, as Gordon puts it, was a step toward rights.<sup>9</sup> However, this alone was not enough to frame welfare as a right. The explicit rights language used in welfare activism in the 1960s needed other structures.

Felicia Kornbluh's history of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) holds that the organization's struggle was made possible because of new resources made available due to post-WWII affluence. Material resources, money and people, made it possible for organizations to operate, but the rhetorical resource of rights language was also necessary. The civil rights movement's use of rights to articulate and justify demands for full citizenship was a resource the welfare rights movement needed in order to justify its existence to itself and others.<sup>10</sup> The women of the NWRO, mostly black and Latina, were struggling to meet basic needs for food, housing, and clothing just like families during the Great Depression. However, these women were struggling during a time when large segments of the country were experiencing great wealth. Kornbluh shows how these problems fueled the welfare rights movement and coalesced into demands for full access to the country's “ballot boxes, its courtrooms, and its consumer marketplaces.” She identifies these as demands for first-class citizenship.<sup>11</sup> During the struggle for integration, civil rights activists successfully argued that a store owner's property rights were not sufficient to allow segregation. For society to accept that

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon, 10, 160.

<sup>10</sup> Felicia Ann Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America*, Politics and Culture in Modern America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Kornbluh, 17.

some people could be barred from even private establishments was tantamount to accepting the existence of second-class citizens. Welfare rights activists tweaked this justification by arguing that not being able to purchase basic goods within private establishments was also tantamount to second-class citizenship. The language of rights was directed towards full access to the country's economy.

Welfare rights activists centralized their role as consumers and built their justification on the idea that citizenship and consumption overlapped. This was possible because of structural economic changes in the nature of consumption identified by Kornbluh but elucidated by Lizabeth Cohen. Much like the term welfare, consumption underwent a meaning switch in the twentieth century. However, while welfare went from positive to negative, consumption traveled in the opposite direction. Consumption had meant disease and destruction, but it became more positive during the Great Depression as political and economic identities overlapped. During this time buying was a citizen's patriotic duty and government was an ally in putting the "market power of the consumer to work politically" to save the country. Although World War II put a damper on government as an advocate of mass consumption, purchasing became patriotic again when the war ended. In the last half of the twentieth century the roles of consumer, citizen, taxpayer, and voter have merged. Citizenship became a consumption practice where government is judged by how "well served" people personally feel by the policies. Cohen names this post-WWII strategy the Consumers' Republic and defines it as "reconstructing the nation's economy and reaffirming its democratic values through promoting the expansion of mass consumption."<sup>12</sup> This overlap of roles made the language of welfare rights possible, and the combining of economic practice and political ideals gave the welfare rights movement its rationale.

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<sup>12</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 2003), 8-11.

Cohen shows where the language of consumer-citizen succeeded when the language of citizen alone did not. During the 1930s African Americans “seized upon the citizen consumer role as a new way of upholding the public interest.”<sup>13</sup> Protests, demonstrations, and riots during the Great Depression against discriminatory hiring practices combined citizenship with consumption, most notably through signs reading “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work.” However, Cohen illustrates that as the relationship changed between being a purchaser and being a citizen so too did the language of demonstrations. She claims the 1967 Newark, New Jersey riots as a significant turning point. Whereas previous actions were about discriminatory hiring practices or discriminatory treatment, the 1967 event was about discriminatory access to purchasing power. Black people across class lines expressed outrage at being excluded from the wealth around them. Looting was not an opportunistic method of acquiring goods, it was a direct action, a political event where the right of access to goods was claimed and taken. They were “no longer satisfied to be spectators rather than participants in the Consumers’ Republic.”<sup>14</sup>

As Cohen points out, the claims of the NWRO and welfare rights organizations were radical but fit within the capitalist framework of the time.<sup>15</sup> Welfare recipients were surrounded by affluence yet were denied access. They were not given the resources to meet basic needs for their families, although they were legally entitled to many of those resources, while also being subjected to invasion of privacy and other humiliating conditions by the welfare bureaucracy. In addition, most of middle-class America remained ignorant of the economic realities of the poor and especially of poor people of color. Deindustrialization combined with racial discrimination meant jobs were difficult to find, and jobs that paid enough to feed a family were even scarcer.

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, 376-377.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, 383.

When welfare recipients claimed rights, they were also claiming political space for themselves. The history of welfare rights is not simply the history of a program or an organization. It is the history of how people viewed poverty and how, or even if, poor people viewed themselves. To claim rights as a poor person means seeing oneself as poor and in community with other poor people. Anti-poverty organizing was and is about more than welfare, as many of the activists in the NWRO and in Atlanta came to realize. However, the reason welfare rights is central to the story is because welfare rights is a subjectivity, a demand, and a critique all at the same time.

### **1.3 The Relevance of Movements**

By the 1960s welfare was primarily still run at the state although SSA meant the federal government was now paying some of the costs. The basic nature of welfare remained intact: most people who qualified for welfare were not receiving it. Piven and Cloward estimated in the mid-1960s that only half of all those qualified for welfare were receiving it in New York, a city where, in comparison with some of the rest of the country, it was relatively easy to get access.<sup>16</sup> Their estimate was criticized for being too conservative. This restrictive atmosphere, however, did face opposition. In 1966 a group of organizers led by George Wiley proposed a coalition of welfare organizations that came to be called the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). Piven and Cloward, as scholar-activists, were present at the conception and formation of this organization. They proposed a strategy, rejected by the organizers, which called for a network instead of an organization. Piven and Cloward believed that “activists of all kinds” rather than a national staff should mobilize the poor to “disrupt the relief system.”<sup>17</sup> Their proposed strategy was a direct outgrowth of their analysis of protest movements.

The strategy proposed by Piven and Cloward was based on disruption. The authors

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<sup>16</sup> Piven and Cloward, 277.

<sup>17</sup> Piven and Cloward, 276.

advised continuous disorder to force financial and political elites to engage the problems of poverty in the country. However, the strategy adopted was one of organizational building. The NWRO aimed to be a mass-based organization of poor people capable of wielding power at the local, state, and national level. While the organizers believed in disruption, they felt that an organization was necessary to negotiate after the disruption. Piven and Cloward proposed a movement strategy, but what was adopted was an organizational one. They did not equate an organization with a movement, but the NWRO organizers did. The lack of clarity about what constituted a movement continues into the scholarship of the period.

Felicia Kornbluh's history of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) is an example of a good historical work marred by a lack of precision regarding movements. Kornbluh sees welfare rights as separate but evolving from civil rights. The civil rights movement's use of rights to articulate and justify demands for full citizenship was a resource the welfare rights movement needed in order to justify its existence to itself and others.<sup>18</sup> This train of thought overlaps the civil rights movement and the welfare rights movement, but the fact is an equally good case can be made that these were separate movements and that they were not. Kornbluh seems to lean toward separate movements. However, the problem is that Kornbluh's book is not about the welfare rights movement, it is about the New York chapter of the NWRO. She does not provide a definition, framework, or criteria for what constitutes any kind of movement. In fact, she uses movement and organization interchangeably.<sup>19</sup> Since New York had the largest chapter, writing about that city is the same as writing about the country as a whole. Additionally, since the chapter was the welfare rights movement, how New Yorkers felt about the organization's tactics is indicative of how the country felt about welfare. Because Kornbluh scarcely mentions

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<sup>18</sup> Kornbluh, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon, 37.

the social upheavals occurring between 1966 and 1975 that do not involve welfare and New York City, one is led to believe that middle-class, white America's backlash against welfare recipients was the direct result of the NWRO's disruptive tactics.<sup>20</sup> However, she also claims economic structural changes beyond the influence of the NWRO killed the movement.

According to Kornbluh, the Supreme Court, the Presidency, and the American people as a whole all became more conservative, in part because they were tired of disruptive politics. This political shift removed the resources the NWRO needed to survive. Since the NWRO was the movement, the collapse of the organization in 1975 was the end of the movement,<sup>21</sup> except, as Piven and Cloward point out, the NWRO actually ceased being an effective political force by 1969.<sup>22</sup>

Kornbluh's inability to determine the relationship between the NWRO and larger societal changes is a result of her lack of movement analysis. One cannot assume an organization and a movement are the same. Historian Stephen Tuck views the seventies as a time of proliferation rather than fragmentation.<sup>23</sup> Seen in this light the collapse of a national organization is not an end of activity, but the beginning of many different types of activism albeit on a more localized scale. In fact, one could make an argument that the collapse of an organization creates political space for experimentation. After the NWRO ceased operations, anti-poverty organizing continued throughout the country. Georgia's chapter was formed in 1967 and continued operations through the end of the twentieth century. In Nevada activists were fighting well into the 1990s. While no national organization of welfare recipients immediately replaced the NWRO, organizations of welfare recipients, the homeless, the working poor, and others did spring up in its wake. In 1970 Arkansas Community Organizations for Reform Now split with the NWRO to become the

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<sup>20</sup> Gordon, 108.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Piven and Cloward.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Tuck, "We Are Taking up Where the Movement of the 1960s Left Off: The Proliferation and Power of African American Protest During the 1970s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 4 (2008).

Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). ACORN wished to organize a wider constituency of poor people. Other local and state welfare rights groups survived the collapse of the NWRO and continued to organize. Some formed the National Welfare Rights Union in 1987 and continue to exist. By pinning the existence of a social movement to the existence of a single organization Kornbluh renders the activity in Georgia, Nevada and Arkansas invisible except to say this was a legacy of the New York organizing. Given that Atlanta welfare rights organizing had so thin a connection to the NWRO those women are, in effect, written out of history.

There are multiple challenges in writing about movements. When do they begin? When and how do they end? How do we identify the legacy of such activity? Do we simply assume that a movement has a legacy? Were the civil rights movement and the welfare rights movement separate? One faces these questions when writing about welfare and Atlanta. The fact that political activism around welfare rights and poverty continued with varying levels of success much longer than the social movement that spawned it forces us to ask these questions. There have been different currents fighting poverty, each with their own agenda created in an ideological and historical context. Examining the economic, social, and cultural factors that shaped those contexts may help us answer these questions. At the least we can make visible the political processes engaged in by historical actors.

#### **1.4 Defining Movements**

One can define a movement as simply a lot of people doing the same type of political activity, and, at least based on this author's experience inside and outside the academy, this definition seems common. While it does lack precision, it still can be useful. People do take collective political action, and rigid definitions if applied dogmatically usually do not illustrate

much. The word “movement” can be used as a standalone word but should not be considered self-explanatory. However, not understanding the various combinations of mobilization, opportunity, ideology and hope presents its own set of dangers. Political activity is messy, and historical actors rarely put their work into a single box. While it is useful for social scientists to focus on the particulars, it is counterproductive to force history into one’s own categories. My focus on movements, hopefully, provides a framework for understanding how the Atlanta activists responded to political changes. This framework allows for a language to describe strategic and organizational changes during the thirty-year period I analyze.

I am claiming that movements exist on a political spectrum, and I focus on three points on that line. The three points are movement, protest movement, and social movement. As all three are part of a continuum, they are all combinations of mobilization activity, political opportunity, ideological production, and hope for success. The difference between the three points lies in the depth of the social networks, cultural frameworks, and connective structures within the organizing. While it seems to make sense to focus on possibility of victory, this can also be counterproductive. Not all movements come together around a set of demands. Spontaneous strikes or riots, for example, may begin with participants saying they have had enough of current conditions. The sustainability of the strike, riot, or rebellion relies more on the participants’ ability to build social networks and connective structures, as well as the structural economic and social conditions of society, than it does on demands. Of course, well organized movements do have demands and they sometimes win them. However, defining a movement by its ability to win victories ignores the work of social connection and transformation I wish to focus on. Rather than focus on the demands, I look at the process that created them.

At a base level the term movement in this context refers to a collective of people engaged

in common political activity. The term is loose and reflects a dictionary definition, as well as common usage, with an emphasis on collectivity. This is, in part, to avoid rigidity but also a recognition that in the last 20 years the term movement has been applied so much and so often that it is now better to limit the battle to what one is not discussing. The term movement should not be used to refer to an organization, goal, strategy, or tactic. There are times, of course, when what starts off as a campaign becomes something more. For example, the Greensboro sit-ins in 1960 spread so quickly that to say a movement was not present would be ludicrous. The immigrant rights marches of 2006 were also an example of a campaign that became more than just a campaign. However, the Greensboro sit-ins became part of a larger sustainable challenge to the dominant racial ideas of the day. The immigrant marches had a political impact, but that impact was not sustainable. This difference is the difference between a social movement and a protest movement. In short, a social movement is a protest movement with some staying power.

A movement, a protest movement, and a social movement can all occur at the same time. Mobilization structure, ideology, and other aspects can interact in various ways. There can also be multiple types of movements competing against or working with each other. This is clearly seen in welfare rights struggles in the 1960s. To assume that welfare rights grew out of civil rights is to presume a chronology where one began after the other. However, the economic concerns of working-class black people existed before the struggle against segregation. If we instead see both welfare rights and civil rights as two sets of networks, frameworks, and structures, we can chart the overlap, as Kornbluh did regarding the language of rights, as well as the competition and the separation, if any. The point, at least in the study of Atlanta activism, is not to determine if these were two separate movements; it is to make visible the connections within the discourse.

Linda Alcoff's and Laura Gray's interpretation of Michel Foucault is useful in this case. In discussing discourse Foucault claimed that speech is not a tool of struggle but a site of struggle. He also warned that speaking on a topic does not necessarily lead to greater freedom. The implication here is that to speak of freedom is part of the struggle for freedom. However, speaking of freedom can also contribute to its defeat. Alcoff and Gray reconcile this seeming contradiction by pointing out that discourse is not necessarily about what is true and what is false, but about what can be said. In their words, what is "statable."<sup>24</sup> In addition, they state that multiple discourses may exist at the same time but only in hierarchical relation to each other. Therefore, it is safe to assume that each historical period has multiple groups of people attempting to carve out political space, to have their view become "statable." One does not have to assume, for example, that civil rights and black power advocates were attempting to prove their view was true while the other was false. One can view the tension as each attempting to gain the political legitimacy necessary to state their view about what was necessary. Of course, rarely is a historical period limited to only two groups of actors. Alcoff and Gray suggest that discourse be seen as competing spheres of influence rather than a single-line spectrum with two views at the extremes. This allows us to chart the conflicts and overlaps within and between various discourses regardless of the number of groups. It is not necessary to end the civil rights movement in 1966 or to ignore black power entirely in order to discuss welfare rights. Each movement, like all discourse, has its own historical beginnings even as it is connected with both previous and contiguous movements. We cannot assume that movements are self-contained waves that run one after another and in one direction. Rather, such historical moments are confused seas where the waves come simultaneously from every corner as well as from below

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<sup>24</sup> Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 18, no. 2 (1993).

and above.

Sociologist Sidney Tarrow has worked to place social movements within the scope of contentious politics, and this is a particularly useful one for contextualizing welfare rights and other anti-poverty work. He has created a definition of social movement based on the ideas of his colleague Charles Tilly which states that social movements are “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities.” This interaction is most often disruption. Tarrow agrees with Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward that disruption is usually the only option that “most ordinary people” have to register discontent with a situation. In fact, his analysis is based on the assumption that challenges to authority are a “normal part of society.” While contentious politics may be normal, however, a social movement is a rare phenomenon. He is adamant that a social movement does not exist unless the phenomenon has three properties: mounting collective challenges; drawing on social networks, common purposes, and cultural frameworks; and building solidarity through connective structures and collective identities to sustain collective action.<sup>25</sup> Disruption in and of itself is not a social movement.

Tarrow’s definition and criteria are useful for a variety of reasons. He is attempting to place the phenomena of social movements in a spectrum with low-intensity conflict on one end and revolution at the other. As conflict becomes more socially organized through development of more extensive networks and structures it has the ability to become more sustainable.<sup>26</sup> Of course, it is not a given that conflict will become more socially organized, and that point is important. To consider any and all collective action a social movement is to diminish those

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<sup>25</sup> Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Rev. & updated 3rd ed., Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7, 9, 27, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Tarrow, 9.

people able to navigate the obstacles. Tarrow wishes to place the social movement and “its particular dynamics historically and analytically, within this universe of contentious politics.”<sup>27</sup> His acknowledgment that a social movement possesses a particular dynamic is crucial to historical inquiry. Conflict in society is normal, but the mass uprising of workers, blacks, students, and so forth is a special phenomenon with its own characteristics.

There are, of course, other types of societal conflict besides social movements. Some of these conflicts may have the collectivity required by Tarrow’s definition but not the sustainability or one other aspect necessary to be considered a social movement. We may still consider some of these conflicts as movements, but, in keeping with the insight that each type of conflict has a special dynamic, we must identify the differences. For this reason, I propose using the label of protest movement for those conflicts that do not develop the sustainability or solidarity needed to be considered a social movement. Social scientists Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward argued that the “emergence of a protest movement entails a transformation both of consciousness and behavior.” They characterized a change in consciousness as one where “the system” loses legitimacy, where previously fatalistic people make demands, and where these same people feel taking action could be effective. Change in behavior is marked by masses of people being collectively defiant. Like Tarrow, Piven and Cloward believed how people disrupt is dependent on the social and cultural conditions of their time, but in focusing on the poor they note that disruption is almost synonymous with disorder since poor people are “so isolated from significant institutional participation” that the only expectation of them is to be out of sight. In short, the poor have little choice in protest other than open rebellion.<sup>28</sup>

Tarrow’s properties for a social movement—mounting collective challenges; growing

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<sup>27</sup> Tarrow, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Piven and Cloward, 3, 24.

and using social networks, common purposes, and cultural frameworks; and sustained collective action by building solidarity—is the foundation of the investigative framework I use in this study. The Atlanta activists continued their work by changing their strategy to meet the demands of the time. However, their change in strategy did not occur in spite of their connection to movements but because of it. These women’s direct participation in social movements and their experience watching that movement ebb directly informed their ability to devise strategies to match the challenges of their time. More than that, their involvement allowed the work to continue long after the movements reached their heights. Many studies focus on how activism changed people’s lives, and this work also asks that question. What is not usually asked, but just as important for this thesis, is how the people involved changed the work.

### **1.5 Atlanta and the Roadmap**

Although the first welfare rights organization in Atlanta composed and led by people on welfare formed in 1967, the basis for that work was laid in 1966. That year, I argue, saw the beginning of the end of the community power structure that defined Atlanta politics for decades. In the next chapter I briefly discuss how previous anti-poverty activism was directly related to uplift ideology, the philosophical framework of Atlanta’s black elite. By the mid-1960s, however, this framework could no longer contain the frustrations and activities of the city’s black working class. The Summerhill riot of September 1966, where residents pushed Mayor Ivan Allen off a police car while he was attempting to address the crowd, marked the opening of a new political space. The next year the Atlanta Welfare Rights Organization would be organized in the same community by some of those same residents. This chapter then discusses the proliferation of anti-poverty organizations during the 1970s and the tensions, both ideological and strategic, between them.

The third chapter tells of the consolidation of organizations and makes the case that the social movement ended in the 1980s. This chapter focuses on the Hunger Coalition as one of the few anti-poverty organizations with a base among the poor left standing. The end of the social movement, the reduction in organizational capacity, and the mounting backlash against previous victories all called for a change in organizational strategy. This chapter discusses the implementation and use of Poor People's Day at the Capitol as a new strategy for maintaining the networks and connections previously taken for granted. I claim this marks the transition from a social movement to a protest movement.

In the fourth chapter I transition into the 1990s and the end of welfare as we knew it. Although 1996 is well known as the year national welfare reform passed in Congress, the Hunger Coalition along with new allies were able to mitigate, and even stop, some state reform efforts. The changes to the political atmosphere marked the greatest challenge yet to state activists, but they were able to mount effective campaigns. The fact that these efforts were undone at the national level suggests a reduction in the social networks and connective structures of the protest movement. In short, the legacies of the social movement were not enough to stop welfare reform.

My conclusion discusses Poor People's Day 2013 and the marked differences between that event and those of the 1980s and 1990s. Through this lens I discuss the lessons learned regarding movements and anti-poverty organizing. While many traditional movement narratives leave the South after 1965, it is clear from this work that the full story of southern organizers has not been told. Additionally, I discuss the impact of uncovering previously hidden political activity on scholarship of the south.

## 2 THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES

### 2.1 Uplift Ideology

The first welfare rights group in Atlanta, the Atlanta Welfare Rights Organization (AWRO), was established in 1967. Although people on welfare had been organizing in various forums before, this was the first time that a group formed based on the identity of welfare recipient. The AWRO was a new type of anti-poverty organization in the city, but it was based on almost a century of African American anti-poverty activity. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Atlanta's black community organized mutual aid societies to alleviate at least some of the desperate poverty of those who moved from the countryside.<sup>29</sup> These societies became the basis for what historian Karen Ferguson named "self-help organizations" that pooled money to provide some economic relief in case of crisis. These organizations, in addition to the black church, were the bedrock of a community-created social safety net for black people of all economic backgrounds. They provided the financial and political model later used to create fraternal organizations, businesses, and social work organizations. However, by the 1920s this ad hoc system was stressed. Throughout the twenties, Georgia's agricultural economy was shrinking, leading to an explosion in the black population in Atlanta as people lost land or looked to the city for opportunities. Ferguson explains how the increased black population, especially the increasing presence of poor blacks, presented a problem for Atlanta's black elite, who were the ostensible leaders of the community yet restricted by Jim Crow from being able to deliver solutions. The result was the development of "uplift ideology," the idea that black people deserved equal rights if they could show they "lived by and aspired to the same moral and behavioral codes" as whites. With the New Deal, Atlanta's professional elite—the social

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<sup>29</sup> For more information on this process see Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

workers, teachers, scholars, and others hired by the various government agencies running the New Deal—was able to shape programs, albeit in a limited way. The end result, as Ferguson puts it, was that black reformers in Atlanta “shaped federal activity to help bring some black Atlantans from the social, economic, and political margins in ways never intended or dreamt of by white New Deal administrators.” This opportunity, along with the experience of the city’s black elite in the twenties, also meant the development and use of a new community strategy.<sup>30</sup>

Uplift ideology required an alliance with elements of the white community since its basis was adherence to white behavioral norms and mores. However, the twenties showed that relying on white people to acknowledge black people’s good behavior in order to win reform did not lead to significant change. During the Great Depression Atlanta’s black elite moved toward an alternative strategy based on building a power base within the black community. The elite would still lead the community, but this strategy relied on working class African Americans participating in legal, direct action, and electoral strategies developed by that elite.<sup>31</sup>

Beginning in the 1930s, voter registration drives in the city slowly increased the power of the black vote. However, the power of this bloc was limited. The political realignment of the 1930s meant that black Atlanta began lining up behind the Democratic Party. In the 1940s voting reforms led to increased voter participation by African Americans. Georgia ended the poll tax in 1945 and lowered the voting age to 18. In 1946 the U.S. Supreme Court declared the white primary, the racial restriction of voter participation in primaries, unconstitutional. While the reforms and realignment increased black voter participation, it did not fundamentally change the nature of that participation. A moderate, black elite still served as gatekeepers and intermediaries between the black working class and the white political establishment. In 1946 the United Negro

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<sup>30</sup> Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta*, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 28, 4, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ferguson, 7.

Veterans Organization led a demonstration calling for the hiring of a black police officer. The *Atlanta Daily World*, the leading black newspaper in the city, reported that “responsible Negro citizens” thought the march “ill-advised and inopportune.” Furthermore, the paper made the point that the NAACP branch had already launched a “citywide movement” while the veterans’ organization represented only “a very small segment of Atlanta Negro veterans.”<sup>32</sup> Of course, the black elite was not monolithic. The 1946 march was called and led by a black veteran who held a doctorate. What this incident does show, however, is the hierarchy of African-American leadership. Responsible leaders were those that represented everyone, and they deserved attention. Irresponsible leaders called inopportune marches that attracted few people. The *Atlanta Daily World* believed social change came from a “practical education plan.”<sup>33</sup> This was a plan devised and implemented by members of the black elite whose participation insured they were considered “responsible leaders.” Those who did not follow the plan were to be scolded until they fell back in line. Failing that, they were to be ignored. Regardless, the job of the black masses was to register to vote and then vote as directed by the plan. While all African Americans were expected to participate in the same strategies, not all would receive the same help. Uplift ideology dictated how much help certain black neighborhoods received. As Ferguson shows, those neighborhoods closest to Morehouse, Clark Atlanta, and the other historically black universities were considered more respectable. Neighborhoods located in South Atlanta like Summerhill, Mechanicsville, and Peoplestown were less likely to meet the respectability criteria of uplift ideology and therefore less likely to be the focus of help.<sup>34</sup> These neighborhoods were forced to create their own approaches for fighting the Depression as well as Jim Crow, and these

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<sup>32</sup> “United Veterans in March on City Hall,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 5, 1946.

<sup>33</sup> David Andrew Harmon, *Beneath the Image of the Civil Rights Movement and Race Relations: Atlanta, Georgia, 1946-1981*, *Studies in African American History and Culture* (New York: Garland Pub., 1996), 9, 13-14, 24, 27-28.

<sup>34</sup> Ferguson, 30.

approaches informed subsequent activity. By the late 1960s, when the city's decades-old power structure between black and white elites broke down, these working-class, black communities were able to use their past experience in the creation of a new political model.

## **2.2 The Politics of Space**

Uplift ideology did gain Atlanta's black community a measure of political power because it allowed the black vote to be wielded as a bloc. Beginning in the 1930s, voter registration drives in the city slowly increased the power of the black vote, but the power of this bloc was limited. Georgia, one of the first states to attack Reconstruction after the Civil War, was also one of the first states to introduce the poll tax in 1868. The 1877 state constitution, created after the final defeat of the Reconstruction government, established the poll tax as cumulative. This meant that in order to vote a citizen would have to pay taxes for each year since they reached voting age. In 1908 Georgia amended the state constitution adding a literacy test and establishing the white primary, barring blacks from voting in the Democratic Party primaries where most elections were contested. This framework of political obstacles kept black voter registration at low levels for more than six decades.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this narrow political maneuvering room, Atlanta's black community was able to win some material gains. Although the white primary meant that African Americans could not vote for most candidates, they could vote in general or special elections. In 1919 and 1921, African Americans voted against and defeated two referenda on school bonds because no funds were dedicated for the black community. After the vote, negotiations between city officials and African American leaders led to a reapportionment of the bond monies and the referenda were

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<sup>35</sup> Harmon, 9, 13-14.

passed.<sup>36</sup> This dynamic of a black elite negotiating with white political officials set the stage for the city in dealings on racial politics. As late as 1962 the same strategy was used when an \$80 million municipal bond, one that did not include funds for black neighborhoods, was rejected. When Mayor Ivan Allen modified the bonds, they passed with overwhelming black support.<sup>37</sup>

David Andrew Harmon's analysis of the black political leadership of this period suggests they were dedicated to working within the system of segregation for gradual reforms that did not challenge that system as a whole. Bound by "existing racial attitudes and political realities," black leadership relied on popular tactics, like rallies and mass meetings, only to "build support for decisions already made or for opponents to constructively vent [black working class] frustrations."<sup>38</sup> By the mid-1960s, however, working-class frustrations were no longer containable. Historian Paula Giddings first told the story, often retold, of Dr. Martin Luther King meeting with leaders of the NWRO in 1968. King went to recruit support for the prospective Poor People's Campaign, an idea first proposed by the NWRO but since appropriated. During the meeting King was eventually chastised by Johnnie Tillmon, a welfare recipient herself and one of the core leaders of the NWRO, for not admitting he did not know about welfare issues.<sup>39</sup> Eventually, King accepted the criticism. Working-class black women publicly berating a member of one of Atlanta's most prominent black families would have been unthinkable just a decade before. This event shows that class was not the only fissure. The community power structure was coming apart along gender lines as well.

Black women have always been part of black political struggle but have not always been

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<sup>36</sup> Harmon, 13.

<sup>37</sup> Winston A. Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 38.

<sup>38</sup> Harmon, 34-35.

<sup>39</sup> Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, 1st Quill ed. (New York: W. Morrow, 1996), 312.

charismatic leaders. Historian Belinda Robnett's narrative of the post-WWII civil rights movement shows how gender shaped the leadership of that struggle. Robnett coined the term "bridge leaders" to describe black women's activist role in community mobilization as well as liaisons between the national movement and the local community. Black women became bridge leaders because as they sought participation within the social movement gender "operated as a construct of exclusion," restricting access to formal leadership roles. While some women were able to break through this barrier, the vast majority of movement spokespeople and public leaders were male.<sup>40</sup> This does not mean women did not hold formal leadership positions or that men did not hold informal ones. Rather, it means that gender was a defining factor in how people were socially positioned and therefore how they participated in the social movement. Black women's social location on the margins of national politics, combined with a constricted political space within black institutions, lead to female over representation as bridge leaders.

Robnett also contends this context, the social constructions of gender, strengthened informal leadership and therefore provided a "strong mobilizing force" at the grassroots. Although Robnett does not use the phrase, this is the concept of subjectification, a Foucauldian term describing how the capacity for action is enabled and created by specific relations of subordination. In short, the ways by which a person is pushed by the hierarchy are also the ways by which that person develops a sense of subjectivity, the view of political self as an individual and in relation to others. This does not necessarily mean the person develops a subjectivity in which they see themselves as inferior, helpless, and without agency. Subjectification explains how social locations shape the use or creation of certain political strategies. In Robnett's historical study she shows that black women activists of the civil rights movement created their

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<sup>40</sup> Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20.

own space within the movement. This “free space” she defines as a “niche that is not directly controlled by formal leaders or those in their inner circle. It is an unclaimed space that is nevertheless central to the development of the movement, since linkages are developed within it.” As Robnett explains, gender functioned as an “organizational construct” within the free space of the social movement to create new leaders within the social movement.<sup>41</sup> Black women were pushed into a gendered social location within the civil rights movement. They then turned that location into a free space, a political tool, to increase the effectiveness of that movement. Clearly these women were not helpless, whether or not they could name the gender forces they were operating within. Subjectification simply renders the space visible without dismissing or romanticizing these women’s efforts. By drawing all of this information together, one can paint a picture of black women’s free space in Atlanta over the course of the civil rights struggle.

Uplift ideology meant black, working-class women were involved in the city’s political struggle but rarely part of the decision-making process. During the post-war years these same women created space within the social movement where their leadership was developed. This same leadership was put to the test as the movement mounted more direct challenges to Jim Crow. Through the mid-1960s most of these women participated in the social movement through established organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and later through the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). While many historians have focused on the difference between SNCC’s and SCLC’s stance on nonviolence or black power, Robnett points to the two organization’s differences in leadership development as more fundamental. SCLC was built on the male charismatic leadership model that allowed women’s participation but also constrained it. SNCC also constrained women’s participation through

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<sup>41</sup> Robnett, 21-22.

socially constructed ideas of gender. However, the organization's focus on the building of decentralized grassroots leadership created a different kind of space, one where women could contest formal leadership positions if not always hold them.<sup>42</sup> SCLC's leadership model was still connected to, if not rooted in, uplift ideology. SNCC's model was, by contrast, a more egalitarian one. The activists in SCLC and SNCC represented two poles within the civil rights activist spectrum in Atlanta, but the working-class women involved would not automatically be included in either. In 1966 those women declared their independence from existing civil rights organizations, and that led to a formalization of their space around welfare rights.

### 2.3 Summerhill Changes Atlanta

Summerhill residents did not get credit for their own riot. The day after residents took to the streets an *Atlanta Journal* reporter summarized the feelings of "most persons" about why event took place: "certain Negro elements" had moved into the neighborhood.<sup>43</sup> "Certain Negro elements" was a reference to SNCC activists. "Most persons" referred to Atlanta's community power structure, the white business and political establishment that governed the city and the black elite that negotiated with them. Both segments were stunned by riot, and both segments failed to understand what it meant.

One historian described Summerhill, along with the adjacent Peoplestown, as a poor black community that "most whites rarely saw and one that middle class blacks ignored."<sup>44</sup> Not coincidentally, Summerhill is a black community away from Atlanta's black universities. Uplift ideology tended to focus on neighborhoods closer to Atlanta University, such as Vine City. The organizations that did exist, such as the Summerhill Civic League, served as grassroots arms of

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<sup>42</sup> Robnett, 105.

<sup>43</sup> Bill Winn, "Big Question: How Did It Start?," *Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1966.

<sup>44</sup> Alton Hornsby, Jr., quoted in Winston Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 115-116.

the community power structure. These organizations mobilized during election time, effectively funneling working-class energy into the electoral arena. Meanwhile, the successes of the civil rights movement meant that more affluent African Americans were capable of seeking better housing in formerly all-white areas, leaving low-income blacks behind. Throughout the sixties Summerhill, a formerly mixed-income neighborhood, was losing almost all of its white and much of its black middle-class residents through a combination of urban renewal projects, including the building of a baseball stadium and freeway construction. City programs designed to alleviate the housing problems failed to reach many residents. This combined with high unemployment and high rents pushed a struggling neighborhood like Summerhill into economic crisis.

On September 6, 1966 Atlanta police chased Harold Prather believing he had stolen a car. The officers shot Prather twice in his mother's yard while she watched and shouted at them to stop.<sup>45</sup> Summerhill residents began gathering at the site and within hours more than a thousand people assembled. The police, black and white ministers, and the mayor attempted to calm the crowd but without success. Mayor Ivan Allen had risen through the white financial and political community by positioning himself as an "enlightened New South business and civic leader." He saw negotiation and moderation as the way to maintain stability in the city without bringing the bad publicity associated with places like Birmingham and Selma.<sup>46</sup> On that day in September, however, he badly miscalculated.

Allen climbed on top of a police car and tried to address the crowd through a megaphone. Rather than listening, the crowd pushed the mayor off the car. As Ethel Mae Mathews, a witness to the scene, put it, "They turned the car bottom upwards, on its BACK, and he fell to the street

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<sup>45</sup> For a more detailed analysis of events see Grady-Willis..

<sup>46</sup> Grady-Willis, 118.

and we ran down there to see what it was all about.”<sup>47</sup> This event was not Mathews’s first encounter with the city’s political forces, and it certainly would not be her last.

In 1965 Atlanta relocated numerous residents of Summerhill, including Mathews, in order to make space for the building of a baseball stadium. Mathews and others were given no notice until the bulldozers arrived in front of their house.<sup>48</sup> This example was part of a pattern experienced by residents of Summerhill and other low-income black neighborhoods. The black elite would take up issues like police harassment, underfunded infrastructure, and lack of services, but they could rarely solve the problem. Simply put, the community power structure rarely worked in the interest of those African-Americans who did not live in poor neighborhoods surrounding the historically black universities. Even observers at the time believed that conditions in poor, black communities needed to be addressed or Atlanta would see riots like those that occurred in Newark, New Jersey and California. But these observers were looking at the wrong neighborhood. Just days before the demonstration in Summerhill a newspaper columnist warned that if something was not done then Vine City could erupt in violence.<sup>49</sup>

Other politicians and ministers attempted to address the crowd, but they had no better impact than Allen. It is tempting to read these dismissals as an outspoken refutation of the racial politics of the day, but that is probably overstating the case. Just as Piven and Cloward observed, the poor people of Summerhill were isolated from governing institutions. They had few options other than a riot to express discontent. Yet, those events in September were part of an opening of political space. In the aftermath of the riot, blame was quickly placed on SNCC because the organization had been organizing residents around housing issues and because activists had been

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<sup>47</sup> Cliff Kuhn and Steve Suits with Vertamae Grosvenor George King, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken? A Personal History of the Civil Rights Movement in Five Southern Communities. Episode 24: The City Too Busy to Hate," 16, 373, 1, Southern Regional Council, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta.

<sup>48</sup> Grady-Willis.

<sup>49</sup> Grady-Willis, 115.

present. One leader in the organization confronted an officer in defense of a child and was arrested for her efforts.<sup>50</sup> Two SNCC activists brought a sound truck, addressed the crowd, and allowed residents to use the system to speak their mind. This incident particularly agitated members of the power structure and was often listed as a primary cause of the riot. In fact, SNCC provided the amplification system, but they did not tell people what to say.

SNCC was formed in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1960 and had its headquarters in Atlanta for almost all of its existence. Although the members of SNCC were college or near college age, the community members the organization most regularly interacted with, particularly in Atlanta, were working-class, black women. SNCC's more grassroots-oriented view of leadership meant an expanded political space for women. Much of the daily political work of the organization was done by working class, black women. The distribution of the organization's newsletter was primarily done by domestic workers who took stacks of issues before getting on the bus to work. In 1966 SNCC launched the Atlanta Project, an effort to organize urban blacks in Atlanta around local issues. Although the effort lasted for only a short time, members of the organization proposed various types of campaigns as early as 1963. Much of the Atlanta Project focused on Vine City, but the group did some work in the southern part of the city as well.<sup>51</sup>

Rev. Roy Williams, vice president of the Summerhill Civic League, succinctly expressed how SNCC's leadership development challenged the community power structure when he said, "Before SNCC arrived we had [local residents] under control, but they whipped them up with hate."<sup>52</sup> The "hate" Williams referred to was black power, an ideological challenge to integration. Most interesting, however, is his blatant statement that the organization had local

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<sup>50</sup> Fay Bellamy Powell, "Playtime Is Over," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in Sncc*, ed. Faith S. Holsaert et al. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 480.

<sup>51</sup> Stephen G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 230.

<sup>52</sup> Wayne Kelley, "Summerhill Was Likely Spot for Trouble When It Came," *Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1966.

residents “under control.” This idea that the residents could be managed if it was not for a bad element was also expressed by Rep. John Hood, a black member of the Georgia House of Representatives. Hood was one who blamed the sound truck for the riot, saying the “whole thing could have been avoided” if that truck had not arrived.<sup>53</sup> The mayor, the police chief, the black newspaper the *Atlanta Daily World*, ministers all saw SNCC as a disruptive force. Of course, they were correct, and in more ways than one.

In the years following 1966, Summerhill became the site of various community organizing efforts outside of the community power structure. Most notably, at least for this study, is the formation of the Atlanta Welfare Rights Organization (AWRO) in 1967. The leadership of the AWRO came from the Summerhill neighborhood, and its president would one day be Ethel Mae Mathews. SNCC played an indirect part in this formation. The organization’s leadership development efforts increased political space for the low-income, black women who would then lead the AWRO. However, structural forces, like the successes of the integration struggle and the general turn towards economic justice by the civil rights movement, were also a factor. The September 1966 riot did not initiate this change. Rather, the riot signified a change in Atlanta politics where poor people could take action for themselves in their own organizations.

#### **2.4 Emmaus House and the AWRO**

In the aftermath of the Summerhill riot four people quietly moved into Peoplestown. A priest, two nuns, and a seminary student moved into a run-down house and began to solicit resources from everyone they knew.<sup>54</sup> As it turned out, they knew quite a few people capable of providing quite a few resources. The white Episcopal priest was Fr. Austin Ford, and he was the prime motivator behind what would eventually become Emmaus House. Ford moved into

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<sup>53</sup> Paul Hemphill, "Pop Bottles, Bricks Fly in Troubled Area Here," *Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1966.

<sup>54</sup> "About", Emmaus House, <http://emmaushouseatlanta.org/portfolio/portfolio2/> (accessed March 13 2014).

Peopletown without a specific program in mind, deciding he we would talk with community residents and ask what was needed. In the fall of 1967 he organized meetings of women on welfare. Ford did not dictate what should be done, he created a space where the women talked with each other and developed their own plans.<sup>55</sup>

It is unknown where the initial idea of a meeting of welfare rights recipients came from. The idea could have come from one of the women Ford talked to, but it probably came from him. It is clear the idea of organizing welfare recipients was something Ford knew about. The National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) launched in 1966 through a nationally coordinated series of local demonstrations. Atlanta was not one of those sites, but by 1967 the NWRO had gained national prominence. As long-time Atlanta activist Muriel Lokey observed, “There was a movement; there was something in the air. Welfare rights was popping up.”<sup>56</sup> Ford knew the idea of welfare rights was gaining traction because he was promoting it. Working with the Georgia Council on Human Relations, he had been traveling throughout Georgia organizing meetings on welfare as well as school desegregation. Ford moved to Peopletown because he was asked by the Episcopal bishop about “starting some work that would serve the inner-city community.”<sup>57</sup> Given his motivation for being in the community, his knowledge of national events, and his activism, it is extremely doubtful that the idea of a welfare rights meeting did not originate with Ford. In organizing, however, ideas seldom remain the property of one individual.

The welfare rights meetings drew 90 people within weeks of its launch. These were more than mere paper memberships as participants paid dues and participated in actions such as confronting a landlord and accompanying other members to the welfare office. The group had

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<sup>55</sup> Kathryn L. Nasstrom, *Everybody's Grandmother and Nobody's Fool: Frances Freeborn Pauley and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 118.

<sup>56</sup> Nasstrom, 119.

<sup>57</sup> LeeAnn Lands, "Austin Ford", The Peopletown Project, <http://thepeopletownproject.com/2011/austin-ford/> (accessed March 2 2014).

also organized a collective distribution of donated food and clothing, established an emergency fund, and were conducting rummage sales to raise money. Ford noted that members “assumed responsibility” for these activities rather than one of the staff. In fundraising communications Ford referred to the welfare rights group as possessing a character separate from his other projects. In October 1967 the group did not have a program and Ford was not devising one for them. Instead, he was building a space for the women to “work and organize in.”<sup>58</sup>

The Atlanta welfare group is evidence of Felicia Kornbluh’s argument that the language of rights used in civil rights was foundational for welfare rights. Through the civil rights movement “rights talk” had become part of the cultural framework for claiming equality in society. It was only a small shift to claim that the right to participate in an affluent society should also be extended to those without enough money. This shift was more than semantic. Participants were not claiming welfare as a right, *per se*. They were claiming inclusion in society as equals with the wealthy. Frances Pauley, a friend of Ford and a long-time Atlanta activist, described the language as providing “an incentive, a feeling that they had a right to be doing what they were doing. To give people a sense of the power that they had when they feel completely powerless.”<sup>59</sup> Claiming rights did not simply justify their activism to the public. It justified it to themselves.

The women of the group took the language of rights seriously, but Ford was not the main reason why. In the fall of 1967 Etta Horne, an organizer from the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), met with the group and invited some of the women to a weeks-long training session. The NWRO national staff had limited contact with the Atlanta group. I can only document two meetings, one in 1967 and again in 1969. However, this training was pivotal to the

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<sup>58</sup> Rev. Austin Ford to Leon Modeste, October 24, 1967, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, 1919-1992, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>59</sup> Nasstrom, 119.

future of the gathering. One of the attendees was Ethel Mae Mathews, who returned from the training session as the de facto spokesperson. As Ford recounted, Mathews and the others came back from the session to find that the chair of the group was not a welfare recipient. Mathews led a coup, demanding that the group be led by a welfare recipient. Although she did not specifically demand she be the leader, she was elected president. The group, now called the Atlanta Welfare Rights Organization (AWRO), also began demonstrations at welfare offices to protest policy and not just cases.<sup>60</sup> The idea of rights, that a group of poor people should be led by poor people, and the strategy of public confrontation all came from the NWRO training. However, the NWRO ended in 1974 while the AWRO continued to operate, with Ms. Mathews as its president, until her death in 2005.

In 1970, through one of Ford's contacts at the Fulton County welfare department, Emmaus House was able to have more than 24,000 notices included in the next month's welfare check to Atlanta recipients with contact information for Emmaus House and more information about their rights if they returned the included postcard. Seven thousand cards returned over the next four months and interest in the group exploded. Muriel Lokey also used the contacts from the mailing to launch the Poverty Rights Office, an advocacy office connected with Emmaus House.<sup>61</sup> Also included in the mailing was a personal biography from Mathews in which she told her story.

Mathews was born in 1926 and grew up in Alabama. She worked, among many other jobs, as a domestic and raised five children. Her wages were not enough to cover expenses, so she began receiving welfare.<sup>62</sup> In the letter she told recipients she first heard about the welfare

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<sup>60</sup> Lands, "Austin Ford".

<sup>61</sup> Emmaus House, *Application for Financial Assistance for the Poverty Rights Office, Grant Application*, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, 1919-1992, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>62</sup> Grady-Willis, 136.

rights group through Ford “who stopped me on the street and explained welfare rights to me.” She also explained she did not immediately join the organization because she feared retaliation from welfare officials.<sup>63</sup> She was quickly able to overcome her fears. By the early 1970s Mathews had built a reputation as a highly principled activist who was not afraid of confrontation. She had testified before the state legislature, run for city council, and was working directly with various state and national organizations. As one organizer put it, “Ms. Mathews was a toughy.”<sup>64</sup>

Mathews maintained her connection with Emmaus House throughout this period. Sandra Robertson, an organizer who moved to Atlanta in the mid-1970s and worked with Mathews for 25 years, described the connection as a partnership. Emmaus House provided a structure and resources, but Mathews knew how to bring people in and keep them involved. As Robertson explains, “The staff had a great deal of influence in how much she could do because they provided her with those resources and, in some ways, a place to develop a base. But they didn’t tell Ms. Mathews what to do. You don’t tell Ms. Mathews what to do. Ms. Mathews had a mind of her own. On occasion she would beat up on the staff. She would tell them about themselves.”<sup>65</sup> Telling the staff “about themselves” involved a tongue lashing usually reserved for recalcitrant elected officials. Ford himself was the target on more than one session. However, Mathews did respect Emmaus House and what it could offer. She was also thoughtful about how she deployed those resources, which included the strategic use of white people. Mathews regularly spoke to white church groups about the realities of living on welfare. Each time she would bring with her one of the Emmaus House white volunteers. David Morath was a young,

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<sup>63</sup> Ethel Mae Mathews, “A FEW WORDS FROM MRS. ETHEL M. MATHEWS: PRESIDENT OF EMMAUS NATIONAL WELFARE RIGHTS ORGANIZATION,” *Poor People’s Newspaper*, print, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, 1919-1992, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>64</sup> Sandra Robertson, interview with author, July 11, 2013

<sup>65</sup> Robertson, interview, July 11, 2013.

conscientious objector working at Emmaus House in 1970. He remembers Mathews inviting him to such talks. "It appears that she likes for someone to go with her when she enters the white middle-class world," he said. "If she brings a white friend with her, she feels it dispels notions of racism."<sup>66</sup>

Robertson believes the space and resources of Emmaus House allowed the AWRO to be sustainable, even as the NWRO collapsed. The relationship between Mathews, the AWRO, and Emmaus House seemed to work. Mathews's reputation extended into political circles and politicians paid attention because she could turn out votes and demonstrators. That ability was directly related to the collapse of the community power structure. Thanks to the voting rights wins of the 1960s the number of black politicians in the city and around the country greatly expanded. This included, in 1973, the election of the first African-American mayor. The expansion of political opportunity meant the expansion of influential positions no longer tied to the traditional political elite. The influence of the black financial elite was also limited. Although Atlanta had a large population of wealthy African-Americans, this group employed only a small number of black people. In 1972 the total was slightly more than 4,200 workers.<sup>67</sup> Most black people were not financially dependent on other black people. In addition, new political possibilities were opening up. In this new political space working-class, black women capable of mobilizing high numbers of people in their neighborhood held influence they never had before. Mathews was able to force a direct line of communication with some politicians.<sup>68</sup> However, her influence waned outside of Atlanta. A statewide strategy was needed.

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<sup>66</sup> LeeAnn Lands, "David Morath Papers", The Peoplestown Project, <http://thepeoplestownproject.com/2011/david-morath-papers/> (accessed March 2 2014).

<sup>67</sup> Mack H. Jones, "Black Political Empowerment in Atlanta: Myth and Reality," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 439, (1978).

<sup>68</sup> Robertson, interview, July 11, 2013.

## 2.5 Going Statewide: The GPRO and the Hunger Coalition

Frances Pauley began her activism during the Great Depression, helping establish services for the poor of DeKalb County. After World War II Pauley became involved in an organization fighting school segregation, a struggle that would consume her professional activities until the early 1970s. After retiring from the federal government as a civil rights specialist, Pauley focused her efforts on building statewide anti-poverty networks. One of these networks, the Georgia Poverty Rights Organization, she personally directed. She served on the board of directors on the other, the Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger or Hunger Coalition, for five years. Both organizations would be central in fighting for poor people's human rights, and they would change how politics was conducted on the state level.

Pauley developed a strong relationship with Lokey and Ford during the early years of her work on school desegregation. She worked with Emmaus House and the Poverty Rights Organization while still employed with the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. After her retirement she came to the conclusion that "radical changes" could only be made if approached statewide. She organized the Georgia Poverty Rights Organization (GPRO) as the state arm of the PRO. In 1975 the GPRO organized its first state meeting with the goal of linking local groups and ending feelings of isolation. In describing the situation she said, "People knew what their little community was, but they didn't see the picture as a whole. By coming together, they could see, and share with each other, that they weren't the only ones that had this kind of problem." She called this process getting "the only ones together."<sup>69</sup> Creating a space where formerly isolated individuals and groups could meet and collaborate became an important tactic for anti-poverty organizing. It also became a source of contention as racial politics changed anti-poverty activism.

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<sup>69</sup> Nasstrom, 123.

The Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger formed in 1974 after a national anti-hunger conference held in North Carolina. The conference had a specific focus on food stamps because it was perceived as “the only state or federal program which has the potential of reaching the majority of hungry people in need.” A core group of Georgia activists, Pauley among them, met and organized a state gathering, the Citizen’s Conference on Hunger, for the following year. That state conference led to the formation of the Hunger Coalition.<sup>70</sup>

The Hunger Coalition was from its inception an advocacy organization, one working within the framework of the War on Poverty. Activists believed that programs like food stamps could reduce poverty, but they also believed that those programs would not be effective unless poor people were involved. All of the War on Poverty programs were under constant threat of being cut back or eliminated by both liberals and conservatives. In 1971 Mathews expressed how either end of the political spectrum could be a friend or enemy when she noted that during the governorship of Lester Maddox, an arch conservative and segregationist, welfare payments were not reduced. However, early in Jimmy Carter’s term the AWRO was picketing the mansion against proposed cuts. “Now we have a liberal governor,” she said, “and we have a liberal welfare director and they cut our checks.”<sup>71</sup> In 1973 a series of poor people’s marches were organized around the country, beginning on the anniversary of Martin Luther King’s assassination, in protest against state and federal cuts to War on Poverty programs.<sup>72</sup> Even when cuts were not proposed, states attempted to save money by not completely implementing programs. The Hunger Coalition’s first campaign came about because although food stamps

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<sup>70</sup> Fall 1975, Bread’n Better, print, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, 1919-1992, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>71</sup> December 2, 1971, “50 Picket for Welfare Yule Bonus,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, newspaper article, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, 1919-1992, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>72</sup> April 1973, “Poor People March For Their Rights,” *Poor People’s Newspaper*, Vol. III, No. 5, print, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, 1919-1992, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

were available to poor people across Georgia, many did not know about them and so never applied. The organization's campaign goal was more about making sure the poor knew about existing resources rather than pushing for something new.

Many advocates saw poor people as a natural constituency in the fight to defend programs. Others, however, thought services should be run by professionals and the poor should simply receive aid. This tension was most apparent in the operations of the Economic Opportunity Administration (EOA), an agency of the War on Poverty launched in 1964 through the Economic Opportunity Act. The act created a host of programs including job training, health services, child care, and legal aid. Most importantly, the law allowed the poor, at least on paper, a voice in decision making through the Economic Opportunity Administration. Through programs like Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), poor people could be part of the organizing of other poor people. This hope, however, did not manifest in Atlanta. Poor people were hired through the EOA, but they usually served in lower paid positions with little decision-making power. The more influential positions in the EOA were usually occupied by middle-class, college-educated people, many not too far removed from the university.<sup>73</sup> One of those people was Sandra Robertson, who was forced to learn how to organize her own staff.

Robertson moved to Atlanta from Indiana and began working for the Atlanta EOA in 1974. She had some organizing experience, but the other women on staff were not impressed with the energetic twenty-something. Robertson was hired as a lead community organizer in the Summerhill neighborhood supervising two older, black women— Ms. Ida Mae Wright and Ms.

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<sup>73</sup> Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 257-259.

Brenson<sup>74</sup>—who were from Atlanta. They considered her a “smart aleck college student” who did not know “a poot” about organizing. To be fair, Robertson believes “all of those things were probably true.”<sup>75</sup> Unlike some, however, she was willing to learn from these women.

The few years Robertson spent at the EOA taught her lessons in organizing she would use for the rest of her life. She quickly realized how skilled Wright and Brenson were. The women would not teach her, however, unless Robertson could convince them she was worth the effort. Both of the women considered Robertson a “foreigner” who did not know the realities of Atlanta or the people she was supposed to organize. She decided the best way to earn trust was to exchange stories with the women. Robertson spent time telling Wright and Benson about who she was, her family, and her life experience. Most importantly, she listened when the women told her their stories and learned her first lesson in organizing: “You don’t come in telling us nothing. Don’t tell us nothing cuz we already know what we need to know. What you do when you come in is you ask us for information that you don’t know and you have no clue about.”<sup>76</sup> Just a few years later this lesson would help her secure a job with the Hunger Coalition.

In the years after its founding the Hunger Coalition met with some success in its food stamps campaign even as it had trouble retaining executive directors. The first resigned within months of the organization’s birth, another requested a demotion to field organizer. Between 1974 and 1979 the Hunger Coalition had two different directors and two years without any director. Although the board consisted of movers and shakers in Atlanta’s labor, faith, and secular activist community, the organization was teetering on the edge of collapse. A new direction was necessary, and some of the board members were keen on making that change

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<sup>74</sup> Despite extensive research I was unable to find any further information about Brenson or Wright. Given their residence in Summerhill it is probable, even likely, they were involved in organizing projects with Mathews. However, I could not find documentation verifying such activity.

<sup>75</sup> Robertson, interview, July 11, 2013.

<sup>76</sup> Robertson, interview, July 11, 2013.

happen.

Robertson was not looking for a job when the directorship of the Hunger Coalition opened. She was working at a parent involvement coalition and had just been promoted. A friend encouraged her to apply, so she did but she did not expect much. Instead, she was called in for an interview by members of the board, one of whom was Mathews. She asked Robertson typical questions about experience, but at the end of the interview she asked how Robertson would go about transforming the Hunger Coalition. Specifically, she wanted to know Robertson's thoughts on how the organization should serve poor people. In an answer that would make Brenson and Wright proud, Robertson said that she would review who was on the board. "Whoever you want to organize," she said, "they need to be calling the shots. They need to have some input on how the organization would be." Robertson asked who was on the board and learned that, with two exceptions, the entire board was white and middle class. She suggested the organization recruit the people they want to organize to the board. After some questions about fundraising, the interview ended, and Robertson left sure she would never hear from them. Two weeks later she was offered the job.<sup>77</sup>

Robertson made good on her interview answer. After being hired she told the board that "middle-class, white people...were going to have to share the power." Her announcement upset many, possibly including Pauley. Pauley served on the board from 1974 to 1979 but either resigned before or just after Robertson was hired.<sup>78</sup> It is possible that Pauley, a long-time activist against racism, understood Robertson's plan and approved. A tension between Pauley and Robertson did develop, but its source was most likely the change in the character of an event close to Pauley's heart rather than the racial makeup of the Hunger Coalition board. In 1980

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<sup>77</sup> Sandra Robertson, interview by author, Atlanta, GA, July 18, 2013.

<sup>78</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

Christians Against Hunger in Georgia (CAHIG), with Pauley serving as chair of the board, convened Poor People’s Day at the Capitol. The week-long event brought in people from across the state to lobby their representatives, network with each other, hear speakers, and attend workshops on various topics. Legislators were asked to speak to the group about the political process. CAHIG furnished lunch while Georgia Legal Services offset transportation costs for participants. Pauley, a central organizer of the event, was quite pleased with “the experiment” and called it a success.<sup>79</sup>

By the end of the 1970s there were a number of statewide organizations in Georgia, but none had the capacity to organize Poor People’s Day on its own. Pauley’s contacts combined with the resources of organizations like the Georgia Client’s Council and Georgia Legal Services created a whole greater than what any single organization could achieve on its own. Yet, the event also is evidence of lowered expectations. Pauley believed the event was a success because it brought together a lot of people who received information and “to some extent were made to feel welcome at the capitol.”<sup>80</sup> Getting information to people, regardless of how it was used, and feeling welcome in a place supposedly open to all citizens was considered a win. In 1966 Summerhill demonstrators shouted down the mayor with demands for freedom and black power. In 1980 Poor People’s Day organizers were settling for feeling welcome.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Historians Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper argue in a recent comparative work that empires do not collapse but instead fragment.<sup>81</sup> I believe the same can be said of social movements. Using Tarrow’s three properties of a social movement—mounting collective

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<sup>79</sup> Nasstrom, 125.

<sup>80</sup> Nasstrom, 125.

<sup>81</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

challenges; drawing on social networks, common purposes, and cultural frameworks; and building solidarity through connective structures and collective identities to sustain collective action—as a measure suggests that the narrative of decline associated with the seventies is unjustified. Atlanta saw an expansion of political actors, namely working-class black women. People like Ethel Mae Mathews were political players because of the success and expansion of the civil rights movement. That Sandra Robertson, a black woman barely in her 30s, would be tapped to lead a statewide organization and charged with transforming its racial and class composition is also evidence that hopes were still high for significant social change even late into the decade of the seventies. However, as the limited idea of Poor People’s Day suggests, the social movement had reached its climax. The continuing effort by Georgia organizations in the 1970s foreshadowed the fragmentation to come. The 1980s became a decade of isolation as previously robust organizations disappeared and others scaled back their vision. The continued strategy of statewide networks and gatherings was born in this context.

Following Poor People’s Day, Pauley and others decided to reduce the gathering to one day, but they were committed to making it an annual event. Pauley also believed the GPRO would be the principal organizer, but that was quickly contested. Robertson and the Hunger Coalition challenged the GPRO for the right to coordinate Poor People’s Day. They argued that an event about poor people should be organized primarily by poor people. This challenge would create significant tension between Robertson and Pauley, but it would also allow the Hunger Coalition and Poor People’s Day to continue to make an impact on state and city politics even as the social movement fragmented and activists were called upon to defend victories won only a few years before.

### 3 The Eighties

#### 3.1 The Birth of Poor People's Day

Although Pauley was a lead organizer of Poor People's Day at the Capitol, the event was not her idea. In the mid-seventies she was one of the founders of Christians Against Hunger in Georgia (CAHG), a coalition of people of faith initially called together by a group of ministers interested in realizing "the effectiveness of the voices that were not from the customary paid lobbyists who frequented the halls." CAHG formed to get church members, religious leaders, and poor people active in state policy debates. Pauley served as the first chair of the board. In 1979, Linda Berry became the second executive director, and she came up with Poor People's Day.<sup>82</sup>

Berry's vision for Poor People's Day was a one-week event during the 1980 legislative session attended by people from around the state who would visit their representatives. The week consisted of trainings, lobbying, and a luncheon event where invited legislators spoke to attendees. This structure was repeated in 1981 since, in Pauley's words, "The various groups participating truly felt that it was possible for people to see that no matter what their economic status, or the color of their skin, they had power." Those various groups included the Georgia Housing Coalition, Metropolitan Christian Council, the GPRO, the Georgia Clients Council, Georgia Legal Services, the Hunger Coalition, and many other smaller organizations.<sup>83</sup> These organizations clearly saw an advantage in working together and in bringing people to the capitol to meet with the legislature. However, some participants were not entirely happy with the process. Sandra Robertson liked the idea of the event, but she had a different vision of how it

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<sup>82</sup> Frances Pauley, "Bits of Remembrances of the History of Poor People's Day at the Georgia Legislature," February 1990, Article, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, 1919-1992, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>83</sup> Pauley, "Bits of Remembrances of the History of Poor People's Day at the Georgia Legislature."

could be implemented. She was not alone.

### **3.2 Poor People's Day in Transition**

Poor People's Day in 1980 attracted around 100 people. Robertson's impression was that "a bunch of progressive, white women" were the leaders of the event and that poor people were there to "sort of follow their path."<sup>84</sup> She believed the event could be more than a gathering of middle-class people listening to politicians while poor people sat around. The following year the Hunger Coalition fought to be the anchor organization of the event.

Planning for Poor People's Day was a process of meetings and collective decisions among those organizations involved in providing resources. During those meetings the Hunger Coalition argued that it should "take the lead" because of its base, albeit a small one, of poor people.<sup>85</sup> The details of these meetings have faded from memory, but some conclusions can be drawn from the results of the process. It is true that none of the other statewide organizations involved could be said to have had a substantial base among low-income black people so even the Hunger Coalition's relatively small numbers would have a great impact on meetings. In addition, the membership of the Hunger Coalition was involved in the debate. Robertson consistently uses "we" in her recollections, but, more importantly, the Hunger Coalition was involved in a similar political shift of its own being pushed by people like Mathews. While Robertson's memory could inflate the number of poor people involved in this push, and it is likely she was the main force behind a new Poor People's Day, it is unlikely she was alone in her efforts. In addition, bringing poor people directly into processes that impact their lives is a strategy Robertson learned at the EOA and used throughout her organizing career. By 1980 Pauley had established herself as an activist against racism, and Robertson respected her and her

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<sup>84</sup> Sandra Robertson, interview by author, Atlanta, GA, July 18, 2013.

<sup>85</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

work. Having more people involved would not be something Berry, Pauley, or others would oppose as a concept, but the Hunger Coalition was demanding more. The organization wanted ownership of a project that had originated with others. More than just a personal issue, control of the event also meant, in a new era of organizational fundraising, access to much-needed financial support.

Robertson does believe the campaign for Poor People's Day strained her relationship with Pauley, at least to some degree: "I can only imagine, but I think Frances Pauley got peeved that it got out of their hands. And there was a little tension, not terribly so, but there was a little tension." Robertson points out that some groups dropped out of the planning process after the Hunger Coalition took over. She admits she did not discuss much of her thinking with the other organizations, an understandable mistake given the pressures she was under to keep the Hunger Coalition afloat. Pauley does not address this transition in oral histories or in her personal papers. Whether she and others were upset by the criticism from a young upstart from out of town is not known, but Robertson did get the impression something was amiss in the relationship. She says, "I do think that there was an edge because they hadn't intended for any group to rise up and want to take the leadership of Poor People's Day, and that happened. It was sort of like, that wasn't supposed to happen. That was the nature of the tension. I still maintained a relationship with them, but I think they were always leery." While all parties agreed on the issues being raised at Poor People's Day, like welfare and food stamps, they disagreed on how to discuss those issues and how to develop solutions. Robertson wanted a Poor People's Day "really led by poor people" with an agenda "inspired by their life struggles." The 1980 and 1981 events were ones where professional advocates and politicians discussed what poor people needed and the best method of delivering services. Moreover, Robertson's impression of the working relationship

between blacks and progressive whites at that time was one of ultimate subservience to the white vision of work. Disagreements would not be “pushed,” meaning that differences of opinion could and did come up but eventually blacks would acquiesce.<sup>86</sup> The Hunger Coalition wanted poor people directly involved in the process, it was willing to push, and it was not going to acquiesce. While the other organizations were not opposed to the idea, and they did eventually agree to change the process, they were unaccustomed to losing such debates with poor black people.

The change in organizational leadership did stress relationships but not permanently. In 1985 Pauley, at almost 80 years old, was active at that year’s Poor People’s Day event and in the evaluation.<sup>87</sup> Her participation in the evaluation and not just the event itself suggests a high degree of involvement, or at least more than one would expect from someone who still harbored a grudge against the organizers. More important than agendas, at least regarding organizational tensions, was money. Pauley described the early eighties as “stressful times” for many organizations. Berry left CAHG, and Georgia Legal Services was unable to help with transportation due to financial cutbacks and restrictions.<sup>88</sup> Funding became a concern for almost all groups, increasing competition and creating new sources of tension.

### **3.3 Funding, Competition and Turf**

During her interview for the executive director position, Robertson was asked about her ability to raise money, but she did not find out the true situation of the Hunger Coalition until after she accepted the job. The organization was almost completely broke and did not have the funds to pay her salary. Rather than leaving, Robertson stayed on despite not getting paid for the first six months. She was able to keep the office open by soliciting donations from churches,

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<sup>86</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

<sup>87</sup> Betsey Stone, Public Assistance Coalition, February 28, 1985, *Participants in Evaluation for Poor People's Day*, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, 1919-1992, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>88</sup> Pauley, "Bits of Remembrances of the History of Poor People's Day at the Georgia Legislature."

unions, and individuals, but it was only when she received her first grant, \$10,000 from the progressive, Georgia-based Sapelo Foundation, that she was able to get paid. Although she describes the period as “a little bit rough,” Robertson does credit the experience for quickly teaching her how to raise money as well as how to manage it. She found out that 80 percent of the Hunger Coalition’s budget came from federal grants, and all of that money was spent before she was hired. This meant she was looking at months without revenue. The experience taught her the need to diversify the organization’s funding base. However, that meant asking for money from some of the same sources as other organizations.

The Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger was one of a number of state, anti-hunger coalitions around the South established in the seventies. Each coalition was funded primarily through federal grants connected with the War on Poverty, mainly through the EOA. In Georgia this meant the Hunger Coalition was not competing for funds with other groups. The process of de-funding the EOA began during the Nixon administration, but gained momentum in the eighties as Reagan pushed more responsibility for welfare onto the states. Robertson became director of the Hunger Coalition before the Reagan-era cuts, but the atmosphere was already changing. As federal money receded, groups began competing for foundation grants from institutions like The Sapelo Foundation and the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta.

The proliferation of organizations during the seventies did not translate into a growth of foundations. Foundation money did not replace government grants. In the early eighties this meant an atmosphere where each group claimed its own turf as unique projects were in a better position to be funded. In a shrinking pool of grant dollars, more than one organization doing the same thing in the same place meant all organizations would receive less money. Although Robertson did not wish to attack other organizations, she was forced to compete for limited funds

if the Hunger Coalition was to survive. “I didn’t want to fight, I wanted us to collaborate,” she says in describing this dilemma, “but we needed and deserved resources to operate just like they did. I wasn’t just gonna not have good money.” Robertson stepped on toes when the Hunger Coalition fought to be the lead on Poor People’s Day after 1981, but the fact that an additional organization was asking foundations for a share of limited funds meant relationships were strained before the first planning meeting took place.<sup>89</sup>

Given this situation, it is a wonder the transition of Poor People’s Day to the Hunger Coalition did not shatter relationships. Many factors may have prevented this from happening. First must be considered Robertson’s personal commitment, and the Hunger Coalition’s organizational dedication, to preserving relationships. There is also the possibility that the leaders of other organizations were not that upset by the change in Poor People’s Day. By the end of the seventies the idea that poor people should be in control of projects affecting poor people had been circulating in activist circles for some time. Furthermore, the Hunger Coalition did have a base ready and willing to mobilize. The aim of Poor People’s Day was to bring poor people to the Capitol, and the Hunger Coalition was doing that better than other organizations. Also, the Hunger Coalition campaign at that time was focused on spreading information about WIC, a program providing food to low-income families, to rural counties. This was not something other groups were doing. Even in a climate of increased funding competition, the Hunger Coalition activities were different enough from other groups to mitigate any sense of threat. Finally, during the eighties many organizations simply closed due to activist burnout, decreased funding, and other reasons. The reduced pool of groups seeking grant dollars would, for a time, ease competition. Any one of these factors, or ones not considered, may have prevented the permanent destruction of relationships. More likely, all of them played a role. For

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<sup>89</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

whatever reason, the relationships were maintained and Poor People's Day remained anchored by the Hunger Coalition. It is possible that without the transition the event would not have lasted as long as it has.

### **3.4 The New Poor People's Day**

If the criterion to gauge the success of the transfer of Poor People's Day is attendance, then it must be considered successful. Attendance at the first two events was between 75 and 100 people with anywhere from 10 to 20 of those being legislators. After the Hunger Coalition took the lead attendance grew, although it is difficult to determine by exactly how much. Robertson remembers attendance as regularly topping 300 and peaking at 600.<sup>90</sup> The event was rarely reported on in Atlanta papers, but this number is consistent with other memories of Poor People's Day. For example, the PRO listed more than 200 attendees at a 1987 Poor People's Day march on the Capitol calling for increased AFDC benefits.<sup>91</sup> One would expect the first two years of an annual event to have lower turnout than the following years, and this could explain some of the increase. However, throughout the eighties statewide organizations closed and many veteran activists retreated from political life. This would, of course, negatively impact turnout capacity. In addition, funding problems, as exemplified by Pauley's recollections about the troubles with CAHG and Georgia Legal Services, would also limit outreach. Yet, attendance grew. It grew because, with the new vision, Poor People's Day began reaching out to more poor people in more effective ways.

Berry's and Pauley's vision for Poor People's Day was focused on the legislative process. This focus was directly related to the function of the GPRO, educating people about government

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<sup>90</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

<sup>91</sup> March 1987, "Poor People's Day at the Capitol: A Big Success," Poor People's Newspaper, Vol XVII, No 3, print, Atlanta History Center, Muriel Lokey papers, mss 967, Box 1, Folder 7, Newsletter, 1987-1993.

and lobbying politicians.<sup>92</sup> The new vision for Poor People's Day included legislation, but this took a backseat to the main goal of building a base of poor people. Robertson explains, "It was an organizing tool. It was an organizing tool, and it was a way in which to galvanize our statewide network annually. To have them come to an event, bring their base, let their base actually articulate and engage with the political structure and political leaders, and expose them to the political process."<sup>93</sup> On its face these goals for the event do not seem to differ greatly from previous years. The difference lies in the emphasis. Before the Hunger Coalition took the lead the main aim was to impact the legislative process and bring poor people to the Capitol to meet with politicians helped achieve that end. Pauley described the GPRO's aim as bringing people to the General Assembly because "we wanted them to come and help us" work on legislation.<sup>94</sup> Pauley and others wanted to pass legislation that would help, or stop cuts that would hurt, poor people. Their main priority were tangible wins. Of course, Robertson and other organizers wanted to win, but their primary reason for taking action was to alter how poor people related to those in positions of power. Many poor people did not see themselves as equal to legislators or thought their experiences did not mean much.<sup>95</sup> Talking with elected officials could influence legislation, but the main purpose was to create opportunities for poor people to realize their own capacity to make change happen.

As the eighties continued the Hunger Coalition became more than just the lead coordinating organization for Poor People's Day, it became the anchor. Travel and lodging expenses previously covered by Georgia Legal Services were taken care of by the Hunger Coalition. The increase in poor people attending the event also meant an increase in costs as few

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<sup>92</sup> Nasstrom, 124.

<sup>93</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

<sup>94</sup> Nasstrom, 124.

<sup>95</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

could pay for a hotel, gas, or vehicle rental. However, this problem became an organizing tool. In the months before the event, people in various parts of the state would have fundraisers to cover some of the costs. In some cities, like Augusta and Soperton, members would also have local meetings with their state representatives.<sup>96</sup> This process, known as an accountability session, became a favored tactic of Poor People's Day.

An accountability session is a planned event in which a group attempts to question and/or force commitments from a decision maker. According to the Midwest Academy, a training center for progressive organizers, these sessions can, among other things, "show a target that there is a large base of people who care what he/she does on this issue."<sup>97</sup> Robertson learned this tactic while working for the EOA. At that time she coordinated up to 200 people in public forums on everything from garbage pickup to the lack of recreational facilities in poor neighborhoods, a number she considered "pretty phenomenal" even back then. However, an accountability session is more than simply a lot of people at an event. It is about forcing decision makers to be specific about their position or commitment. Attendees went through a political education process that honed their questions. They learned how the target decision maker could and could not meet their demands. In this way, according to Robertson, community members did not allow a politician to avoid accountability by using bureaucratic jargon. Robertson, as the organizer, provided technical help, and the attendees used that information to push their demands.<sup>98</sup>

Pulling together an accountability session is quite difficult. The easiest way for a politician to avoid embarrassment is to not show up. Simply having a lot of people in attendance

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<sup>96</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

<sup>97</sup> Midwest Academy, "Sample Agenda: Organizing for Social Change", Midwest Academy, <http://www.midwestacademy.com/sample-agenda-organizing-social-change/#> (accessed April 28 2014).

<sup>98</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

does not always guarantee the decision maker's attendance. The Hunger Coalition adapted the tactic by marching on politicians, particularly state legislators. Just as the AWRO members marched on welfare offices, Poor People's Day attendees marched on state offices in order to force an unwilling representative to meet with them or, more often, to pressure a legislator to vote a certain way. This became a necessary adaptation as the eighties progressed and the political environment grew more conservative.

### **3.5 The Movement Ebbs, The New Political Atmosphere**

Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency is sometimes regarded as a cause rather than a symptom. That is, his presidency is viewed as having ended social movements instead of signifying these movements' end. In January 1981, after he took office, Mathews summarized her view of the future when she wrote, "I can tell you this, knowing Reagan: We have a big fight on our hands."<sup>99</sup> However, Mathews also wrote about a "pervasive feeling of uneasiness and uncertainty" that was "dominating the national consciousness." Reagan did not cause these feelings. They were, in her analysis, linked to the "very serious and substantial economic repercussions" the country was facing. Looking forward from 1981, Mathews saw a need for "analyzing and redefining our nation's role in a changing world."<sup>100</sup> Reagan, as the face of a new conservatism, was diametrically opposed to the policy aims and strategies of the welfare rights movement. His election was, without a doubt, a setback for welfare rights, but it was not the end of the movement. The national movement was already ending, and that is why so many conservative policies were able to be implemented.

Historian Stephen Tuck's interpretation of the seventies is that it was a "high-water mark

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<sup>99</sup> Ethel Mae Mathews, January 1981, Poor People's Newspaper, Vol. X, No. 12, print, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, 1919-1992, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>100</sup> Ethel Mae Mathews, April 1981, Poor People's Newspaper, Vol. XI, No. 4, print, Frances Freeborn Pauley Papers, 1919-1992, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

of the black liberation movement.” He depicts the decade as a time where a few national organizations were eclipsed by many local struggles all “seeking to expand rights further.” The expansion of demands, rather than the defense of those already won, is one mechanism Tuck uses to differentiate his interpretation from the standard narrative of the seventies as a time of defeat.<sup>101</sup> Tuck’s interpretation does not mean the social movement lasted indefinitely. Rather, it pushes the timeline back. Furthermore, the proliferation of local struggles does not mean an automatic proliferation of social networks or connections or a sense of common purpose. As Tarrow points out, social networks and connective structures are vital to the existence of a social movement because they are used to build solidarity and collective identity.<sup>102</sup> The rapid expansion of local struggles, at least in Georgia, put a strain on existing networks and structures unable to connect with new activism. The result was a growing sense of isolation as individuals and even groups not part of the solidarity-building activities. When Pauley talked about finding “the only ones,” those who felt they were politically alone in their outlook and work, she was talking about finding those who were not being served by the social networks and connective structures of the social movement. In the seventies various statewide organizations existed and were able to provide the necessary links. The creation of statewide events, such as Poor People’s Day, were, in part, attempts to address isolation. The eighties were, however, a different story. By the end of the eighties the Hunger Coalition was the only statewide grassroots organization with a low-income base left operating. Events like Poor People’s Day were originally envisioned as a way to expand connective structures and social networks of the social movement. By the time it was implemented, however, it was needed to create new structures and networks in the movement’s absence.

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<sup>101</sup> Tuck, “We Are Taking up Where the Movement of the 1960s Left Off: The Proliferation and Power of African American Protest During the 1970s,” 641.

<sup>102</sup> Tarrow, 17.

In the early and mid-seventies Atlanta was host to a wide assortment of black organizations competing for working-class support. New communist organizations challenged the political and economic analysis of old-guard civil rights groups regarding everything from trash pickup to police brutality.<sup>103</sup> Throughout this period most of the welfare-rights activists remained their own political bloc, willing to work with most groups but not willing to become an appendage to any. Yet, they were part of the political mix of the city. Mathews, for example, routinely included the black power phrase “power to the people” in her monthly columns for the Emmaus House newsletter. Jerome Scott, a radical organizer and political educator who has lived in Atlanta since the late seventies, explains Mathews’s use of the phrase: “When Ethel Mae Mathews said, ‘Power to the people’ she meant economic power. She meant Head Start for everyone. She meant welfare should be expanded to include more and more people.” Mathews was picking up the political analysis around her and adapting it to her situation. Although her definition of black power may or may not have been similar to others, what could and did tie the various organizations together was the sense that rights could be expanded. Scott categorizes this period in Atlanta as one where various ideological currents were mixing together within the social movement in an attempt to expand economic security. Anti-poverty activists were working to broaden welfare programs as part of an expansion of the New Deal.<sup>104</sup>

By the mid-seventies the ideological competition had waned. The first Poor People’s Day was not held in an atmosphere that sought expansion of rights. The modest goals for success are an example of a change towards the defensive. Political scientist Todd Shaw, in studying welfare rights activism from the sixties through the nineties, charts this national change in political ambiance. He describes why and how activists maintained “an infrastructure for opposition” as

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<sup>103</sup> For deeper analysis on the ideological competition within the city see Daniel Horowitz, "Same, Same But Different: An Atlanta Case Study in Defining a Movement" (possession of the author, 2012).

<sup>104</sup> Jerome Scott, interview by author, Atlanta, GA, July 20 2013.

the movement ended. This infrastructure, usually in the form of organizations, was then “able to perpetuate and transmit activist networks, protest repertoires, and collective identities.”<sup>105</sup>

Tarrow identifies each of these mechanisms as necessary to the existence of a social movement. During a social movement, activists, according to Shaw, engage in disruptive politics. This is the power to invoke substantive reforms and social change by fundamentally challenging a political system. After a social movement, activists engage in diversionary politics because they are unable to push for radical changes. Diversionary politics, also known as “place-holder politics,” are actions that lay the groundwork for more effective future insurgency, cushion the marginalized against the full brunt of the counter-attack, and to create a diversion that buys more time.<sup>106</sup>

Shaw’s analysis takes the inevitable rise of a social movement for granted. He is also too optimistic about an organization’s capacity to build collective identities, as the isolation in Georgia in the late seventies and eighties shows. Even so, his analysis of those strategies and techniques used by movement veterans nationally translates well to Georgia. It explains why statewide events like Poor People’s Day became popular even as the form and content of the event changed. In fact, his dichotomy of disruptive vs. diversionary politics helps explain why the change in form was a necessary one that may have been a contributing factor to the event’s, and the Hunger Coalition’s, longevity. This is easier to see if we interpret disruptive politics as primarily offensive and focused pushing an agenda and diversionary as mainly defensive and dedicated to reducing harm and buying time. The attention to maintaining and rebuilding social networks and connective structures through various strategies meant that as the social movement fragmented nationally the Hunger Coalition was able to maintain activity, albeit at a much

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<sup>105</sup> Todd C. Shaw, ““We Refused to Lay Down Our Spears”: The Persistence of Welfare Rights Activism, 1966-1996,” in *Black Political Organizations in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, ed. Ollie A. Johnson and Karin L. Stanford (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 172-173.

<sup>106</sup> Shaw, 176.

intensity, at the state level. The politics of this activity changed, according to Shaw's analysis, from disruptive to diversionary if one views actions within the larger strategic aims of the activists. There was a continuation of militant activity. In fact, some of the actions during the eighties were quite radical in nature in that they forced decision makers to confront those being affected by policy changes. However, the activity was diversionary, not disruptive, because the focus was on defending previously won victories and not on expansion. Given the change in the political climate, this was most probably a necessary change. The social movement was over.

The Hunger Coalition was able to survive because it focused on state social networks and connective structures. Shaw uses Tarrow's properties for social movement, but he does not identify protest movement as a separate point on a movement spectrum. There is no reason he should as his larger aim is to discuss the political framework the activists were working in during and after the social movement. But I do believe there is a danger in focusing too heavily on goals, and the disruptive versus diversionary framework can lead down that path. I take Shaw to be analyzing *how* networks and connective structures were used rather than why or to what end. This focuses more on strategic orientation such as how the Hunger Coalition adapted to the changing political situation in ways that allowed it to survive when other groups did not.

### **3.6 The Networks Beat Workfare**

The social movement was over by the eighties, but the struggle continued. It also changed. By the end of the eighties the fight for welfare rights became a fight against poverty in which welfare was one component. Throughout the decade activists were on the defensive, attempting to preserve previous victories or prevent new harm. Yet there was some success at the state level. When the Reagan administration pushed welfare policy back to the states, it created an opportunity for those who maintained networks or who could build new ones. In 1984, after

16 years, the state of Georgia passed a law allowing two parents in a home to receive welfare if either or both were to become eligible.<sup>107</sup> Previous policy, dating back to Depression-era relief, denied welfare to families with an able-bodied man in the home. That same year the Hunger Coalition began a new campaign against an old idea: workfare.

In 1969 President Nixon popularized the term “workfare” as an opposite of welfare. Espousing the “dignity of work” as a means of countering “the route of the permanent handout,” Nixon proposed reducing the welfare rolls by pushing recipients into the job market, even if jobs were not available.<sup>108</sup> In fact, workfare was not able to move recipients into the workforce, but it did provide political cover for those who opposed welfare. Historian Rickie Solinger documents the failure of government at various levels to reduce welfare rolls through workfare. As the social movement was able to reach and fight for poor people eligible but previously denied welfare, the rolls increased. In this climate the opponents of welfare were able to step in and claim the program was becoming a crisis.<sup>109</sup> Ironically a crisis is exactly what Piven and Cloward wanted when they proposed their strategy back in 1966.<sup>110</sup> More poor people receiving the benefits they were legally entitled to did not actually create a financial crisis, but opponents were able to use the increased roll numbers, along with the existence of an alternative like workfare, to manufacture one in the eighties. In this “crisis,” Reagan was able to attack the program. He, in addition to reducing the budget levels for many welfare programs, issued block grants to the states. Each state then had federal help in funding programs while also maintaining flexibility in

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<sup>107</sup> Ethel Mae Mathews, July 1984, Poor People’s Newspaper, Vol XIV, No 7, print, Atlanta History Center, Muriel Lokey papers, mss 967, Box 1, Folder 6, Newsletter, 1982-1986.

<sup>108</sup> Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Domestic Programs", The American Presidency Project, (accessed April 25 2014).

<sup>109</sup> Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 150.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Cloward and Frances Piven, "The Weight of the Poor: A Strategy to End Poverty," *The Nation*, Vol., No. May 2, 1966.

how it administered the program. In practice this meant a renewed effort to reduce welfare rolls. This is how the concept of workfare was able to make a return in the eighties.

The Georgia campaign against workfare was successful, in part, because of the maintenance of social networks and connections among anti-poverty activists. But its success was also due to the incompetence of local officials in implementing the program. According to Robertson, workfare in the state actually meant recipients working for public agencies doing “menial jobs” and not receiving the benefits or training promised. In North Georgia this was taken to an extreme when one welfare office director made recipients clean her house. The Hunger Coalition organized a group of these women to come to a press conference organized during Poor People’s Day. The director was fired, but retaliation against the women, all white, was swift. Each received visits from the sheriff, harassing calls, and not-so-veiled threats that continued activism would result in child services taking their children away.<sup>111</sup> This story shows that anti-poverty activists, particularly those associated with the Hunger Coalition, consistently sought to expand their network even in the face of state harassment. By 1984, around the time this story took place, the organization had a majority black board of directors as well as a majority black constituency. Yet, the organization was consciously conducting outreach among white welfare recipients. Despite this specific effort being stopped, it does indicate that the overwhelmingly black organization was not exclusively black. Those women in North Georgia were contacted through neighborhood canvas in which organizers knocked on doors. The organization was clearly committed to reaching poor people throughout the state. Being committed to involving poor people in the political process did not end at the color line. The Hunger Coalition placed priority on expanding larger networks of poor people and did it through

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<sup>111</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013. Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

a political analysis of their class situation that used race to include more people rather than exclude. This was not enough to counter the state's attacks in North Georgia, but it was enough to defeat workfare.

In 1983 a workfare pilot program was introduced in ten Georgia counties. Of the more than 200,000 recipients in the state, 120 were enrolled in the program. Six of those received jobs. Activists attacked workfare as inefficient and ineffective since it cost more to implement the program than to send direct payments and that it did not prepare recipients for employment.<sup>112</sup> By the end of 1985 two of the county programs were closed and the other eight were scheduled to be shut down by the end of 1986. Because the program was introduced at the state level, activists were able to effectively prevent its full implementation. The effort to introduce workfare in Georgia had been defeated, but not permanently.

The struggle against workfare also signified a change in activist views on poverty. The Emmaus House newsletter, *Poor People's Newspaper*, ran a headline with the title, "Poor People in Georgia Fight Workfare."<sup>113</sup> This title is indicative of a wider view of poverty, one that included welfare but also the new issue of homelessness. The growth of homelessness changed activist understanding of what an anti-poverty campaign should involve. During the eighties homeless rates tripled, meaning that by 1989 as many as 600,000 people were experiencing homelessness sometime during the year.<sup>114</sup> The battle against workfare was no longer simply a welfare rights issue, as it was in 1969, but a poverty issue. This understanding formed the basis for a fortuitous meeting in 1989, when Jerome Scott met Robertson for the second time at a

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<sup>112</sup> Celia W. Dugger, "Workfare System Trainees Cannot Find Employment," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 25 1983.

<sup>113</sup> "Poor People in Georgia Fight Workfare," *Poor People's Newspaper*, Vol XVI, No 1, print, Atlanta History Center, Muriel Lokey papers, mss 967, Box 1, Folder 7, Newsletter, 1987-1993.

<sup>114</sup> Martha R. Burt, "Causes of the Growth of Homelessness During the 1980s," in *Understanding Homelessness: New Policy and Research Perspectives*(Washington D.C.: Fannie Mae Foundation, 1991, 1997).

national anti-poverty summit in Philadelphia. There they and other activists created a plan for a new national agenda to end poverty. While the national, as well as regional, network did not last, the state network did. That network formed the basis for the 1996 fight to end welfare.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

The fragmentation of a social movement, like the fragmentation of an empire, results in pockets of communities cut off from each other. Countering this isolation requires the continued creation of political space where relationships can be maintained or rebuilt. The anti-poverty activists around the Hunger Coalition were able to turn Poor People's Day into such a space. The original idea of the event did not place such emphasis on relationships, but the change made the gathering more effective in its mobilization efforts as more poor people sought to end their isolation. The transition also allowed the event to continue beyond the existence of the social movement and serve as an ongoing organizing and fundraising tool for the Hunger Coalition and local organizations.

Historian Belinda Robnett wrote that one-on-one activism, the individual outreach to potential constituency, is necessary even during a social movement. She also claims that this outreach can and does survive the movement itself.<sup>115</sup> The story of Poor People's Day during the eighties provides support for her claims. The increase in attendance as well as the form and success of actions against welfare were a direct result of new outreach efforts implemented after the handover to the Hunger Coalition. Furthermore, although Robertson was not involved in Atlanta organizing in the sixties, the strategies and tactics she learned came directly from those involved in the social movement passing on the knowledge. Robnett also argued that black women used "free space" created by the social constructions of gender to develop informal

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<sup>115</sup> Robnett, 17.

leadership. Mostly barred from formal, charismatic leadership roles, black women turned the social location they occupied into a political tool used to increase mobilization efforts.<sup>116</sup> As I argued earlier, however, in the late sixties and throughout the seventies black women anti-poverty activists broke through the restrictions set on their access to formal leadership roles. This does not mean that social constructions of gender and race were no longer restrictions, they were. However, by 1981 a young, black woman relatively new to Atlanta could hold a statewide executive director position and lead a challenge against white activist control of an event and succeed in that challenge. The transition of Poor People's Day signifies that black women's free space was no longer limited to informal leadership roles. This free space could and did become formalized within the new vision of Poor People's Day, and it was exactly what was needed in order to adapt to the new political climate. The anti-poverty activists who pushed for the change in the gathering gave the social movement, in its last days, the tools needed to survive as a protest movement.

The Hunger Coalition navigated the transition from social movement to protest movement because it was able to maintain or build social networks and connective structures, create space for the building of solidarity, and continue to mount collective challenges. The tactics of continued outreach and gatherings helped bring new people in and retain those already recruited. The national social movement fragmented with the collapse of organizations like the NWRO but, more importantly, the end of mechanisms to connect local struggles around the country. Groups like the Hunger Coalition survived at the state level and were able to do some work to combat the isolation of local groups, but they did not do so nationally until late in the decade. In 1987 activists formerly affiliated with the NWRO created the National Welfare Rights

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<sup>116</sup> Robnett, 21-22.

Union (NWRU) as a way of connecting state and local struggles. In the late eighties and early nineties this organization along with others would attempt to pull together a national agenda through a series of gatherings. While these gatherings did not spark a new social movement, and they had limited success even in creating national networks, they did allow a space for state organizers to share ideas and create plans the challenges to come. In the nineties those challenges to welfare proved to be ultimately successful.

## 4 THE NINETIES

### 4.1 Summits

The strategic use of the gathering to build new social networks was a national phenomenon. The National Welfare Rights Union (NWRU), the National Union of the Homeless, the National Anti-Hunger Coalition, and United Church of Christ sponsored a National Survival Summit in 1989 in Philadelphia.<sup>117</sup> The goal was to pull together a national network based in a shared analysis of poverty.<sup>118</sup> Although Robertson did not attend the meeting, Scott did. He and a group of others committed to building a southern regional network with Scott taking the lead. Back in Atlanta, Scott was looking for partners and, as it happened, so was Robertson. According to Robertson, “He wanted a grassroots group, and there wasn’t that many in Georgia to choose from so I got to be the one.” She offered a space outside the Hunger Coalition office at Central Presbyterian Church which turned out to be a desk in the hallway. This setup worked, and the Up & Out of Poverty NOW! network was born.<sup>119</sup>

Up & Out of Poverty was originally a Massachusetts campaign with which the NWRU was aligned. The goal was lifting families above the poverty line through increased wages and safety net benefits.<sup>120</sup> The National Survival Summit was a mechanism for spreading the campaign nationally and using it as a basis to form coalitions. The push for coalitions working in a common framework had been used before, but the proliferation of political activity during the seventies, along with the ensuing turf wars, lowered the sense of urgency. By the late eighties and early nineties, however, this particular type of social network was more attractive, particularly in the South. During the seventies anti-hunger coalitions formed in about eight

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<sup>117</sup> Shaw, 189.

<sup>118</sup> Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

<sup>119</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

<sup>120</sup> Shaw, 189.

southern states. All had folded by 1990 but one. As Scott says, “The Hunger Coalition here in Georgia hung on, but it was down to a fraction of itself.”<sup>121</sup> The organization survived the funding crisis of the eighties but just barely.

Around 1988 Robertson left the Hunger Coalition on sabbatical. She describes her feelings at the time as “totally burned out.”<sup>122</sup> Scott believes that funding also had something to do with her leaving.<sup>123</sup> For almost ten years Robertson learned the craft of fundraising while keeping the doors of the Hunger Coalition open. The pressure was enormous, and it simply makes sense that eventually she would need to step away. Unfortunately, her departure created problems. The new executive director did not pay required taxes, and the Hunger Coalition eventually owed \$28,000 to the IRS. A new executive director was hired but was unable to solve the problem. In 1990 the board asked Robertson, who had been selling real estate, to come back. She was ready. Robertson was excited to be back in the work, and the foundation world was also excited about her return. She was able to negotiate a deal with the IRS as well as raise enough money to fund the organization.<sup>124</sup> When Scott met with Robertson after the National Survival Summit she had just returned to the Hunger Coalition. Scott was looking for a grassroots organization with which to partner, and Robertson was looking for a project. Bringing summits to the South met both their needs.

The Up & Out network organized two regional summits, one in Savannah, Georgia in 1990 and the other in Montgomery, Alabama in 1991. Each event attracted hundreds of southern activists, and the program reflected a need to defend the existing safety net. However, the push was not just to maintain the status quo. Organizers of the summits wanted participants to develop

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<sup>121</sup> Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

<sup>122</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

<sup>123</sup> Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

<sup>124</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

a new vision. As Scott says, one aim was to “push through this notion that we need to be thinking of a new and different world rather than going back to anything.” The attendees worked on developing a common understanding of how the politics of poverty had changed in the last decade. The ultimate aim was to spark a national movement that would “end poverty in our lifetime.”<sup>125</sup>

This is not to say the summits ignored organizational needs. The other goal of the gathering was to “rekindle organization structure.” Since southern states had a history of anti-hunger coalitions, there were statewide networks or at least the potential of such networks. The summits were thought of as political events that could excite and revive dormant networks.<sup>126</sup> This worked in Georgia but not in other states or regionally. Robertson attributes this to funding as it cost too much to “bring people together often enough.” The comment suggests that attendees’ main activities occurred at gatherings rather through campaign work supported by the summits. In this case the networks required more support than could be provided. Robertson’s comments on why Georgia Up & Out thrived affirm this conclusion. The Hunger Coalition folded its work into Up & Out, making the network the “political arm” of the organization. This provided funding, staffing, and a well-maintained communications chain connecting activists around the state. Connection to the national summits allowed for some low-level coordination of talking points or joint press statements on welfare and poverty issues. However, the real work was done at the state level.<sup>127</sup> In the early nineties, as welfare reform began to take hold, the network was put to the test.

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<sup>125</sup> Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

<sup>126</sup> Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

<sup>127</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

## 4.2 Process as an Organizing Tool

Robertson wanted the Hunger Coalition to anchor Poor People's Day because she thought it important that poor people be an integral part of the political process. This reasoning carried over into Up & Out of Poverty. The planning process became an organizing tool, a political space where people could "deposit their issues and find people that connected to those issues."<sup>128</sup> Poor People's Day became a project of Up & Out, merging the process and expanding the political space. Instead of working on a one or two-day event, participants were choosing issues and planning strategy for a year-long campaign. This process created a sense of ownership among the attendees for the poverty issues chosen. Although people would not always have their projects selected as a top priority, they would have the chance to make their case. They would also be able to make contacts around the state. Knowing that the process opened again the following year, attendees were more likely to stay involved so they could try again to have their issue selected. But this process also created a filter where only groupings with a certain level of organization could rise to the top. Introducing an idea was not enough, there had to be "the staff capacity...to carry that ball and launch it."<sup>129</sup> A single individual or even a small group would not see their issue become a priority unless they could organize others to join them. Whether intentional or not, those able to organize effectively enough to have their issue become a priority simultaneously showed they were able to partner in a state campaign.

At its high point Up & Out involved 80 groups around the state, albeit many were composed of no more than 10 people. Although the process allowed a small group to become effectively involved, and even push its own agenda, most of the campaign activity originated from the Hunger Coalition. The organization proposed ideas and issues through the Up & Out

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<sup>128</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

<sup>129</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

process like others and was usually able to get a welcoming reception. The Hunger Coalition coordinated the process, but it did not manipulate it. Given its leadership and capacity, it is understandable that smaller groups would accept Hunger Coalition proposals so long as the process was perceived as fair. The Hunger Coalition did not propose more than a couple of priorities, but Up & Out would pick up to six. This left political space for other groups to organize. That many groups consistently did suggests many received some benefit from the procedure. One of the benefits people received was social capital.

For some of the participants, attending Poor People's Day was their first time leaving their home town. They also stayed in a hotel and participated in some sort of action targeting some decision maker. Robertson explains, "That was power in their minds. Learning the language of organizing and learning the tricks...of organizing people and getting people into a space to make decisions and to do something was powerful for these grassroots people."<sup>130</sup> Clearly attendees received some benefit by traveling to and staying in Atlanta. Robertson's point, however, is that they received something else: a political education. Participants learned how the political system worked as well as how they could have some influence. Those who learned these lessons through the decision-making process of Up & Out and Poor People's Day would be more likely to stay involved.

Interestingly, Robertson is candid that the campaigns usually lost. Often in the interview she mentions how the legislative process "hardly ever worked" in favor of participants or that wins produced little in the way of material gain. Political struggles were conducted to make life better, or at least to stop it from getting worse, for poor people. But oftentimes success meant the people involved gained a better sense of "what the problems were with the system" and "what

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<sup>130</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

was going to be required to make some change.”<sup>131</sup> Some of this can be attributed to the change in political climate from an expansion of rights to a defensive, siege mentality. Yet, when coupled with the focus on process as an organizing tool, one Robertson learned while working at the EOA, it also seems that such transformation became a definition of victory.

### 4.3 Winning on Defense

In the aftermath of the regional summit in Savannah in 1990, Up & Out began to build a state agenda. In June 1991 the Hunger Coalition anchored the Georgia Up & Out of Poverty Now! Summit to provide “the unheard” a chance to “plan, organize and redirect the conditions of their lives.” The format was similar to Poor People’s Day with speakers, panels, the presence of state legislators, and a keynote speaker. In one respect was a greater focus on picking priorities for next year’s legislative session. Of the six priorities chosen, four involved supporting existing organizations engaged in some efforts. The other two goals included opposition to Atlanta’s nuisance ordinance, used to harass homeless people, and addressing abuse by labor pools.<sup>132</sup>

Welfare was not directly listed as a concern, but this reflects the broader understanding of poverty developed during the eighties. Labor pool workers were often homeless men desperate for work and taken advantage of. This issue was viewed as a part of the effort to end homelessness. The following year workers testified before legislative committees about being charged fees for transportation and equipment as well as working a full day and not being paid. A union steelworker testified that labor pool workers were given assignments paying minimum wage, before fees were deducted, and were so dangerous unionized workers would refuse to take

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<sup>131</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

<sup>132</sup> N’Jere Alghanee, “Georgia up & out of Poverty Now! 1991 Summit,” *Street Heat News*, Vol. 1, No. 7, June 1991.

them.<sup>133</sup> Fighting for worker rights was part of the larger struggle against poverty. In this particular fight, Up & Out won. In 1992 the Georgia General Assembly made it illegal for companies to charge transportation and equipment fees and mandated that potential employees be informed of hazardous work conditions beforehand.

At the second Southern Survival Summit, held in Montgomery, Alabama in August 1991, welfare was a main topic of concern. At the National Survival Summit in Detroit in 1992, it was the major priority. Still, the resolutions passed show that participants thought of poverty in larger terms. Welfare had its own section, but that was limited to benefits. Workfare opposition was listed under labor while increases in food stamps were under hunger.<sup>134</sup> But this broader view of poverty held its own challenges.

More than 200 people attended Poor People's Day in 1992. Forty legislators also participated, but they did not speak and only listened to what attendees had to say. People discussed health care reform, ideas for job creation, tax reform, and abuse in the labor pools.<sup>135</sup> While this array of issues reflects a broader conception of how to alleviate poverty, it is a scattered conception. As the fight against poverty grew broader the agenda grew longer. Georgia Up & Out was not able to pull these various strands into a single strategy but neither could the national coalitions. Although activists were reformulating their understanding of poverty, they were still on the defensive. In the lead up to Poor People's Day 1992, Robertson wrote, "Our continued survival depends on changing the regressive policies that create the negative environments that government and business ask that we accept as our reality." The solution was a united grassroots movement able to "tell the truth about our condition and what it will take to

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<sup>133</sup> "Victory! Victory! Labor Pool Regulations at Last," *Street Heat News*, Vol. 2, No. 2, April/May 1992.

<sup>134</sup> N'Jere Alghanee, "Up and out of Poverty: Second Survival Summit," *Street Heat News*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Oct/Nov 1992.

<sup>135</sup> "Poor People Send a Message," *Street Heat News*, Vol. 2, No. 2, April/May 1992.

solve our problems.”<sup>136</sup> Gatherings like Poor People’s Day and the summits were able to help poor people understand the political context that created poverty, but not a single, cohesive strategy. In the absence of that strategy, activists fought defensive actions. Some actions, like labor pool reforms, were needed and useful. Yet, it is extremely difficult to advance an agenda through defense. Organizers were trying to understand how poverty had changed over the decades and were not ready for the frontal assault on welfare looming on the horizon. Scott said, “No one knew in 89...that by the time we got to 93, 94 we would be fighting to just hold on to welfare as it is. We didn’t know that was coming.”<sup>137</sup> What was coming was the end as they knew it.

#### **4.4 The End as We Knew It**

In 1988 workfare returned, and it was ushered in by the federal government. Congress revised AFDC with a new version of workfare called the JOBS (Jobs Opportunities and Basic Skills) program. JOBS mandated that states have both an employment program and education for parents on welfare. The federal government also provided funds to states that experimented with “innovative approaches to help families become self-sufficient.”<sup>138</sup> Georgia experimented with the PEACH program, Positive Employment and Community Help. PEACH was not born completely from JOBS, however. In 1986 when the previous workfare program was shut down, representatives from various poor people’s organizations worked with the Georgia Department of Human Resources to craft a new program. The result, PEACH, offered people on welfare a chance for an education along with support like child care.<sup>139</sup> Recipients used educational

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<sup>136</sup> Sandra Robertson, "Why Poor People's Day at the Capitol," *Street Heat News*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Jan/Feb 1992.

<sup>137</sup> Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

<sup>138</sup> Mara Rose, "A Fighting Chance; Program Aims to Free Needy from Welfare," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 2, 1991.

<sup>139</sup> "Poor People in Georgia Fight Workfare," *Poor People's Newspaper*, Vol XVI, No 1, print, Atlanta

programs because they had access to critical support structures. In one county PEACH was able to place more than 5,500 people in jobs. More importantly, 75 percent of those recipients held the job for at least one year.<sup>140</sup>

PEACH was the one workfare program that seemed to actually transition people into the workforce. Why then, was the program not retained? Cost was one factor. PEACH provided supports that were not, and are still not, part of the national infrastructure. Child care, secondary or vocational education, and health care are all services individuals access only if they can afford them. Yet without these services poor people face monumental challenges in attaining some sort of economic self-sufficiency. In 1993 one editorial estimated that it would take \$6 billion each year to successfully move the then five million people on welfare off the program.<sup>141</sup> Of course, this was a price Congress would not pay, but cost does not tell the whole story.

The federal JOBS bill made funds available to states to provide support services. Yet, only around 60 percent of that money was accessed.<sup>142</sup> If the stated aim of workfare legislation was to get welfare recipients working, and there existed a method of doing so that was proven to work, what would prevent states or the federal government from pursuing it? The answer is ideological. Since its creation during Great Depression, ADC was intended only for a fraction of the population that actually needed it. It was created to be, in historian Linda Gordon's terms, "stingy and humiliating." The base assumption of the creators of welfare was that the poor, specifically mothers and their children, were needy because they were helpless.<sup>143</sup> That assumption had not changed by the nineties. What had changed was the nature of help. Rather than more supports, or the expansion of rights, assistance turned into pushing recipients off the

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History Center, Muriel Lokey papers, mss 967, Box 1, Folder 7, Newsletter, 1987-1993.

<sup>140</sup> Rose, "A Fighting Chance; Program Aims to Free Needy from Welfare."

<sup>141</sup> "The Cost of Welfare Reform," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 24, 1993.

<sup>142</sup> Cynthia Tucker, "Salvaging Welfare Requires Work, Not Rhetoric," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 8, 1992.

<sup>143</sup> Gordon.

rolls. State and federal officials had always wanted to keep the number of recipients low, but in the early nineties opponents of welfare were able to frame removing assistance as a means of helping those on welfare. It did not matter if folks were materially better on welfare, they were helpless. Making people work in whatever capacity became synonymous with helping people achieve a better life. It did not matter if the children received decent health care or enough food as long as the parent was working.

During the 1992 presidential campaign Bill Clinton ran ads making the promise to “end welfare as we know it.” Workfare was a key part of keeping that promise. Clinton made the claim that as governor of Arkansas he had “moved 17,000 people from welfare rolls to payrolls.”<sup>144</sup> His proposal to end welfare included \$4 billion in annual spending on training, job placement and child care as well as an increase in the earned income tax credit. At a campaign stop he said, “People who can work ought to go to work, and nobody should be able to stay on welfare forever.”<sup>145</sup> Clinton was able to combine the myth of welfare dependency with the idea that transition into the workforce was possible because the base assumption was that recipients were helpless. Bureaucrats made decisions and welfare recipients lived with the consequences. However, PEACH shows that programs designed with input from the poor can be effective. Anti-poverty activists thought welfare was in need of reform and were willing to be part of a process in devising a sound plan. But opponents of welfare at the national and state level had their own ideas of what reform should look like.

In July 1992 then Georgia Governor Zell Miller created a task force to examine the state’s welfare system and to develop alternatives. Miller used the same rhetoric as Clinton. He described welfare as a “dead end street.” He wanted to get welfare recipients training, education

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<sup>144</sup> Richard L. Berke, "The 1992 Campaign: The Ad Campaign; Clinton: Getting People Off Welfare," *New York Times*, September 10, 1992.

<sup>145</sup> Adam Nagourney, "Clinton Proposes 2-Year Limit on Welfare," *USA Today*, September 10, 1992.

and “into good paying jobs.” The commission began by considering a freeze on benefits for families that had more children while on welfare. This would later become known as the “family cap.” Pauley criticized the idea a “perfectly terrible” and chastised the governor for not thinking deeply about the problem and “just following a national trend.”<sup>146</sup> Yet the task force surprised the governor. At the end of the year the commission not only rejected the family cap, it proposed expanding welfare to almost 60,000 people by changing the formula used to calculate need. Miller was less than pleased. He rejected most of the task force’s recommendations, saying the state could not “continue to reward personal decisions which cost the taxpayers more money.” He then proposed a series of punitive measures as reform including forcing teen mothers to live with a parent and cutting off benefits to able-bodied recipients who refused a minimum-wage job. The governor kept the recommendations to chase down fathers who did not pay child support and to increase funding for PEACH.<sup>147</sup>

By far the most controversial element of the reform package was the family cap. Robertson called for the defeat of the entire package. The Governor was blaming the poor and that “poor babies” would “suffer at the hands of politicians who are either insensitive or unaware or who just don’t care.”<sup>148</sup> Miller’s proposals did push groups that had not been heavily involved previously to take action on welfare. The American Civil Liberties Union, Save the Children, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference came out in opposition but focused their efforts on stopping the family cap. However, a grand coalition never emerged. Opposition to the plan was a loose network with the Hunger Coalition and Up & Out of Poverty forming the left end of the spectrum. The fight took place within the General Assembly, with lobbying as the

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<sup>146</sup> Ben Smith, "Miller Calls for Task Force to Revise Welfare. Restricted Aid One Proposal," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, July 31, 1992.

<sup>147</sup> "A Rebuff from the Governor," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, January 5, 1993.

<sup>148</sup> "Welfare 1993 Legislature," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, January 28, 1993.

main weapon. Rep. Georganna Sinkfield, chair of the House Committee on Children and Youth, waged a personal battle to remove the family cap. While it became clear that some form of welfare reform was going to pass, as late as March news accounts were unclear whether the family cap would be included.<sup>149</sup> In the end, welfare reform with the family cap did pass. Sinkfield and activists were able to delay the start of the caps, exclude mothers with children under 14, and were able to include a two-year grace period, but Miller's office still described it as an "absolute victory." The reform measures also cut off benefits to any able-bodied, childless adult who refused a job offer. Sinkfield hoped Clinton's national legislation would roll back the state loss.<sup>150</sup>

Workfare was not a controversial point in the 1993 Georgia legislation, because the proposal was to increase funding for PEACH. Legislators, at that time, and many activists agreed that PEACH was good enough. In 1994, however, Congress began seriously debating welfare reform and workfare was a key point. In 1993 the Clinton administration allowed states to experiment with reforms while still receiving federal money by seeking a waiver. Georgia, under Miller, applied for a waiver in 1994 with the aim of rolling back those compromises won by Sinkfield.<sup>151</sup> In addition, Miller proposed ending PEACH and replacing it with Work for Welfare which would require 20 hours of community service each month. At a Poor People's Day event, Sinkfield recalled how similar this idea was to the workfare pilot program of the eighties and worried about abuse.<sup>152</sup> That legislation passed. Finally, the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 allowed Georgia

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<sup>149</sup> "Salvaging Welfare Reform," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, March 8, 1993.

<sup>150</sup> Julie K. Miller and Lyle V. Harris, "Legislature 1993 Last-Minute Pact on Welfare Final Measure Includes 'Family Cap' Provision," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, March 24, 1993.

<sup>151</sup> George Graham, "States Win Approval for Welfare Reform Plans," *Financial Times*, November 3, 1993.

<sup>152</sup> Frances Schwartzkopff, "Advocates of Welfare Assail Work Plan," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, February 10, 1994.

to implement even more reforms. The PRWORA ended AFDC and instituted Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) with a five-year lifetime limit. Under the PRWORA, states could work out their own reform efforts. Miller proposed and won a four-year lifetime limit.

Welfare reform did not occur in 1996. The process that ended with the PRWORA began as early as 1988. In the intervening years activists attempted to walk a line between state and federal reforms but were overwhelmed. Although Clinton had vetoed two similar bills before the PRWORA, he eventually signed the legislation fearing political backlash.<sup>153</sup> Clearly activists were not able to build a constituency threatening enough to force a third veto. The same was true at the state level. Up & Out of Poverty was able to build a political framework that could challenge the worst of the reforms, but it did not have a base large enough to push an alternative. In his analysis Scott says, “It’s like my favorite slogan, ‘You’re not going to get what you’re not organized to take.’ Well we never got organized enough to take any damned thing. So that’s what we got.”<sup>154</sup>

#### **4.5 Birth of a Political Education Process**

Scott may be correct that Up & Out was not organized enough to reshape welfare in its own vision, but it is not correct to say the network did not “take any damned thing.” In fact he admits that the network was able to prevent the elimination of food stamps and even have the program expanded.<sup>155</sup> However, this win was limited. Throughout the nineties anti-poverty activists were on the defensive, and this is the more important point Scott addresses in his comments. He believes the ability of a network, coalition, or organization to mobilize is directly

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<sup>153</sup> Barbara Vobejda, "Clinton Signs Welfare Bill Amid Division," *Washington Post*, August 23, 1996.

<sup>154</sup> Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

<sup>155</sup> Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

related to the vision it puts forward. A timid or defensive vision of the future does not inspire people to take action. The struggle around welfare was marked by two different approaches: a defensive one that wished to save what it could and one that wanted to rethink how a social safety net should function. While each had elements of the other—for example, the Hunger Coalition did make strategic choices about what could pragmatically be saved and what should be fought against—Up & Out of Poverty was part of an effort to rethink the social safety net.<sup>156</sup>

The base membership of the network was made up of people receiving or who had received some type of public assistance. As welfare recipients, the Up & Out base knew how the system actually functioned, and they wanted it to change. Defensive fights, like preventing the family cap, were struggles to keep welfare as it was. This simply was not good enough for Up & Out. As Scott put it, Up & Out's position was "fuck welfare as it was." His reasoning was simple, "Why should we be fighting to restore welfare? Everyone hated fucking welfare."<sup>157</sup> The Hunger Coalition and Up & Out were not opposed to welfare reform, they were opposed to ending the social safety net. Instead they were interested in having conversations about ideas like a guaranteed minimum income. This was not a new idea. In the sixties and seventies the proposal was made by Martin Luther King, Milton Friedman, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan among others. President Richard Nixon submitted a bill to Congress calling for a minimum income. The conservative backlash of the late seventies and eighties, however, meant the idea quickly dropped out of favor.

Georgia organizations that fought against the family cap provision in Gov. Miller's proposal were part of the defensive, pragmatic group attempting a fight they thought they could win. The Hunger Coalition did join in with this alliance to fight the family cap. However, it

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<sup>156</sup> Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

<sup>157</sup> Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

consistently made the point that the entire welfare reform package had to be defeated. The hope was that a defensive battle could open conversation about new visions. This was popular among the base membership but did not have much traction with allied groups. In response Up & Out prioritized political education of the base aimed at insuring poor people defined their own problems. One of the first educational instruments was *Street Heat News*, a statewide magazine edited by Scott and Robertson. The publication included articles on national and state issues as well as essays and commentary by Up & Out members. About 5,000 copies were printed and distributed each month, and homeless people became the primary distributors. Homeless folks working with the organization would take bundles and sell them on the street. Although ideally some of the sales money was supposed to pay for production costs, none ever did. Still, the method had some advantages as it gave homeless people a chance to read the paper and raise some money for themselves.

The purpose of *Street Heat News*, although most called it simply *Street Heat*, was to insure “people in economic, political and racial struggle for justice” controlled how problems were defined and how solutions were devised. The end result was a space where poor people could articulate their own experiences and use that as a basis for strategic decisions. The masthead was quite explicit: “We can no longer permit others to tell us how we are feeling about our economic poverty, our political weaknesses and the varied manifestations of racism we encounter.”<sup>158</sup> The idea for the publication came from Sandra Enos who came into the Hunger Coalition seeking services. Robertson discovered Enos had secretly been sleeping in the offices for three days. Rather than simply kick her out, Robertson gave her an ultimatum: “If you’re gonna come here and hang out, you gonna have to be part of this movement, of this work.” Enos

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<sup>158</sup> *Street Heat News*, Vol. 1, No. 6, June 1991.

began doing work around the office, but she soon discovered a writing talent and asked to put together a newsletter. The idea grew into *Street Heat*.<sup>159</sup>

Robertson and Scott oversaw the editing of *Street Heat* as part of the educational drive of Up & Out. In 1986 Scott and a group of others formed Project South: Institution for the Elimination of Poverty & Genocide. This organization took the lead in coordinating political education within Up & Out. After 1992 Project South became the educational arm of Up & Out in Georgia and moved towards more frequent political education sessions with the base of the network.<sup>160</sup> The decision was not coincidental. As the fight around welfare heated up so did the organizing of a statewide welfare rights group. Some of the members of this group had participated in welfare rights organizing in the sixties and seventies, but many had not. Political education created a space where members could learn the history of struggle around welfare, sometimes directly from those involved.

#### **4.6 The Rise of the GWRU**

In late 1993 clients from the Hunger Hotline, a service of the Hunger Coalition designed to provide families with food, were invited to a meeting to “discuss common welfare concerns.” Fifteen people met to talk about the Governor’s welfare reform package, and some from that meeting attended state hearings as well as monitored debate in the General Assembly. Attendees felt legislators talked about welfare recipients “as though they were excess baggage and waste.” The primary lesson they brought back was that “little attention, if any, was being given to the humanity and dignity of people living on public assistance in Georgia.” These fifteen people became the Welfare Rights Support Group.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

<sup>160</sup> Scott, interview, July 20 2013.

<sup>161</sup> N'Jere Alghanee, "Developing Solutions: Welfare Rights Support Group," *Street Heat News*, Vol. 2, No. 7,

What made the support group possible, initially, was the Hunger Hotline. Until around 1989, the Hunger Coalition was strictly an advocacy organization with no direct services. However, as funding was cut for many social services, the need for some sort of direct aid became apparent. During Robertson's absence a new director organized a food pantry where people could come and get emergency assistance, but the Hunger Hotline was originally instituted as an organizing tool. Clients came looking for aid, and they would get it, but then staff would have a conversation about "getting engaged with the political scene and the whole nine yards."<sup>162</sup> While the Hunger Coalition always engaged in community outreach, this was different. The organization now provided services poor people needed, but then it talked with the clients about why those services were needed. The introduction of the Hunger Hotline was only partly about providing aid the federal government was no longer willing to fund. It was about providing political education.

The Welfare Rights Support Group, which in 1994 became the Georgia Welfare Rights Union (GWRU), was linked to the National Welfare Rights Union. This relationship was independent of the one with the AWRO. Mathews's group was operating throughout the nineties, and she was not going to be absorbed. The end result was that the AWRO was a local group and the GWRU focused statewide. Robertson remembers that Mathews was willing to be part of the state network, "but ain't nobody going to come into Atlanta and take the Atlanta Welfare Rights Union. She made that very clear."<sup>163</sup>

The late eighties and early nineties saw Mathews shift her orbit from Emmaus House to Up & Out of Poverty. Mathews had close ties with Ford, and when he retired she began moving toward the Hunger Coalition. Her longtime relationship with Robertson helped in the process,

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November 1993.

<sup>162</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

<sup>163</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

but Mathews felt there was more to gain in working directly with Up & Out. Robertson says, “She could see that there was support in the Hunger Coalition for her ideas and what she wanted to do with the welfare rights movement. Up & Out was a place where she felt she had a voice.” Robertson’s comments should not be interpreted as a falling out between Emmaus House and Mathews. That relationship never faltered. Rather, Mathews saw a need within Up & Out for her experience. The membership of the AWRO was getting older and moving from welfare to Social Security. However, Up & Out members were younger, mostly women, and the majority were on public assistance. Mathews’s connection to Up & Out meant being readily available to give advice and receive inspiration and direction.<sup>164</sup>

The Georgia Welfare Rights Union was officially launched during a statewide summit of more than 100 people who gathered to “study and prepare for the upcoming welfare reform proposals.” The summit was the idea and the end result of work done by the fifteen members of the Welfare Rights Support Group. Attendees of the gathering chose opposition to Work for Welfare as their main campaign with a strategy combining confronting state officials and outreach to recipients in public housing. The type of jobs Gov. Miller’s proposal included picking up trash in parks or cleaning state offices. Although GWRU members did see these as menial tasks, they were not opposed to doing this work. Their opposition was that they would not be paid for it. In their analysis, this did not just undermine their ability to earn, it also threatened those workers who did those jobs.<sup>165</sup> Their broader view of poverty informed their analysis and critique. The membership knew that not being paid for work was going to be bad for them and for other workers. They knew they had to think about others even as they felt few thought of them.

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<sup>164</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

<sup>165</sup> N’Jere Alghanee, “No Free Labor! Welfare Rights Union: We Represent Ourselves,” *Street Heat News*, Vol. 3, No. 3, July/August 1994.

The main message from the summit was that the welfare mother must organize because she is by herself. In a summary of the meeting one person wrote, "Nobody can really care about these issues the way welfare mothers do because we live it. We cannot work for free." This desire to speak for themselves motivated the strategy of outreach and confrontation. People on welfare, especially women, were the most effective in supporting others on welfare. The attendees even went so far as to castigate ministers and preachers who did not "understand the fact that working for welfare reinstitutes slavery." However, the recipients saved their greatest disdain for elected officials. They singled out Rep. Nan Orrock, calling her a "two-faced politician" who worked for a progressive foundation advocating social justice but also served as a floor leader for Miller and worked to pass the Governor's reform package.<sup>166</sup> The GWRU dedicated itself to building a constituency of welfare recipients. Within a year they had groups in Augusta and Dublin as well as in public housing complexes around Atlanta. The group also maintained its national connection through the NWRU.<sup>167</sup>

The mobilization efforts of the GWRU had some success. Poor People's Day 1995 saw a turnout of more than 400, not quite the peak but definitely higher than average. Attendees filled the Capitol rotunda and heard "youth, welfare mothers, senior citizens, minimum wage workers, migrant farm workers" and others give testimony about the impact of budget cuts. The assemblage passed a resolution declaring Georgia guilty of "crimes of the state" and invited the Governor and members of the General Assembly to "hear testimony of the People" and urged their "cooperation in alleviating the many offenses against the People."<sup>168</sup> Almost 40 mothers on welfare and activists also packed a committee hearing on Learnfare, a welfare reform that would

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<sup>166</sup> Alghanee, "No Free Labor! Welfare Rights Union: We Represent Ourselves."

<sup>167</sup> N'Jere Alghanee, "We Have a Voice! The Georgia Welfare Rights Union," *Street Heat News*, Vol. 4, No. 1, May/June 1995.

<sup>168</sup> Sandra Robertson and Hugh Esco, "Poor People's Day at the Capitol, 1995: 'The People's General Assembly'," *Street Heat News*, Vol. 4, No. 1, May/June 1995.

penalize recipients whose children did not attend school. The chairman was shocked by the attendance and commented, "Where did they come from?" The bill died in the committee.<sup>169</sup>

After Poor People's Day, at the March meeting of the GWRU, the membership elected new leadership. One of the co-chairs was Carolyn Pittman.<sup>170</sup> Pittman discovered the Hunger Coalition only recently, but she was a dedicated volunteer and committed to working for a better community for herself, her family, and her community. Her election as co-chair marked a new beginning for her and Hunger Coalition. Twenty years after that March meeting, Pittman would become the executive director.

#### **4.7 New Leadership, New Stories & the Human Rights Framework**

Pittman began receiving welfare after the birth of her daughter in 1981. Living with her parents, she applied and eventually was granted a public housing unit in Carver Homes in south Atlanta. Born in Summerhill, Pittman's family moved to the West End in the late sixties when her father found a better job. She moved into public housing around 1983 in order to avoid burdening her parents. Almost immediately she began trying to find a way out of public housing. What struck her first was how difficult it was to survive on welfare. Decades later she remembers exactly how much she had to work with: \$378 per month. She says, "I knew that \$378 was not enough...After I paid my rent, tried to feed my family, clothe my family. It just wasn't enough. That's just real. I think it will always, that number, stick with me."<sup>171</sup> Pittman was representative of others Up & Out was targeting for outreach. Her personal experience taught her exactly how difficult, almost impossible, it was to survive within the framework of public assistance. Also like many others, Pittman was actively looking for something better.

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<sup>169</sup> Sandra Robertson, "The Good, the Bad & the Ugly," *Street Heat News*, Vol. 4, No. 1, May/June 1995.

<sup>170</sup> Alghanee, "We Have a Voice! The Georgia Welfare Rights Union."

<sup>171</sup> Carolyn Pittman, interview by author, Atlanta, GA, August 16 2013.

In the late eighties and early nineties, Pittman felt that something better was a job paying a “decent wage” and childcare. This proved difficult to find. A single mother with four children, she was both deeply discouraged and active in her community. Carver Homes, like most of Atlanta’s public housing, had a tenant association. Louise Watley was president of the association and, like Mathews, was a political force. Each week the association hosted meetings about how to access new services, development of skills like finance and budgeting, and about politics. Pittman regularly attended these meetings, but she still felt her voice did not count. She heard about an upcoming meeting where state representatives would be answering questions. The presence of politicians sparked Pittman’s interest because she wanted to “see who they were and how they looked.” She also wanted to hear their response when told about the limitation of public assistance. However, Pittman was not planning on speaking. She was going to watch and listen. She hoped to find information or resources that would help her get out of public housing: “I knew if I wanted to get out of public housing I was going to have to do something. I was going to have to move, and that wasn’t nobody coming to me.”<sup>172</sup>

That meeting was a turning point. Pittman did talk with the representatives, and being able to speak directly to decision makers in a setting of equality was a moving experience. She says, “My takeaway from going to my first meeting was that I can start seeing my way out of this. You know you just feeling like you’re swimming in the dark? For them to come out to my community was like, they’re coming out for a reason.” She realized that getting out of public housing would take some time, but the key was being able to tell her story. Even though she knew what she had gone through, she only had ten minutes with the state representative. She learned that being able to quickly and concisely relate her experiences was important in moving

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<sup>172</sup> Pittman, interview, August 16 2013.

decision makers, whether they were elected officials or not.<sup>173</sup> She did not come to the Hunger Coalition, the GWRU, or Up & Out to learn what to say. She knew what she wanted to say. She came to learn how to say it.

Pittman's process is reflective of the political education strategy of Up & Out. Education was not simply a method to fill people's heads with facts. The education model used was Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and Myles Horton's popular education. In these methods the teachers, or facilitators, create a space where each person brings their knowledge and experience. The aim is transformation.<sup>174</sup> The key to both transformation and mobilization is storytelling. Robertson explains, "Hearing your story and hearing my own story, and understanding the connection between the two, and knowing that there's something that can be done to save us from travesty, from tragedy, from injustice—knowing that there is a solution—is what propels people to act."<sup>175</sup> The storytelling act does not just relate facts, it allows the teller and the listener to put those facts into a political context. Mobilization comes from being able to analyze power dynamics and being able to see one's strengths as well as systemic weaknesses in the structures negatively impacting one's life. Poor People's Day and Up & Out of Poverty were extensions of this educational space.

A year after Pittman joined the GWRU, and just after she was elected to leadership, the group changed its name to the Georgia Human Rights Union (GHRU). This change was the result of collaboration with the National Center for Human Rights Education. The director, Loretta Ross, led educational sessions on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR is a United Nations document that defines human rights. In the mid-nineties human

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<sup>173</sup> Pittman, interview, August 16 2013.

<sup>174</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000).; Myles Horton, Judith Kohl, and Herbert R. Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

<sup>175</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

rights organizations, like Ross's, passed out untold copies of the UDHR laid out in small, blue books. The GWRU were deeply impressed. "Our minds were blown about all the stuff internationally that was going on around human rights," says Robertson, "And people loved that little book...it was very clear what the international community said the standard should be. When we read that and showed people that book, it gave validity to their wanting to have those things in that book." After the education series members of the GWRU felt that welfare rights were limited in vision. Of course, the group still wanted a just social safety net, but the larger framework of human rights allowed an inclusivity the group found attractive.<sup>176</sup> The change in name reflects the continued broadening understanding of poverty of Up & Out activists. Moving towards the international human rights framework may also represent a trend towards a strategic prioritization. The UDHR provided validation for political demands, but it also gave a language for how and when to make those demands. Using the language of human rights meant the GHRU did not have to give up what it was fighting for, but it also did not have to take on more struggles either. The group could fight for the rights of women by fighting for welfare rights when it framed that campaign as a human rights struggle.

It is not a coincidence that the change from Georgia Welfare Rights Union to Georgia Human Rights Union occurred during welfare reform. While Up & Out activists were able to increase mobilization capacity, they were simply unable to prevent the rollback of previous victories. More importantly, the activists did not want to simply defend a system they did not like. Recognizing they were politically outgunned, the shift to human rights was also a shift of framework. No longer were the members fighting for a right to welfare, they were demanding economic human rights which included a right to food, a living wage, union recognition, and

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<sup>176</sup> Robertson, interview, July 18, 2013.

more. For the last twenty years the Hunger Coalition and Up & Out have framed their demands this way. Since 2010 the focus has been on rebuilding the GHRU which lapsed after the retirement of Robertson and a financial crisis that almost ended the Hunger Coalition's existence. Pittman, who stepped into the crisis and worked to save the organization, is dedicated to bringing meetings back to the community. She is working to help individuals "make those connections" as she did. She is seeing a future, one hard to reach but attainable. In that future poor people around the state "come forward" to take the resources and knowledge they need to bring change to their community. That future is not in the halls of the General Assembly or even the meeting rooms of the Hunger Coalition. It is in the kitchens and living rooms of people across the state.<sup>177</sup> The Hunger Coalition, Up & Out of Poverty, or the GHRU probably exists in this future, but that will only be because it provides the political space people are seeking.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

There is an African-American expression that speaks of making a way out of no way. This is a good description of the anti-poverty activist mission. During the nineties the social movement retreated into memory and the conservative backlash framed what organizers felt they could demand. However, the simple truth is that compromising before engaging in struggle is a sure path to defeat. The creation of Up & Out and the GHRU were attempts to create a way out of defeat. Even in the midst of welfare reform, when all political calculation led to the conclusion that even monumental efforts would only lead to a slightly less devastating outcome, the Up & Out activists built their work on fighting for a larger vision. When people could not see a way, they spent their time learning how to see. They called this political education.

It is important to detail how political education shaped the analysis of poverty and how

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<sup>177</sup> Pittman, interview, August 16 2013.

this in turn shaped political strategy. Making this link shows that rather than being paralyzed by stronger forces or simply absorbing the assumptions of the dominant ideology, anti-poverty activists sought to study the actual conditions and build a new vision based on what they found. In studying this activity one can take for granted the creation of space for political education. However, rendering visible how activists created new or used existing space can provide information on structural and grassroots processes. During the sixties the space was informal and easily missed by scholars looking for something more like a classroom setting. By the nineties such spaces had been formalized into summits, events, and workshops. Yet, the individual client sitting in the Hunger Hotline was also involved in a political education space. My point is that political action was and is more than dramatic confrontations with decision makers. It is in how and why people talk with each other. Understanding why and how a group makes the strategic decisions it does requires an examination of that process of communication.

The movement framework has both benefits and limits in helping understand strategic process. There is a danger of forcing historical events into a predetermined theoretical framework. As Robnett states, one-on-one conversation is a necessary component of organizing regardless of the existence of a social movement. To say welfare rights was a separate movement from civil rights is to ignore, or at least downplay, the common cultural and theoretical framework. At the same time, change must be acknowledged. One can therefore proceed by remembering that a theoretical lens, like an actual camera lens, is useful only if it brings subjects into focus. For example, the argument that the welfare rights movement was different than civil rights could be useful if it shows how black women's activism changed when access to formal leadership roles became more common. The important point here, the subject on which to focus, is the change in political space and how it was used. A lens is only useful if it renders visible that

which was hard to see. Arguing for a difference between social movement, protest movement, and movement is useful because it allowed me to focus on how anti-poverty activists dealt with changing social structures and connections. Moreover, it also put defensive strategic decisions into political context. Clearly, space and how it is used is important to understanding strategic processes. The lens allowed me to see into that space.

The struggle around space occurred during all four decades examined in this study, but it looked different because that struggle was shaped by the existence, or not, of a social movement. The civil rights struggle created a space that allowed for an organization, like the Hunger Coalition, to be formally led by a black woman. Even as the social movement faded, the formalized leadership space continued. The social movement of the sixties and seventies, as well as the protest movement of the eighties, created a social analysis of race, class, and gender the Hunger Coalition successfully used to argue for coordinating Poor People's Day. That the event continues to exist and be useful more than 35 years later suggests their argument was valid. Students of social movements may be drawn towards stories of direct action, but the most common, and perhaps most important, political struggle is the fight for space. How people decide, or are forced, to be together can determine the end result of a process before it begins. Unfortunately, this process is often invisible in the scholarship. There are many words written about the march but few about the meetings leading up to it. Even less attention is paid to the time when the march was just an idea few thought was possible or when those who had the idea were not heard.

Poor People's Day 2013 occurred in June rather than February. About 200 people attended the event held at the Hunger Coalition office, and the day was divided between political education workshops, great food, and access to services. Attendees were overwhelmingly black

and low-income and many, perhaps most, were under the age of 25. The main question during the workshop was a variation on what action does it make sense to take. Given the hostility towards poor people in today's political climate, what is the best way to survive? How do we make a way when there is no way? One young man made an interesting point. He talked about the "hustle," the various ways poor people make money. The individual hustle may be legal, formal, both, or neither. He suggested that what is necessary today is a "collective hustle" where a community determines how to prosper with the same flexibility as the individual as long as the end result was beneficial. This man was not arguing for illegal money-making activities on a community-wide scale. Rather, he was pointing out that a desperate individual would look outside of the boundaries of decorum for ways to survive. If our communities are desperate, it makes sense to also think outside boundaries like nonprofit structures. What I heard him say was that we have to create a space we need unrestricted by the space we have. That one moment in that one meeting will probably not be given much attention in years to come. But there is every reason to believe that tomorrow's political structures were first conceived of in spaces like that.

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