

Women resist poverty: Interview with Rev. Annie Chambers

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Annie Chambers. SLL photo: Rasika Ruwanpathirana

Struggle-La Lucha interviewed the Rev. Annie Chambers for International Working

Women's Day. Chambers is a resident and housing rights leader at Douglas Homes, a public housing project in Baltimore which is threatened by privatization. She is a former Black Panther Party member and is currently organizing a new housing coalition.

Struggle-La Lucha: Could you tell us a little about your experiences as a young activist? Where did you grow up? How did you become committed to the struggle?

Rev. Annie Chambers: Life experiences propelled me into the struggle. I grew up in Richmond, Va. I lived there until I was 12. When I was a little girl, I was raped. Out of that rape I had a child. Her father is white. Back then, I couldn't tell my father because my father and family would have wanted revenge. I didn't want my father to die, so I couldn't tell him.

I had a brother who was already in the struggle at that time, my brother James X. He was one of Malcolm X's men. He would come home and talk about the struggle. I was amazed that people were fighting back. I had a lot of anger in me.

I was forced into marriage. You couldn't be a single woman without a husband having a baby back then. But I wanted to do something, so when my brother would talk about the struggle, I kept telling my father I wanted to go. I kept begging my father to let me go. In the summer, my father finally agreed to let me go, even though I was still a child and I was married. I was 14.

SLL: Can you tell our readers a little about your experiences organizing the Baltimore Welfare Rights Organization?

AC: They used to call us "the welfare rights women." In 1973 or 1974, it was getting close to the holidays and a whole lot of people in Baltimore had not gotten their AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] checks. So they came to Welfare Rights and we decided to go to the welfare office and talk to the director of social

services, Buzzy.

We went directly to Buzzy's office, walked in and locked the door. We told him that none of us would have Christmas or any other holiday until the checks got out. We stayed in there all night until Buzzy got on the phone and called his people back into the agency. The checks and the food stamps went out. That was the sort of struggle we engaged in.

We also started taking over houses that the city was renovating and turning into public housing. We really started to pick up people that way, a lot of women looking to house their families. The women in Welfare Rights just kept fighting. Whenever we said we were going to do something, we did it. We were a strong, working-class organization, with all races, creeds and colors.

SLL: You are spearheading a new coalition for housing rights. What are some of the major issues that you're fighting around?

AC: The main thing we are fighting for right now is to keep Douglas Homes as public housing. Johns Hopkins University has already expressed that they want Douglas Homes.

We are fighting for affordable housing for everyone. This is one of the things the Black Panther Party was about.

People cannot afford the rents in this city. We are sitting here in Douglas right now, and around here they come to the tenants telling people they will give them a voucher in exchange for your public housing lease. But what they don't tell people is that you have to keep qualifying for that voucher. There are all sorts of rules with it that they can use to kick you out. They want to evict people.

They are destroying Douglas Homes. The city doesn't want to actually fix the doors and the roofs and the plumbing in public housing.

We are fighting to keep Douglas. We want it to be a historic development here. It has been here since the 1930s. It was one of the first public housing developments.

SLL: Finally, I understand that you will be speaking at the United Nations on poverty in the U.S., which particularly impacts women. What are your thoughts on fighting poverty?

AC: The connection between capitalism and poverty is that the capitalists are greedy as hell. What communities are thriving? Only upper-class people.

We need to talk about education, housing and actual decent wages. Fifteen dollars isn't even enough. It's a joke. By the time it goes into effect, we will need \$50 dollars an hour. America enslaves its own people. We want to work with the unions so the unions don't back off, so they don't compromise.

People want to say that we don't have a king and queen system, but we do! It is just the few at the top with the wealth, and they won't even let crumbs drop off the table. When people tell me they are in the middle, I say, "No you aren't. You are just one or two lost paychecks away from being me, from being poor."



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