

# Tenants Organize!

*An Interview with Anne Smith*

BY JOYCE WATT AND RUTH MOTT

**A**ny discussion of women and housing is incomplete without talking about public housing. Public housing projects across the country are home to thousands of low-income women — working poor women, sole support mothers, immigrant and refugee women, older women and disabled women.

The Metro Toronto Housing Authority (MTHA) controls 33,000 public housing units in the Metro Toronto area. Over 100,000 residents live in MTHA buildings, making MTHA the largest landlord in Canada.

For public housing tenants, poor security, continual maintenance problems, divisive tenant relations and a dysfunctional bureaucracy, have long been the MTHA's claim to fame. Fuelled by these issues and the Ontario government's dismissal of MTHA chair and tenant supporter John Sewell in September 1988, MTHA tenants across the city decided to organize. A Metro-wide public housing tenants conference held in October 1988, founded Residents in Action (RIAC) to represent MTHA tenants and to fight for their rights as public housing tenants and low-income people.

The struggle of poor women living in public housing is also inseparable from the fight against poverty and for welfare reform. In 1988 the Ontario government concluded a two-year commission to study the provincial system of social assistance and recommend reforms. The Social Assistance Review Commission (SARC) captured the aspirations of many people across the province who were seeking improvements to an outdated and inadequate welfare system.

As a result of the SARC, Ontario introduced limited improvements to social assistance at a time when other provinces are cutting back their welfare expenditures. However, to date Ontario's application of the SARC has not provided noticeable increases for the vast majority of social assistance recipients in Ontario. The government has fallen far short of its commitment both to implement the SARC recommendations and to relieve the forced poverty of Ontario assistance recipients.

The following is an interview with Anne Smith, chair of RIAC and anti-poverty activist.

RIAC was formed in the Fall of 1988, when John Sewell was dismissed as chair of Housing (Toronto tenants often refer to the MTHA as simply "Housing"), without any tenant input. He was doing so much for tenants and things were beginning to happen. Tenants felt angry that again they were denied input into the

management of MTHA. We felt that a conference of these same tenants would stop this from occurring again.

We all have a common goal, which is to improve our living in every aspect. Most of us are living in a very modest way, we all have the same problems. We are basically poor. Some of us are poorer, some of us are comfortable in the sense I guess that we feel more fortunate than others, but we all have the same concerns. We want our children to grow up with all the right ideals, we want our children to be educated properly, we want our children to be fed properly. So all these things bring people together and make people want to fight and make people strong. As they say, "There's strength in numbers."

I joined a work group in my community several years ago to try to improve the standard of living within my project for the children who were growing up there. They were coming up to the age when it was so necessary and so vital for them to have some direction and protection.

The way it stands at the moment, because there's so many single parents in Housing there's obviously a lot of poverty. Because these parents are living way below the poverty line, they have no support. They have a lot of problems due to their poverty. Low-income (working poor) families too are not making the wages to live anywhere else, so they are forced to live in Housing. Like all public housing tenants, they are subjected to the drug dealing, security problems and the abuse of the place. Seniors too are living in disgraceful situations, especially in Housing, where they're put in ghettoized areas. They have no advocates, they have no support groups that do anything about the fact that they've worked for many years and they're still poor.

Success? Well, I guess the first thing would be to get some recognition from Housing. The whole idea was to have consultation with Housing, to be able to give input into the decisions and policies they make at the top. At this point that's not happening. They say they are trying to, but the problem is our group is not recognized. Lack of recognition, lack of respect, lack of wanting to recognize that tenants living in MTHA really do have the same feelings across Metro. These people who are the "Authority," as they call it, they don't know anything about it the problems faced by MTHA tenants, because they don't live in this situation on a day-to-day basis.

RIAC consists of six tenants and six advisory members. Five of the six members of the council are women, and four are single mothers. With their struggles they can relate to other women with the same struggles — they can share a lot of grief, they can share

their own poverty issues.

Our advisory council consists of legal workers, community workers, people who work with the homeless, so we have a great deal of knowledge. We also have people who from time to time give us resources and input into the kind of information we need to help tenants. At times we need to meet with politicians, especially those who are sympathetic to our cause.

The one factor that joins our work as public housing activists to anti-poverty groups across the city and the province, is that we're all poor. We're all trying to survive, we're all trying to improve our standard of living. We're all fighting for better housing, more money, better ways to look after our families. I have joined other groups that support these same issues, such as Scarborough Poverty Eliminators Committee and Women for Economic Justice.

There is also an Ontario coalition against poverty. We had a poverty march last year where groups from across Ontario united and tried to push for better housing, better conditions and implementation of the SARC report recommendations. We hope to be able to tie in with many of these anti-poverty groups in the future.

When we had our RIAC conference in October 1988, we had a group from Scarborough that had come out of a poverty conference we'd held in June 1987. We thought that even the poor should have some humour and we could sometimes laugh at our own problems and see some of the lighter sides to it. So we formed the Scarborough Poverty Players to do some skits and to knock the agencies a little. We're not really attacking anyone in particular but some of the things that take place between the bureaucrats and the common people are absolutely idiotic, so we

found some humour in the fact that we're poor.

But humour aside, the government of Ontario must realize that poverty is a blatant reality. People are dying of poverty, people are suffering. The situation doesn't need to be so hopeless. The government needs to take action now to guarantee basic rights to everyone in Ontario — the right to have enough food, a decent roof over one's head and rights to good education and recreation.

The first thing politicians have to do to make this a reality is to educate themselves on the issues. When we approach politicians we found a sad lack of information about the SARC recommendations or about the kinds of changes that would make life better for the poor. They don't seem to be able to relate in any way to what they could do. They're more interested in being in a better Toronto, making it better for the rich, for the tourists. We have the Skydome, we have the

opera house, we have the Olympics coming in. We have all these things that cater to the wealthy and I don't see what they have that makes Toronto better for the poor. You know, when are we going to have affordable housing? For people who require housing it's not going to improve for many years to come.

MTHA and the government of Ontario must make affordable, safe housing a priority. Housing with quality lighting, design, maintenance and security — with locks that work, so tenants can feel safe in their own homes. They must provide monies not only to build housing but also for proper upkeep. Affordable housing is not enough; it must be properly maintained and not be left to turn into a slum in five years.

Just because it is affordable housing it should not lack safety and security. MTHA must take greater responsibility for the security and maintenance of its buildings, as efforts in these areas have been sadly

lacking. When buildings are well kept and tenants feel secure in their housing, tenant pride and dignity will follow.

If nothing else can wrench the conscience of this government to make desperately needed improvements to welfare and housing, surely the future of our children will. The government must realize that housing is a right, not a privilege. With this as a mandate, there is no choice but to act upon it. The poor too have a responsibility to organize to fight for a future for our children. Public housing tenants are not going to sit back anymore, we must empower ourselves.

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