

From: Hillbilly Nationalists,  
Race Rebels, and Black Power  
by Amy Sonniz and James Tracy

CHAPTER 4  
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## Lightning on the Eastern Seaboard: October 4th Organization and White Lightning

*Working class communities have been slow to anger, but we're angry now. . . . We've been slow to take to the streets, but we're learning from our Black sisters and brothers. Kensington [Philadelphia] today is like a time bomb. And if you refuse to hear the ticking, you'll have to hear the explosion.*

—October 4th Organization, Philadelphia, 1972

The Sixties were a shockingly violent decade for activists in the United States, yet it was the Seventies that ushered in a deeper systematic retaliation against civil rights and social justice. It was a sobering decade. Twenty-five years after World War II boosted the nation's economy, the post-war decline of manufacturing jobs coupled with urban planning disasters and depopulation, blighted northern cities. Urban centers experienced a spiral of disinvestment as suburban sprawl continued drawing wealth away from the city. Businesses buckled and northern factories scurried south in search of cheaper labor. In 1973 the rising cost of oil spiked the U.S. trade deficit and consumer prices rose to the highest point since the end of the Korean War. By 1974 more than 7 percent of the nation's workforce was unemployed. Black workers were hardest hit with unemployment levels surging to 15 percent. Even workers who had enjoyed a degree of security in the past were in an unfamiliar position—uncertain where the next paycheck would come from and in danger

of losing their homes. Once comfortably blue collar neighborhoods like Chicago's Southwest Side, Philadelphia's Kensington, and New York's Mott Haven section of the Bronx started to show more obvious signs of decline: adults milling around at midday, boarded up row homes and tenements, shuttered factories, mysterious fires and block after block of abandoned cars. It was exactly the economic crisis Students for a Democratic Society had predicted when it founded Jobs or Income Now; it just peaked ten years behind schedule. Just as SDS leaders Tom Hayden and Carl Whitman warned in "An Interracial Movement of the Poor," the document laying out the vision for projects like JOIN, it would take strong, permanent bases of unity among white workers and workers of color to curb rising fear that racial equity came at their own expense.

Progressive organizers faced a different terrain than the one they had seen in the radical Sixties. It was shaped, among other things, by severe economic recession, the splintering of New Left community organizations and mounting right-wing backlash. An overall job shortage combined with white workers' perception of favoritism toward workers of color created the conditions for resentment. In 1971 new affirmative action policies fueled this fire as Nixon's Labor Department passed legislation to correct the "underutilization" of minorities in federal contracting.<sup>1</sup> Politicians looking to fortify a conservative "law and order" agenda fomented white chauvinism for their own gain by exploiting people's fear of economic insecurity. They were part of a New Right taking shape in the United States. Broadly defined this movement included traditional Republicans, libertarians and conservative Democrats among its foot soldiers.<sup>2</sup>

The New Right's ascendance began in the final days of the McCarthy Era as politicians and pundits saw new ways to consolidate right-wing political influence in the United States. At first the movement argued for an alternative to economically conservative, but socially liberal, northern Republicanism by returning to the fervent states' rights and anti-interventionist foreign policy outlook once found in the Grand Old Party. At a glance, this movement resembled a discordant collection of organizations with little else in common. Soon, the emerging New Right made sense of its

patchwork by articulating a cogent criticism of New Deal-era social welfare, government bureaucracy, communism and civil rights. The New Right fostered an ethnocentric nationalism and began harnessing social anxieties about the emerging countercultures of beatniks, student leftists and organized people of color.<sup>3</sup>

In the late Fifties, economic conservatives such as William F. Buckley and the intellectuals surrounding the *National Review* magazine vocally embraced racism, arguing that white southerners had the right to forcibly resist integration because whites represented the era's advanced race (though Buckley later changed his tune). As the movement grew, Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign for president pushed a platform of states' rights and shrinking federal government. He and other New Right politicians rejected Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and any efforts to expand social welfare. When Goldwater lost, his supporters turned inward and spent the better part of a decade perfecting their strategies. At the end of the Sixties the spinal column of the Democratic Party was forcefully realigned as the Dixiecrats fled the party and joined the Republicans. By the start of the Seventies, the U.S. looked more conservative than the post-war social order Sixties activists had rebelled against.

On the East Coast, two groups inspired by Chicago's Rising Up Angry emerged to harness the era's revolutionary aspirations and address the unique conditions of their working-class neighborhoods. Philadelphia's October 4th Organization (O4O) and New York's White Lightning each played David to the Goliath of organized political backlash and economic decline. In Philadelphia, Goliath was cop-turned-mayor Frank Rizzo, who harvested the anxieties of Italian, Irish, Polish and Greek communities to secure his throne at City Hall. "Tough on crime" barely described a mayor wielding the police force as shock troops against neighborhoods of color and the Left. For Rizzo the mounting financial crisis provided an opportunity for fearmongering, but industrial collapse and a widening wealth gap proved a Goliath of its own for Philadelphia residents.

In the Bronx, White Lightning faced off against the behemoth of New York's Rockefeller Drug Laws, named after then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Among other changes, the laws spelled major

prison sentences for minor possession. Rockefeller's "mandatory minimums" marked a decisive early battle in the War on Drugs. The state spent more than \$76 million locking people up for drug offenses between 1973 and 1976 alone, ignoring the fact that hard drug use actually increased during the same period. Blacks and Latinos composed more than 90 percent of drug convictions over the next two decades and incarceration rates soared to record levels. As New York went, so went the nation. State after state echoed Rockefeller's harsh punishments for nonviolent offenses and the U.S. prison population more than doubled by 1980. Over the ensuing two decades it quadrupled.<sup>4</sup> Implicit in White Lightning's fight against harsh drug penalties, though, was another Goliath at work in their communities: addiction.

O4O and White Lightning had chosen formidable targets. Rizzo and Rockefeller emerged as just two figures providing tempo for the New Right's dance to power. They did so with support from both sides of the political aisle. Rizzo, a right-wing Democrat, refined the language of white ethnic resentment and acted out his special hatred for the radical Left. Rockefeller, although considered a liberal by GOP standards, drafted the blueprint for the wholesale warehousing of the poor, especially Black and Brown nonviolent drug users. And yet O4O and White Lightning emerged not to weaken a particular opponent, but from the best impulses of the revolutionary moment: the belief that social transformation was not only necessary, but also possible. For the better part of the Seventies, October 4th Organization and White Lightning built on the progressive traditions in Kensington and the Bronx. Like JOIN, the Young Patriots and Rising Up Angry, they built a small but notable cadre of white radicals by providing direct community services and organizing against racist policy, the "war on the poor" and the seemingly endless war in Vietnam.

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Founded in 1971 by a small group of working-class radicals and ex-students, October 4th Organization took its name from an uprising

during the American War of Independence. On October 4, 1779, a throng of Philadelphians stormed the warehouses of merchants and businessmen that hoarded food and clothing in order to inflate prices. The original O4Oers seized supplies and redistributed them to the hungry.<sup>5</sup> The new O4O took this example as an inspiration. With an aim to “unite the people against big businessmen, merchants and politicians,” the group’s program reflected a spirited progressive populism and the “rising dynamism” of the revolutionary moment.<sup>6</sup> In this moment few organizations felt like a lone David facing off against Goliath. They had the power of numbers, moral purpose and optimism on their side.

Founding member Marilyn Buggey had grown up poor in Philly’s Germantown neighborhood. As a teenager, her father would remove the light bulb from her room so that she couldn’t study, insisting she work rather than go to school. The family needed the money, but she eventually got herself into Temple University and left home. Her fiancé, Jack Whalen, drove a cab for a living. In a short amount of time he had gone from a quiet adolescence in Union, New Jersey, to become a student activist at La Salle University. He might have preferred to stick with his original interests—baseball, girls and playing drums in a rock band—but politics found him. La Salle required students to complete Army ROTC coursework in order to graduate. With a moderately sized anti-war contingent, campus activists protested the requirements and won. Tame compared to the demonstrations that year at Columbia University, the La Salle campaign nonetheless garnered two thousand signatures on a petition and culminated with a 250-person sit-in, which ended compulsory ROTC. Their victory opened a floodgate for on-campus political activity.<sup>7</sup> Yet Buggey and Whalen grew frustrated with the insularity of campus activism. Both dropped out of college and moved to the Kensington neighborhood to live near the headquarters of the *Free Press* movement newspaper. There they met Robert Barrow,<sup>8</sup> Dan Sidorick, Chris Robinson and several others who became the nucleus of O4O. The organization provided a refuge for radicals alienated from the middle-class student

movement. O4O activists shared the belief that a large portion of the student Left was divorced from the realities of U.S. workers.

At Goldman Paper Company in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia these harsh realities were visible everywhere. Deindustrialization had taken a heavy toll in Kensington. Dozens of mill workers were laid off with just three days’ notice. Company owners threatened remaining workers with termination if they took sick days and harassed them into surrendering vacation time to avoid further layoffs. Instructed to operate large sheet-cutting machines alone, workers were told to ignore the dangerous labor shortage. The United Paperworkers International Union proved only marginally helpful, so Goldman workers like Dan Sidorick began organizing Kensington’s at-risk and unemployed workers under the banner of October 4th Organization. They heard the same story from everyone. Out-of-work men were being redirected to local Navy recruiters. Up until the Vietnam War ended in April 1975 the military remained the best bet for a steady job—that is, if they hadn’t already been drafted. Women were told to find domestic work or low-wage clerical jobs, as if the pay and insecurity of those jobs made up for the lost factory work some had done for decades. In response workers rallied outside the unemployment office at 5th and Olney just about every week demanding, as JOIN had, “Jobs or Income Now.”

With this early action, O4O set itself apart from other Left organizations by uniquely combining labor activism and community-based organizing. In Kensington there was no separating the two. Originally founded as an industrial township, outside the original borders of Philadelphia, Kensington was first settled by English, German, Irish and Scots immigrants. The population expanded during the twentieth century with new arrivals from Poland, Italy and Eastern Europe, including a substantial number of ethnic Jews. Journalist Peter Binzen’s description of the neighborhood in 1970 reads a lot like *Harper’s* sensational portrait of Uptown. “Kensington’s air is polluted, its streets and sidewalks are filthy, its juvenile crime rate rising, its industry languishing,” he wrote.<sup>9</sup> According to Binzen, bars and dingy row houses provided the backdrop for idle

youths hanging out on street corners, ready for trouble. Fabric mills and machine factories spanned the skyline. Many were boarded up. While an accurate description of some blocks, most were lined with small, tidy row houses with postage-stamp front yards, well kept by renters or owners who had been there for generations.

When it came to the city elite's portrayal of the neighborhood, Binzen's choice of chapter title in his book *Whitetown USA* captured the sentiment: "Kensington Against the World." In reality, neighborhood politics were more complex and O4O's founders knew that the real Kensington belied simplified media reports of a downtrodden neighborhood filled with proud and hardened racists. The right-wing hoodlums, cops and a few reactionary groups were always there and racial conflicts did occur, but O4O's work proved many more residents opposed these extremists than supported them. When a group of neighborhood troublemakers broke into a Puerto Rican family's home and started trashing it, dozens of neighbors filed into the house and stopped the assault. The cops drove by while it was happening, yet did nothing to intervene. It was practically policy for police to let such racial skirmishes play themselves out.

Beyond a local neo-Nazi and some diehard George Wallace supporters, it was Frank Rizzo who served as the city's most visible architect of this racial antagonism. The Philadelphia police followed Rizzo's lead and Rizzo made no secret of his support for white ethnics "protecting" their neighborhoods. Rizzo wasn't brilliant or even that charismatic, but his control over the city showed a skilled hand in machine politics. Rizzo was born in an Italian enclave of South Philadelphia and joined the police force in the Forties. For decades the city's Italian American workers held some of the lowest paying jobs the city had to offer. Italian immigration to Philadelphia picked up in the late 1800s when Congress passed laws allowing the importation of cheap labor, mostly into the country's low-wage manufacturing sector. To survive, most new Italian immigrants relied on padrones in order to find work and housing—an arrangement resembling part indentured servitude and part ward politics. The padrone system fit Rizzo's style

of governance perfectly and helped secure his tenure in the police department. Granting favors and exacting tributes, Rizzo projected the image of a strong father figure who had pulled himself up by his own Italian bootstraps. His campaign messages evoked stories of European immigrants who arrived with little and, through the virtues of hard work and discipline, built a well-earned stability.

The New Right found an unlikely partner in the Democrat Rizzo, but he proved himself a worthy tribune for the cause. As a Democrat he resembled more the total-domination style of machine politics embodied by Louisiana Governor Huey Long than the simple fear-based racism of George Wallace. In 1959 Rizzo led a series of raids on Philadelphia's growing bohemian coffeehouse scene. While the department pointed the finger at beatniks, many believed the raids were a pretext for anti-gay harassment. Police justified one raid by saying that a young girl told them she went to the café to meet lesbians. As one journalist put it, "Creeps, kooks, liberals, phonies, fags, ultraliberals, lefties and bums—Rizzo's morality dictates that he must save his city from the shaggy perverts whose politics or culture spread like dandruff."<sup>10</sup>

It was clear he planned to disembowel the Left and stir whites' fears about civil rights and the city's growing Black population. In 1967 he was promoted to police commissioner, a last stop on his way to City Hall. As an Italian-American, his promotion was a kind of coup at a time when Philadelphia's Irishmen dominated the department and anti-Italian bigotry ran high. Rizzo was under-terred though, and political events provided plenty of fodder for a tough Italian policeman looking to bolster his reputation. In November 1967 Philadelphia police beat up and arrested dozens of Black high school students during a demonstration calling for Black history classes and school improvements. The cops were following Commissioner Rizzo's direct orders after he shouted, "Get their black asses!"

The following year, in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, riots erupted in a hundred U.S. cities, burning some blocks to the ground. Philadelphia escaped substantial damage, attributed by many to Rizzo's use of mobile buses to quickly deploy

hundreds of officers to trouble spots. Only four years earlier, North Philly had erupted into an infamous riot after police arrested a Black couple for illegal parking. Damages were estimated at \$2 million. This time, however, Rizzo was in charge. Large showings of police force shored up Rizzo's image as a man who could keep the rabble in line. Rizzo was also skilled at conflating the Black communities' spontaneous outrage with organized civil rights actions. He laid the groundwork for his mayoral campaign by convincing white voters that the civil rights movement's real goals were specious and violent. Rizzo even had a group of hardcore Black supporters who he bonded with over their mutual hatred of radical dissidents (and a well-known policy of generous patronage). By the time he captured the mayoral seat, however, he minced few words about his plans for rebels, anti-police demonstrators and Blacks. In one of his more notorious statements, he bragged to a reporter, "I'm going to make Attila the Hun look like a faggot."<sup>11</sup>

As a new generation of rebels came of age in the City of Brotherly Love, Rizzo became notorious for his crackdowns on the Black Power movement and the New Left. In September 1969 police raided the Black Panthers' North Philly headquarters under the pretense of a fugitive search. A few months later, several Panthers were arrested on firearms charges, all of which were later dropped. In August of that year, Rizzo directed another raid on the Panther offices after unidentified Black men allegedly shot two police officers. He forced the Panthers to strip naked and invited the press to photograph them.<sup>12</sup> With the Panther leaders in jail, police gutted their offices seizing furniture, clothing, records and equipment. Word of Rizzo's brute force spread quickly in the Black community and across Philadelphia's Left. His efforts at intimidation backfired as hundreds of North Philly residents showed up to join the Panthers and rebuild their office before arrested leaders even got out of jail. In each incident Rizzo sharpened his use of the media to drive home the message that liberal dissidents would be punished. He revealed in graphic detail what he thought the government should do with the Panthers. "I don't know why we let idiots like them

survive. Maybe the laws have to be changed. . . . These creeps lurk in the dark. They should be strung up. . . . I mean within the law."<sup>13</sup>

By all accounts Rizzo relished his shock value. Apparently, so did some voters. In 1971, Rizzo became the first Italian-American mayor of Philadelphia. He was voted in by white working-class residents in South Philly, Kensington, Fishtown, Frankford and Port Richmond. An estimated 20,000 Republican voters switched their affiliation to the Democrats in order to vote for Rizzo in the primary, helping him win the mayoral seat by a 50,000-vote margin. His victory reflected the ambitions of many white ethnic workers who faced some of the toughest times seen since the Depression. It also symbolized the apex of a decades-long process of Italian-American assimilation into the city's power structure.

Assimilation or not, Rizzo capitalized on the fact that many white ethnic groups who had arrived in a melting pot of indistinguishable whiteness were eager to reclaim their immigrant roots and traditions. Groups like O4O and White Lightning recognized the importance of these identities, as well, and encouraged members to explore the cultural traditions and progressive histories of their ancestors. However, Rizzo fortified a conservative brand of white ethnic chauvinism and deployed it toward a fine-tuned politics of resentment and discrimination. As the economy buckled under severe recession, white workers and immigrants who had ascended from poverty to a semblance of security felt in a precarious position. The real Philadelphia, Rizzo claimed, was threatened by civil rights, intermarriage and suburbanization. The noble working-class who had built the city (by which he meant only European immigrants) needed to shore up "defenses." Philadelphia's population had fallen below two million people as middle-class whites moved to the suburbs. Those who remained were anxious about scarcity and job competition with the factories closing down. Their presumed competition came from Black workers who had moved North looking for work and, to a smaller extent, new communities of Puerto Ricans, Chinese and Cambodian immigrants. As middle-class whites left for Bucks, Chester and Montgomery Counties during the Fifties and Sixties, the Black population in Philadelphia more

than doubled. With it grew resentment from the city's remaining white elite and some white working-class residents who couldn't afford the train to the suburbs.

Despite the relative insularity of the neighborhood, many of O4O's members already had close relationships with Black and Latino Philadelphians. In some cases they went to school together and often they worked together. O4O member Sue Milligan<sup>14</sup> got a job in an insurance firm after high school where she worked with many Black women. She related to these women as friends and coworkers, hanging out after work and partying together along with several of her friends from Kensington. Before Milligan ever heard about O4O, those relationships catalyzed her political awareness. One of her good friends had recently gotten involved with the Black Muslim movement and admired Malcolm X. Milligan had only ever heard about Malcolm X's "white devils" comments, so she worried what this might mean for their friendship. Malcolm had changed his thinking, her friend explained. He opened to the possibility of working with whites and in 1965 he had outlined a model for multiracial alliances similar to the one SNCC and the Panthers adopted. This inspired Milligan. Malcolm X had seen the same deep connections between race and class oppression that she was starting to see. Milligan began reading more and having discussions with her Black friends about institutionalized racism. She didn't join O4O immediately but once she did Milligan joined the Women's Committee and started attending the group's education sessions. Like most other radical groups at the time, O4O members read and discussed Marx, Engels, Mao, Che, emerging feminist theory and literature from the era's current political movements. In practice, both Milligan's personal relationships and O4O played equally important roles in her political education. Each helped her develop the deeper values that turned her into a lifelong organizer.

O4O's unique labor-community organizing model spoke to Milligan as well. O4O organized in both workplaces and the surrounding neighborhood from its inception. While some leftists debated whether workplaces made better sites for mass mobilization than neighborhoods, which usually lack a single unifying issue,

O4O "didn't have the luxury of choosing one or the other," as Milligan put it. In neighborhoods like Kensington where machine shops and factories sat interspersed with narrow row homes, the workplace and the community were inseparable. In contrast to other neighborhood-focused groups like JOIN and Rising Up Angry, or even the Revolutionary Youth Movement II, which grew out of SDS and focused solely on factory organizing, O4O carved out a unique position by organizing where they lived *and* where they worked.

O4O's Chris Robinson grew up in the then working-class and semi-rural Fox Chase section of Philadelphia. After a stint in SDS he joined Revolutionary Youth Movement II in order to organize workers, but through O4O he found Kensington to be the best of both worlds. O4O activists made sure their neighbors remembered the city's history of multiracial women's organizing among Jewish, Italian and Black garment workers in the 1920s. They set a practical and moral pole for Kensington to continue in that tradition and hundreds joined the cause, as neighbors and workers. Class was always the group's starting point, and addressing racism was simply part and parcel of fighting capitalism. For O4O's Dan Sidorick this approach meant organizing his coworkers at Goldman Paper Company against layoffs and dangerous working conditions by day and his neighbors against police brutality, the war and big business by night.

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During its early days O4O's leaders looked around for an issue that could jump-start the organization, expose Rizzo and unite people. Rizzo's regime had well-known outposts in the neighborhood, including social service providers like the Lighthouse Settlement. These outposts provided both obstacle and opportunity for O4O. Founded in 1893 to provide social services to the neighborhood's mill workers, the Lighthouse of the Seventies provided recreational and social services to the majority-white neighborhoods of Kensington and Fishtown despite sitting within arm's reach of

North Philadelphia's Black and Puerto Rican communities. When the Black Panthers and Young Lords campaigned to start a free breakfast program at the Lighthouse, a powerful group of white residents called the Committee of 11 rallied to stop the program and the distribution of leftist newspapers like the *Free Press*, which Rizzo had declared "even more dangerous than the Panthers." Several members of the board expressed interest in change but none wanted to anger Rizzo or alienate those white residents who were protesting loudly about racial mixing in the neighborhood. The board decided to create a separate division to "service" Black and Puerto Rican residents, which meant de facto segregation from the other programs. The group decided to go on the offensive with a campaign to democratize the Lighthouse Settlement.

After surveying residents, O4O found that a good number of people opposed the racial bias of their more vocal neighbors. However, most feared losing their jobs or facing other retaliation if they spoke up. They also weren't too pleased that the Lighthouse barred young women from joining sports leagues. Working with local activists of color, O4O issued a set of demands to the Lighthouse that included ending discrimination, diversifying its board and creating a sports program for girls. They kept up pressure as well to set up community-sponsored events like free concerts in Lighthouse Field. When their demands were denied, they placed a band and a generator on a flatbed truck and led a march through Kensington. Three hundred residents joined them in the pouring rain. The action yielded no immediate changes, but it gave O4O a chance to test its mettle and identify neighbors sympathetic to their cause. With its base of support secure O4O started both a jobs project and a community school, but it was in confronting police brutality that the group really earned its street credentials.

Throughout surrounding neighborhoods O4O started distributing pocket-sized cards for the People's Bail Project including information about individuals' rights during arrest, booking and trial. Leaders recognized the effort as critical to build unity among working-class neighborhoods across the city. The cards provided an opportunity to talk directly with white residents, reminding them

that police harassment was something all working-class residents had in common. On an individual basis, this undermined the mayor's basic tactic. Rizzo was relying on fear and the magnetism of overly simple explanations: crime in Philadelphia was up and so too was the city's Black population.<sup>15</sup> White residents were left to draw easy conclusions about cause and effect. Rizzo made his solution clear: Control the rising Black population, show them who's boss, lock them up and throw away the key. Such logic asked white communities to assume if people of color went to jail they must have deserved it. O4O worked to point out the fallacy of such assumptions.

Police behavior in white neighborhoods made this argument easy for them. According to O4O community surveys, police seemed to do anything they wanted to poor white residents in Kensington and nearby Fishtown. One incident in the neighborhood drove the point home. In September 1970 Philadelphia police shot and killed Paul Frankenhauser, a young Fishtown resident. When the cops responsible were let off with no penalty, Frankenhauser's family contacted O4O for help. The following April the group planned a protest demanding that the city reopen the investigation into his death.<sup>16</sup> Community members, including Frankenhauser's wife Joann, decided to disrupt one of Rizzo's rallies in the heart of the Fishtown neighborhood. The police anticipated the protest and members of its Civil Disobedience Squad were already on the scene.<sup>17</sup> The Frankenhauers and O4O demanded an audience with Rizzo, at which point the police attacked the unarmed residents shattering the skull of O4O co-founder Robert Barrow. When Whalen pulled up in his taxi, it immediately doubled as an ambulance and a getaway car. A lawsuit against Rizzo for Robert Barrow's beating resulted in a \$5,000 settlement.

Over the next few years, O4O expanded its programs to address just about every issue likely to build community power and improve conditions. At one point the entire leadership of O4O participated in setting up community self-help centers and planned a "Community Health Fair" at the McPherson Square Library that drew people from surrounding neighborhoods to get free testing for diabetes, glaucoma, anemia and lead poisoning. Hundreds of

city residents showed up to talk to volunteer health providers, get tests they hadn't been able to afford and lend their voices to O4O's demand for universal health care.

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With a growing membership, O4O also started raising questions about the bigger context, nationally and internationally. Radical organizations in the late Sixties and early Seventies, especially those focused on neighborhood work, were always on the search for ways to "bring the war home." O4O knew that protests and preaching about the ills of U.S. foreign policy would just push residents farther away. With hundreds of locals fighting in Vietnam, the war was already right at home for them. O4O's Sue Milligan had seen dozens of friends drafted. Some never came back. Others came home badly injured and psychologically wounded. The local high school her brothers attended had the highest Vietnam War casualty rate for a student body in the entire country; fifty-four Thomas Edison High School students lost their lives in the war. Illustrating the broader problems with the war meant finding a different approach from the student movement's mass rallies. During a pair of carpet-bombings just before Christmas 1972, B-52 bombers unleashed thirty bombs over heavily populated sections of Haiphong and Hanoi in North Vietnam. Timed just days after the breakdown of the Paris peace talks between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, the "Christmas bombings" destroyed thirty multiunit residential buildings in the Kham Thien area and leveled the 900-bed Bach Mai Hospital, killing twenty-five doctors. Pentagon spokesperson Jerry Friedman described the destruction as "some limited, accidental damage."<sup>18</sup> Columbia University professor and retired general Telford Taylor, who was in Hanoi at the time, vividly described a very different scene in the *New York Times*: "Hospital grounds were torn by huge fresh craters and the buildings that escaped hits were shattered by blasts . . . with rescue workers carrying patients piggyback, cranes and bulldozers and people using only their hands desperately clearing debris to reach victims said to be still buried

in the rubble, and the frantic hospital director running from one building to another."<sup>19</sup>

Although the war was never short on atrocities, the bombing became a powerful symbol for the anti-war movement and spread dissent far beyond radical circles. In New York, the cast members of seventeen Broadway plays gave up their pay on Richard Nixon's Inauguration Day and contributed the money to the hospital's reconstruction. Public repulsion was so widespread that the Internal Revenue Service took the unprecedented step of officially disallowing tax-deductions for any contributions to the Bach Mai Emergency Relief Fund.<sup>20</sup> O4O came up with their own way to help. They launched a blood drive, walking door-to-door in Kensington and Fishtown to recruit donors. The organization wanted to show the world that the workers of Philadelphia were opposed to the war. At house after house they found supporters. Hundreds of willing participants joined the effort. Many donated money. The rest showed up at the blood bank the following Saturday. Even among Kensington's more conservative residents, nobody agreed with bombing a hospital.

The blood drive also provided an opportunity to talk about the costs of war. Many residents had already made the connection. Their own local hospitals were in dangerously poor shape and low-income women regularly received shoddy treatment when seeking health care, especially for reproductive health issues. Health care and women's issues also emerged as a natural place to build strong coalitions with activists of color. Through their friends at the Third World Women's Alliance, O4O members learned, for the first time, about the U.S. government's practice of forcibly sterilizing Native American and Puerto Rican women, as well as Black women and women prisoners. The Third World Women's Alliance published a newspaper called *Triple Jeopardy* dealing with the impacts of racism, poverty and sexism on the lives of low-income women of color. After inviting *Triple Jeopardy* to a meeting to discuss how they could support each other, O4O women formed a multiracial coalition with the Puerto Rican Socialist Party to tackle issues with particular impact on women's lives.<sup>21</sup> Their major campaign drew

in a broader cross-section of women's groups focused on improving patient treatment at St. Joseph's hospital in North Philly.

Over the next several years O4O's women's group emerged as an anchor point for the group's community work. Like Rising Up Angry, women in O4O never considered splitting off into a separate women's group. Instead the group resolved to struggle together around sexism in the same way they struggled within the organization around class and within their community around racism. At one point a couple of male members of the steering committee were suspended for sexism, but O4O's overall approach was to educate, discuss and learn together. The O4O women's group started organizing regular educational forums for both men and women on issues like equal pay and reproductive freedom. The forums also provided a space to uproot sexist attitudes among members and reinforced the idea—which needed pointing out at the time—that women are and have always been strong leaders.

With the forums as a model O4O used ongoing popular education methods to deepen conversations with residents on a range of issues from city corruption to foreign policy. During one session, O4O bused Kensington residents to the Main Line suburbs to see how the rich lived. They made special stops at the homes of nineteen individuals O4O believed directly oppressed and exploited the neighborhood, especially landlords and elite industrialists.<sup>22</sup> This simple geographic tour of the city's political economy focused people's anger. O4O understood that in a community the strong arm of "the boss" isn't always as visible as in the workplace. The tour showed there were real people reaping real benefits from O4O members' cycle of poverty. By showing where these landlords and corporate elites profited in nearby poor Black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods, the tours also helped residents see common cause across racial lines. A special issue of the local *Kensington News Bulletin* provided background information on the nineteen targets, which the *Philadelphia Daily News* dubbed, "A handy tabloid-size directory of Who's Who and Where He Got His."

Knowing where he got his, or how he kept it, mattered like never before among families devastated by unemployment, record

inflation and the city's disregard. It also helped O4O choose its targets. In one campaign the organization took a page from the unemployed workers' movements of the Thirties using direct action "office visits" to challenge Philadelphia Energy and Gas Company for cutting off electricity to families behind in their bills. Twelve O4O members accompanied one mother to the utility offices to demand her electricity be restored. The single mother of two had paid her back debt but couldn't make the extra \$25 reinstallation charge. As a result of the action, PECO restored her service.<sup>23</sup> In another incident, city inspectors failed to hold anyone accountable for a massive sewage backup in the home of a young Kensington family. The city's property licensing department claimed they didn't know who owned the house. After two months and hours spent scooping the sewage out with buckets, the family called O4O for legal help. A volunteer lawyer uncovered a chain of previous owners and missing city records that could have been replaced within days, not weeks. O4O planned a sit-in to demand the city repair the broken pipe and locate the owner. The day before the action a plumber appeared at the home to clean up the waste and fix the sewer line.

With interventions like these, O4O did its best to improve people's daily reality. Each action earned them new supporters. About sixty people served in the organization's core leadership at some point, and about five hundred participated as regular members over the years. Unfortunately, not every action succeeded and rising unemployment only made things harder for the region. Philadelphia lost 40,000 jobs between 1971 and 1974, most in the manufacturing trades and private construction. When the city announced almost three hundred jobs would open up in September 1974, ten thousand workers stood outside in the rain to apply. It was a waste of time. Mayor Frank Rizzo had already filled the positions with his supporters and their friends. Many people in Kensington always disliked the mayor and the city's machine politics, but Rizzo had a big enough base to aim for reelection that year. After all, backdoor promotions to civil service positions were just one of the perks offered to his loyal supporters.

In the lead-up to his 1974 reelection, Rizzo returned to his old tricks trying to divide residents in North Philly and Kensington along racial lines by dedicating himself to blocking the relocation of Thomas Edison High School. The Vietnam War had devastated the student body, but the school itself looked like its own kind of war zone. The school building at 8th and Lehigh—then named Northeast High School—was declared a fire hazard in 1956. At the time, city officials responded by redistricting. They opened a new school in the far Northeast to serve the city's remaining middle-class families, but they kept the old building open. The city just gave it a new name and filed in poorer Black, Puerto Rican and white students from North Philly and Kensington. Because Edison was the only boys' public school in the area, neighborhood boys had no choice but to attend Edison High, unless they were fortunate enough to attend Catholic school. The campaign to rebuild the high school in a new location near Lighthouse Field forced the issue of neighborhood unification. Rizzo seized the opportunity to remind white residents that the new locale would bring Black and Puerto Rican students closer to the heart of Kensington. O4O naturally joined parents and students in pressing for the new school site. When Rizzo's forces asked people in Kensington to call the governor to voice their concerns about the relocation, three times as many people called to vote for the new site.

During his second-term campaign Rizzo had to work twice as hard for Kensington's votes. Many in the neighborhood were fed up with the regime. In the months preceding the election, police harassment of local kids had reached new levels. Cops swept through the area around Westmoreland and Mascher Streets arresting almost every young person in sight, seemingly without provocation. According to a witness quoted in O4O's newspaper, "They got a paperboy who was collecting on his route, a boy walking his mother to bingo, kids on errands for their parents, several people sitting on their front steps, and people hanging in the schoolyard—forty-seven in all." At one point the cops crammed twenty-one kids into a single paddy wagon. Kensington residents reacted instinctively; two hundred parents spontaneously blocked an intersection

at Front and Allegheny to prevent further raids. Police had illustrated, once again, that the department's brutality problem lived on both sides of the color line. Protests against the police department increased and so did Rizzo's tough-guy rhetoric. His divisive tactics had failed at Edison, but he wasn't finished. In 1975 Frank Rizzo was reelected as mayor, once again drawing his support from white ethnic communities in the Northeast, South Philly, Richmond and to a lesser extent Kensington. He won, but he spent \$1.2 million to do so—three times more than his opponents.<sup>24</sup>

Frank Rizzo hadn't changed, but some minds in Kensington and Fishtown had. O4O built a sense of possibility among workers and residents, breaking through the fears they learned during decades of scarcity and red baiting. Their challenges and successes, however small, showed an innovative approach to organizing white communities during a decade of political and economic fallout. Their workplace-plus-community approach was unique at the time, and helped demonstrate their message of working-class unity in practical ways. They supported local workers when they went on strike and used their newspaper to share dispatches from national groups, such as the United Farm Workers of America. They celebrated the historic campaign of Mother Jones to support textile workers and stop child labor and they highlighted Philadelphia's history of progressive populism. In the end, people in O4O felt like they were a part of something bigger, which is precisely what kept many of them in the movement far beyond the group's lifetime.

Part of this broader connection came from their collaboration with Rising Up Angry in Chicago and White Lightning in the Bronx. Rising Up Angry's Steve Tappis played the biggest role in uniting the three groups. Tappis spent time in both Philly and the Bronx working to set up a formal alliance. At the time there were fewer national forums for neighborhood organizers to share lessons or collaborate so his attempt was more difficult than it would have been a few years earlier. The formal alliance never amounted to much more than moral support, information sharing and reprinting

articles from each other's papers, but the groups' shared analysis did bolster their sense of purpose.