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Alma Barlow: Grassroots Leadership and the Rise of the Richmond Tenants Organization

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Abstract

This sociological essay examines the important role Alma Barlow played in the creation of the Richmond Tenants Organization (RTO). Her role in this endeavor is crucial as it highlights other issues forced into the public arenas at the same time. The first concerned housing, specifically, public housing, made more urgent during the era of housing discrimination, and the call by many for the U.S. government, and states and local communities to enact a comprehensive public housing policy. Second, the rise of Alma Barlow and the fight for equity in public housing and many other areas of Black life, as revealed in her political activism in the city of Richmond and the state of Virginia, replicated the political activism of other Black women activists on the national stage—women like Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, and Ella Baker. Third, Alma Barlow's housing activism was occurring simultaneously with two other issues of national importance being acted out in Richmond and vicinity: *Brown vs Board of Education* and issues of school integration and desegregation, and the legal and political issues associated with the Richmond–Chesterfield Annexation Dispute. Fourth, this article discusses the issues which precipitated the rise of the RTO, the process in the creation of RTO, the confrontations with the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RRHA), and the many issues involved in this confrontation, and the role Alma Barlow played in this process. Finally, Alma Barlow's organizational role outside of RTO is analyzed to illustrate her widening social, economic, and political role in the city, the region, and the state.

Keywords: public housing, tenants, racial politics, political community, social and political advocacy, grassroots leaders, grassroots organizing, social and political commitment

Alma Barlow: Grassroots Leadership and the Rise of the Richmond Tenants Organization

To understand the significance of Alma Barlow and her role as a grassroots leader in the formation of the Richmond Tenants Organization, one must know the important role of housing in the health and well-being in the lives of Americans, especially Black Americans. Racial discrimination in housing has been pervasive in American society, both as practiced individually and as national public policy (Franklin & Moss, Jr., 1988). Probably unknown to many, the segregationist policy of the American government as stated in the Federal Housing Administration mandate required that "...properties shall be continued to be occupied by the same social and racial classes" (Ibid). This national policy was both promoted and enacted by local and regional governments, north and south, as millions of Blacks uprooted themselves from their rural communities and moved to small, medium, and large cities in the south, north, and west (Freer, 2004, pp. 614-618). The post-Depression housing shortage and the heavy in-migration to medium and large American cities prompted the emergence of the Public Works Administration and the creation of public housing projects to replace deteriorating urban housing blight (Barnett & Hefner, 1976, pp. 60-61). The first of six low-income housing projects built in Richmond, Virginia, was Gilpin Court, whose construction began in 1941 and was completed in 1943. Subsequent courts in the city were Hillside, Creighton, Fairfield, Whitcomb, and Mosby, the last court, completed in 1962.

Public housing projects throughout the United States were built in areas of cities which reflected the racial and class populations in those areas and districts. For this reason, it was virtually impossible for them to be built in predominately middle- class areas and districts. Likewise, predominately Black units were in predominately Black areas, while white units were in predominately white areas. The urban housing crisis which precipitated the construction of the six

housing projects in Richmond should be viewed in connection to the rapid racial population shifts occurring in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. But Alma Barlow's role must be viewed from the perspective of what was the traditional relationship between housing development administrators and public housing residents. In this relationship residents had little to no voice in the decision-making processes which affected them. Hence, this traditional relationship set the stage for the emergence of Alma Barlow and RTO. In addition, we cannot discount the impact of external events and activities which may have had direct, or indirect, influence. One was the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The other was the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The latter struck down southern-manufactured pre-requisites to voting which had long prevented Blacks from voting: the white-only primary; poll taxes; literacy clauses; and the grandfather clause. Both the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act opened the doors for activists such as Alma Barlow. In Richmond, Alma Barlow and others channeled their energy into the register to vote drive initiated by the Richmond Crusade for Voters and the local chapter of the NAACP. The other crises in the Richmond area were the already mentioned annexation conflict and the aftermath of the on-going school desegregation issue made prominent by the Byrd Machine and its Massive Resistance strategy against the Brown School Decision. While these many issues were being argued and debated, Alma Barlow was laying the foundation for a new, and for many, a radical perspective, that would entail growing power to public housing residents and a new orientation to power from below – power to the oppressed, the outsider, and the marginal. In a sense, the creation of RTO would not only empower the powerless, but it also gave the formerly powerless a new perspective of who they were and their importance on the local, regional, and national scenes. RTO's creation, therefore, has sociological as well as psychological significance.

Grassroots Organizations

Grassroots organizations and politics have always been a feature of Black organizational life. On a national level the NAACP and the Urban League are known to many. What is not known are the many grassroots organizations, locally created to deal with local problems with which Black citizens had to deal as they confronted whites in their local communities over issues of employment, wages, and legal and social inequalities and injustice. Though many men created and were active in grassroots organizations, this study of the emergence of RTO, and the predominance of Black women in the leadership role prompts a review of women-led grassroots organizations and the women who were grassroots organizers and leaders. Under the sub-title of “Grassroots Politics,” Eric Arnesen (2003, pp. 18-29) describes the emergence of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and the competitive politics with which it engaged both the NAACP and *The Messenger*, the magazine published by Black socialists in Harlem. Important in this segment on “Grassroots Politics” was the author’s discussion of Black women organizations, such as “Mother’s Clubs,” Republic Clubs, and Laundry Workers Union.

Women grassroots leaders have always existed and will continue to exist, for each local crisis, or problem, and will elicit the attention and response from that special person who will see and understand the local problem in ways not seen by others. In addition, their motivation to attack the problem will seem to be greater than those around them. That is the very definition of leadership and being a leader.

One of the grassroots leaders important to highlight and celebrate is Septima Clark. Septima Clark was a teacher in Charleston, South Carolina and along with Esau Jenkins, created and worked with The Progressive Club on Johns Island, S.C., to educate, provide funds, and

medical care for the poor during the Jim Crow years of rigid segregation. The first author of this paper remembers Mrs. Clark well, as she taught fourth grade at Henry P. Archer Elementary School in Charleston, S.C. while he was a student there. She was later fired for belonging to the local chapter of the NAACP and for refusing to withdraw her membership. The Charleston city and county officials then viewed the NAACP as a communist organization. Cynthia Stokes Brown (1990) and Katherine Mellen Charron (2012) have written extensive biographies of Mrs. Clark.

Another grassroots organizational leadership model is Fannie Lou Hamer. Her grassroots legacy is very different from that of Septima Clark as she was born and reared in extreme poverty. Her emergence as a fearless local grassroots leader is one of assertion, conviction, and determination. This determination was capped by her co-founding of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and its challenge to the all-white Democratic Party delegates in 1964 at the National Democratic Party Convention. Many books have been written about Mrs. Hamer, but two by Earnest N. Bracey (2011) and Meagen Parker Brooks (2014) are noteworthy.

If Alma Barlow were in search of grassroots leaders to emulate, she could find no greater models than generations of Black women such as Septima Clark, Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer. Researchers studying the racial politics of Richmond, Moeser and Dennis (1982, 2020), Silver and Moeser (1995), and B. Campbell (2011) have cited the important role of a Richmond grassroots leader, Curtis Holt, Sr., and his role in the Richmond annexation dispute.

Alma Marie Barlow and the 1960s

Alma Barlow was a significant advocate for the poor, the dispossessed, and the outsider. As she, the daughter of a Lunenburg County, Virginia farmer, was evolving from her teen years in Victoria, Virginia, as a basketball player, tennis player, cheerleader, usher in her church, and church choir member, to eventually reside in Fairfield Court in 1961. She would remain there for

more than thirty years. Public housing issues were exploding throughout the nation, especially in Harlem (Franklin & Moss, Jr., Ibid). It was here that Jesse Gray placed housing and housing inequities on the national agenda when he led a Harlem rent strike to highlight the deteriorating conditions of Harlem's low-rent public housing. The strike provided the foundation for the creation of the National Tenants Organization that became the umbrella group for the local Richmond Tenants Organization, a group in which Alma Barlow served as president for fifteen years. However, throughout the 1960s, Barlow was getting her activist teeth sharpened by her involvement in other regional issues. For example, when she was fired from her job as a housekeeper during a leadership session at John Marshall Hotel in Richmond, she was immediately hired in the office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth where she became a leading advocate for poor women in the city of Richmond. Also, during the 1960s, she returned periodically to Lunenburg, County, where she was born, to convince cafeteria workers to unionize. Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) sought to convince the workers to unionize. Barlow had little success in this venture, though her efforts to get residents to support the larger programs and platforms of Martin Luther King, Jr. were more successful (Barlow, recorded interview, Summer, 1982).

In a sense, Alma Barlow's role in Richmond, Virginia, especially her role in the formation of RTO and her general role as advocates of the poor and dispossessed, can be encapsulated within the framework of grassroots politics and economics. Throughout the nation, Black Americans were exercising their political, social, cultural, and economic options to carve out new areas by which to define themselves and create new agendas. The idea of grassroots and grassroots leadership denotes an orientation to the unorganized, those not already connected to large societal political, social, and economic networks and large-scale organizations. Above all, grassroots movements

such as the movements around the works of Jesse Gray and the National Tenants Organization in New York, the Richmond Tenants Organization, Fannie Lou Hamer's work with sharecroppers in Mississippi, and the grassroots work of Esau Jenkins and Septima Clark with the Progressive Club on Johns Island, near Charleston, South Carolina, are all examples which illustrate the emergence of grassroots movements and activities as frameworks for insurgent organizations (Rachal, 1998; Levine, 2004; Jenkins & Perrow, 1977; Clark & Twining, 1980). Insurgent organizations and groups have their origins in grassroots soil and are rooted in long standing local and regional problems that those in power have refused to either address, or change. For this reason, grassroots leaders, representing local constituents must inevitably confront and challenge powerful individuals, organizations, and groups. To do this, insurgent groups, from the weakened though skillful positions, must make use of physical confrontations, protests, sit-ins, and boycotts to force powerful institutions and organizations to not only address unresolved issues, but also to learn how to listen to the powerless, now not so powerless, and to make political, economic, and other socio-political amends.

The Beginning of a Social Movement-Organizing the Unorganized

The Richmond Tenants Organization began as a group called The Council of Presidents, and Barlow was president of one of the local councils in 1971. In 1975 she was elected President of the Council of Presidents. In 1977 the Council of Presidents was renamed The Richmond Tenants Organization. RTO immediately applied for and was given membership and affiliation with the National Tenants Organization. This, in effect, shifted Barlow from the presidency of the Council of Presidents to the presidency of the newly named Richmond Tenants Organization. In July 1978, there was an additional structural change in RTO, and Barlow became the Executive President of the Richmond Tenants Organization. As she told a Richmond-Times Dispatch reporter

during an interview on August 1, 1978: “The primary concerns of the tenants are to have some say in the running of the projects and to eliminate what they [the tenants] call harassment and lack of interest by housing officials for low-income tenants.”

The immediate issue which created a crisis for RTO and the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority was heating in residents’ homes. For many months, residents in all the courts had been contacting Mrs. Barlow about inadequate heating in their homes, and she visited other housing projects in other states to find out how they dealt with such problems. Though heating was the most immediate issue, the RRHA’s new lease agreement with tenants, a government requirement, was approaching, and RTO wanted to make sure it would have a seat at the table and have a decisive voice in the deliberations.

To prepare for the encounter with RRHA, as stated earlier, Mrs. Barlow visited public housing advocates in other cities in Virginia, and in other states. Though the heating problem was the most immediate problem, the issues expanded as she met with other public housing advocates. She developed a strategy and an outline for addressing the problems she and RTO had to address:

1. She reviewed the leases presented to tenants by other housing authorities to observe what was covered or excluded. How was the rent collected, and by whom? How much were late payment fees, and when were the deadlines, when were they due? Who determined when rent increases would occur, and the percentage rates determining such increases? Mrs. Barlow and the RTO Council wanted assurances that the tenant rights were recognized and protected in tenant-RRHA relations and interactions. Above all, she wanted to make sure that a federally funded housing program, designed to help those most in need of public housing assistance, was doing so.

2. After a careful review of the leases from the housing authorities contacted, Mrs. Barlow and the RTO Council read hundreds of pages of federal guidelines and regulations regarding public housing leases.
3. Meetings were held with tenants in all the Richmond public housing projects in which tenants were asked to express their views of the RRHA and what they wished to include in any revamped leases.
4. After receiving comments from residents, RTO proceeded to draft its own version of the provisions for a revised RRHA–Tenants lease. A revised RRHA–Tenants lease was approved by those attending the lease discussion meeting, and this was in addition, approved by the RTO Council.
5. RTO then hired an attorney to review what the Council had approved and the format in which this would be presented to the Executive Director of RRHA.
6. Mrs. Barlow met with women from all the housing projects to organize and train them on issues related to public housing policies and procedures. It should be noted that men were not intentionally excluded. It is the reality, however, that women have, from the very beginning of RTO, been in the forefront of the leadership of RTO as well as comprised most of the more active participants in housing authority activities.

In late July 1987, Mrs. Barlow met with Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority officials and presented a list of non-negotiable demands. A failure of RRHA to meet the demands would result in a rent strike. The following table illustrates Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority Policies and Requirements and Richmond Tenants Organization (RTO) Counter Policies and Demands.

1	<p>RRHA existing rent and lease policy and requirement: Provide “reasonable” amounts of heat and hot water.</p> <p>RTO counter policy and demand: Provide adequate amount of heat and hot water.</p>
2	<p>RRHA existing rent and lease policy and requirement: In the lease, RRHA should be referred to as “management,” not “authority.”</p> <p>RTO in agreement: RRHA is the “management.”</p>
3	<p>RRHA existing rent and lease policy and requirement: Rent is raised when tenants’ income increases (federal requirement).</p> <p>RTO counter policy and demand: Rent should increase annually.</p>
4	<p>RRHA existing rent and lease policy and requirement: Changes in lease and management policy can only be made by officials of RRHA.</p> <p>RTO counter policy and demand: All changes in lease and management policies must be made with RTO as the official body representing all tenants in public housing.</p>
5	<p>RRHA existing rent and lease policy and requirement: All repairs to repair requests will be handled within a reasonable time period.</p> <p>RTO counter policy and demand: All repairs to requests must be done in 24 hours: tenants may refuse to pay rent until repairs are made.</p>
6	<p>RRHA existing rent and lease policy and requirement: All tenants are responsible for providing their own means to transport themselves to pay rent at designated places.</p> <p>RTO counter policy and demand: RRHA should provide transportation to the handicapped and elderly to enable them to pay rent at designated locations.</p>
7	<p>RRHA existing rent and lease policy and requirement: The RRHA does not provide stoves or refrigerators. Standard locks are provided for entrances.</p> <p>RTO counter policy and demand: RRHA must provide stoves, refrigerators, window locks and deadbolt locks for all entrances.</p>
8	<p>RRHA existing rent and lease policy and requirement: Rent deposits are required, as will late charges be required for late rent.</p> <p>RTO counter policy and demand: No deposits should be required, nor should late charges be required.</p>
9	<p>RRHA existing rent and lease policy and requirement: Tenants must list all residents in their apartment.</p> <p>RTO counter policy and demand: This should be required.</p>
10	<p>RRHA existing rent and lease policy and requirement: Suspected drug users and dealers could be evicted from public housing without a hearing.</p> <p>RTO counter policy and demand: The Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment must be preserved. No eviction should occur without a hearing of the charges.</p>

First, RRHA required “provide ‘reasonable’ amounts of heat and hot water” for which RTO demanded “provide adequate amount of heat and hot water.” Second, RRHA required “in the lease, RRHA should be referred to as ‘management,’ not ‘authority” for which RTO agreed “RRHA is the ‘management.’ Third, RRHA required “rent is raised when tenants’ income increases (federal requirement)” for which RTO demanded “rent should increase annually,” and not more often. Fourth, RRHA required “changes in lease and management policy can only be made by officials of RRHA” for which RTO demanded “all changes in lease and management policies must be made with RTO as the official body representing all tenants in public housing.” Fifth, RRHA required “all repairs to repair requests will be handled within a reasonable time period” for which RTO demanded “all repairs to requests must be done in 24 hours: tenants may refuse to pay rent until repairs are made.” Sixth, RRHA required “all tenants are responsible for providing their own means to transport themselves to pay rent at designated places” for which RTO demanded “RRHA should provide transportation to the handicapped and elderly to enable them to pay rent at designated locations.” Seventh, RRHA required “the RRHA does not provide stoves or refrigerators. Standard locks are provided for entrances” for which RTO demanded “RRHA must provide stoves, refrigerators, window locks and deadbolt locks for all entrances.” Eighth, RRHA required “rent deposits are required, as will late charges be required for late rent” for which RTO demanded “no deposits should be required, nor should late charges be required.” Ninth, RRHA required “tenants must list all residents in their apartment” for which RTO agreed “this should be required.” Tenth, and lastly, RRHA required “suspected drug users and dealers could be evicted from public housing without a hearing” for which RTO demanded “the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment must be preserved. No eviction should occur without a hearing of the charges.”

Many of the issues raised were resolved through intense negotiations and compromises. Mrs. Barlow complained to the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society regarding the federal government's National Public Housing Forfeiture Project; the Richmond Tenants Organization and the National Tenants Organization petitioned for an injunction. Judge Richard L. Williams of Richmond stopped the scheduled eviction (The Indianapolis Recorder, March 14, 1992, p. D8). The paper also quoted Barlow (Ibid): "It [the eviction] was discriminating against people who have just about lost all self-respect because of where they live. To say you're going to search and seize someone's home without any hearing is stretching it a little bit." She insisted that the central issue between RTO and RRHA, when all was said and done was, who would control whom in RTO-RRHA relations: "...the real issue is power. The real issue, power, is even more important than the particular problems of tenants...."

The above quote says much about the experience of Alma Barlow while she served as president of RTO. She understood that the power inequality between RTO and RRHA reflected the existing power inequities between the poor and the non-poor, and blacks and whites, and that this power inequality was both long standing and deeply etched into multiple layers of the American socio-political, economic culture. Thus, Richmond only gave us a microscopic view of that reality. As Mrs. Barlow's RTO role enabled her to interact with a wider array of individuals and organizations her role as a grassroots activist on the Richmond stage began to expand and she began to move into the larger socio-political world in Richmond. For example, simultaneously with her role as RTO president she became involved in many projects whose intent and objectives were not far removed from the issues and problems affecting those living in public housing. A close review of the list of her involvements will illustrate how closely associated they are with the issues and problems with which she dealt as RTO president. It is also significant to note that in

these organizations, like her RTO role as grassroots advocate leader, her leadership role was also reflected in her advocacy role in a host of other advocacy organizations.

Non-RTO Affiliations

Alma Barlow's face flashed a wide smile as she described her work in other organizations throughout Richmond and regional communities. She made it clear that she was an involved advocate for Black people and the poor, and she voiced a deep commitment to programs assisting her people and others in need. This need and urgency explain her involvement as president of both the Richmond Food Stamps Advising Committee and the Virginia Anti-Hunger Committee. For the former, she explained the provisions of the Food Stamps applications and helped those who qualified to fill out the appropriate application forms. The Virginia Anti-Hunger Committee was a state-wide program which entailed visiting rural and urban areas where it was known that pockets of poverty existed. There was a connection between the two programs, in as much as the anti-hunger program would lead directly to assistance for the poor for food stamps entitlements. In addition, her work as chair and board member of the Coalition for the Homeless, likewise, fed into both the anti-hunger committee and the Food Stamps program. Thus, there existed a unifying theme, and a common goal and objective, between these three organizations. But there was also social activism as Barlow's Anti-Hunger Coalition went to Washington, along with other groups, to protest cuts in the Comprehensive Education and Training Act (Hayter, 2017, p. 198).

There was a degree of synergy between Barlow's role as a precinct leader for the Democratic Party: her role on the board of directors for the Voter Registration Project Coordinator, her role as a member of the 3rd Congressional District for the Virginia Congressional Black Caucus, and her membership in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. These three activities and affiliations can be seen as integral to the politics of the city of Richmond, and germane to the

crucial role of the Richmond Crusade for Voters as a galvanizing force in Richmond's changing racial political landscape. Although her logic was grounded in the political, and she demonstrated her political astuteness in her dealings with RRHA, Barlow threw her hat in the political water once when in 1984, she challenged Henry Marsh in the 7th District for a seat on city council. Though she lost, and didn't expect to win, she ran against Marsh:

...to bring attention to the deepening problem of East End poverty...a reclamation of poor people's humanity...to remind elected that they had done very little to stem the tide of growing poverty in Richmond. She was Richmond's reminder that high-profile politics and affirmative-action construction contracts seemed to benefit only a small handful of well-connected African Americans. (Hayter, 2017, pp. 224-225)

Conclusion

Alma Barlow was a grassroots advocate for the outsider, the dispossessed, the marginal, and the disinherited. She lived in the Fairfield Court housing project thirty-one years before she was able to acquire a loan from the Virginia Housing Development Authority's Urban Ownership Opportunity Program in 1992. Under a special financial loan program, her monthly mortgage was lower than what she had been paying for rent as a public housing tenant. Sadly, she died the very next year on August 15, 1993. However, many in the Richmond community recognized her many contributions before she died. She was the recipient of the Outstanding Women Award presented by the Richmond YWCA in 1980, and a member of the leadership class of Richmond's Leadership Metro. In his book on racial politics and voting rights, the historian Maxwell Hayter (2017, p. 18) paid tribute to Alma Barlow and former Richmond city council member, Willie Dell, a former

professor of Social Work at Virginia commonwealth University, as social activists who spent the early 1980's "intentionally politicizing the fight against crime and poverty and openly promoted the need for more pointed social welfare programs."

Alma Barlow was a bold and tenacious advocate for the powerless and voiceless public housing tenants in Richmond's public housing units. She stepped up to the plate at a time when nation-wide and world-wide, the powerless and the voiceless were demanding a seat at the decision-making table. She became one of many women in the 1960s and 1970s who did not believe that the role of women was a consignment on the sidelines. Instead, she became a visible model of leadership for many women who may have been hesitant to move from being a bystander to the position of leader. And as was pointed out in this paper, her public advocacy did not end with the successes of her encounters with the housing authority. Rather, we saw her advocacy branching out into many other areas of community life in the Richmond metropolitan area, such as voting, food stamps allocations, and other programs for the poor. She was a representative of those who saw a need to address long-standing problems that had been ignored. She was a tenacious advocate for women, the vote-less, and the poor. Her contributions will not be forgotten. Her story is an exemplary case of how one person's actions can revolutionize a situation that has persisted for so long. She has been a model for many others who are advocates for changes in public housing, voting, and issues concerning the poor and disinherited.

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