

THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN

By David Hartsough and Alonzo Smith
Class of 1958

We would like for the Westtown community to learn about the **Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival** (PPC), and we would like to let you know why we feel that our support has been motivated by what we learned at Westtown.

You can learn about this movement in more detail by visiting www.poorpeoplescampaign.org, And by visiting both the general Facebook page, as well as one created by Quaker supporters.

But briefly, we want to outline some major aspects of this campaign, and then explain how our Westtown education has impelled us to become active in it.

The current movement is a revival of the one begun by Martin Luther King. In the late 1960s, as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, the realization emerged that civil and political equality could not be won without social and economic justice. Accordingly in 1967 King called for a national Poor People's Campaign to converge on Washington, DC, a call that was endorsed by, among others, the National Welfare Rights Organization and the American Friends Service Committee.

For the first time in American history, an interracial group of economically deprived people planned to come to Washington to address the leaders of the national government. Just before the Campaign began, King was murdered in Memphis, but the marchers came anyway to form Resurrection City, a tent community on the National Mall. David was one of the original participants and he met Martin Luther King.

Resurrection City lasted about six weeks. After the marchers' National Park permit expired the occupants of Resurrection City were forcibly evicted by policemen. Critics of the movement cited incidents of violence, which marchers said were grossly exaggerated. President Lyndon Johnson and most Congress members all refused to meet with Campaign leaders. After King and Robert Kennedy were killed, national attention shifted away from economic justice and the rights of poor people.

But the historical memory of the Poor People's Campaign has persisted. Today, 43.5 percent of Americans have inadequate or no incomes, while the concentration of national wealth in the hands of a tiny elite is increasing. Over the past two years, the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival has reached out to communities in more than 40 states across this nation. We have met with tens of thousands of people, witnessing the strength of their moral courage in trying times. We have gathered testimonies from hundreds of poor people and we have chronicled their demands for a better society. The PPC's moral agenda is drawn from this deep engagement and commitment to these struggles of the poor and dispossessed.

One of the formative documents for us was *The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America*. This document not only talks about persistent poverty but also how it is related to the war economy that is hurting our brothers and sisters and undermining our national security. In addition to documenting these problems, this report reflects on the moral and spiritual need for a new kind of society.

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the first PPC, a series of demonstrations took place over a six-week period beginning on May 20 in state capitals around the country. Concerns about local issues were presented to legislators, and some of us engaged in civil disobedience. These state demonstrations culminated in a rally on the National Mall on June 23 which drew over ten thousand activists who are determined to return to their communities to expand the movement.

For us, what we learned at Westtown sixty years ago is a vital part of our commitment. Back in 1958, the two of us went to Weekend Work Camp in Philadelphia on weekends. We learned to respect and value the inner light that each individual carries within. This respect and value has also impelled us to embrace diversity. We are unreservedly dedicated to actively working for world peace and social justice. And we view our fellow human beings and the world we share with them as creations of God. We cannot stand by and watch people being hurt and our planet being destroyed without taking action. Our deep commitment led us both to engage in an act of civil disobedience resulting in arrest at the U.S. Capitol, on June 21, two days before the rally.

These are some of the reasons why we have chosen to support the PPC; David in California and Alonzo in Maryland. We hope that Westtown alumni, faculty, and students will join the Pennsylvania PPC, or at their homes, and we want to encourage everyone who reads this to express our concerns through their own actions.

Together, we can all help to bring about a better world.