

“The Cincinnati Boycott”*Part Two of a Two-Part Series*

Several weeks ago I traveled to Cincinnati, Ohio at the invitation of Thomas Dutton, the director of Miami University’s Center for Community Engagement, to meet with the city’s black and progressive community activists. The meeting was held in the heart of the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, in one of the city’s most economically depressed areas. Only a few hundred feet from where we met was the murder site of 19-year-old Timothy Dewayne Thomas, an unarmed black man shot by police that led to the 2001 Cincinnati race rebellion.

In our four-hour session, about forty participants discussed the status of their 400-day economic boycott campaign against the city’s political and corporate area’s incredibly rich “diversity” and pushing the banal slogan, “Cincinnati Can: You Can Too!” Local television stations and newspapers are filled with stories about black workers who had been dismissed from their jobs at downtown restaurants and shops due to the boycott. Mayor Charlie Luken and several prominent blacks with ties to Cincinnati’s largest corporate employer, Proctor and Gamble, have charged that the economic campaign is destroying the city’s “reputation” and damaging any hope for improving the material conditions of poor black people.

The Cincinnati City Council has used the racial crisis to push through a series of repressive measures aimed at the poor and working poor, who are of course predominantly blacks and other racialized minorities. Panhandling was outlawed “during the night hours, at bus stops, on private property, and within twenty feet of a bank or at an ATM.” Those immediately hurt by the new law were the street vendors of the local newspaper *Streetvibes*, printed by the Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless. *Streetvibes* vendors were often homeless people who purchase the newspapers for 20 cents and subsequently sell them for one dollar. Mayor Luken, however, cruelly denounced them as “beggars armed with newspapers.”

In October 2001, the City Council passed the “Housing Impaction Ordinance,” which was designed, according to researchers Thomas Dutton and Jonathan Diskin to deny funding for the network of non-profit housing corporations that work in poor neighborhoods to develop affordable housing. City Council members had been persuaded by “the popular but misguided view that the concentration of low-income housing is the root of most problems in Over-the-Rhine and other ‘impacted’ neighborhoods.” As Dutton and Diskin note, completely ignored were “the more fundamental causes for neighborhood decline: the disappearance of good jobs for low-skilled workers, declining wages, poor education, persistent patterns of racial discrimination, [and] government rollbacks in social services (including ‘welfare reform’).”

Yet despite these repressive measures, social justice activists in Cincinnati are fighting back. One youth group has formed “Cop Watch” in which teenagers and young adults armed with video cameras and walkie talkies monitor the behavior and actions of the police in their communities. Last summer, Cop Watch distributed flyers entitled “Know Your Rights” in Over-the-Rhine and other urban neighborhoods to young people.

The Coalition for a Just Cincinnati, a group that has been in the forefront of the boycott campaign, has initiated a number of public protest tactics. The Coalition has contacted prominent artists and performers attempting to persuade them to honor the boycott. Through non-violent pickets and demonstrations, protesters encourage local residents not to shop downtown or to patronize restaurants, until real reforms are implemented. The Coalition has now begun to reach out to college campuses to recruit volunteers to join picket lines and civil disobedience demonstrations. Despite their advocacy on non-violent protest, Coalition members have been spat at, verbally, and physically assaulted by those who oppose the boycott.

The city’s most recent tactic against the boycott has been to severely curtail regular police protection from Over-the-Rhine. One activist said that “neighborhood people feel they aren’t being protected ... the cops have backed away from doing their job.” Prostitutes, hustlers and drug dealers have been coming back, along with the affluent white businessmen and professionals who pay for their services, but who live in the suburbs.

The racial issues being debated in Cincinnati aren't unique. They exist in virtually every African-American, Latino, and poor neighborhood in the United States. Despite the failure of mainstream civil rights, women's rights and traditionally liberal organizations to endorse the boycott, we cannot afford to let this movement fail. For over 400 days, activists have attempted to raise the conscience of their community by challenging local leaders to deal with black and other oppressed people with fairness and greater justice. As in the historic boycotts in Montgomery and South Africa, we must support the cause of racial and economic justice in Cincinnati.

Dr. Manning Marable is Professor of History and Political Science, and the Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University in New York. "Along the Color Line" is distributed free of charge to over 350 publications throughout the U.S. and internationally. Dr. Marable's column is also available on the Internet at www.manningmarable.net.