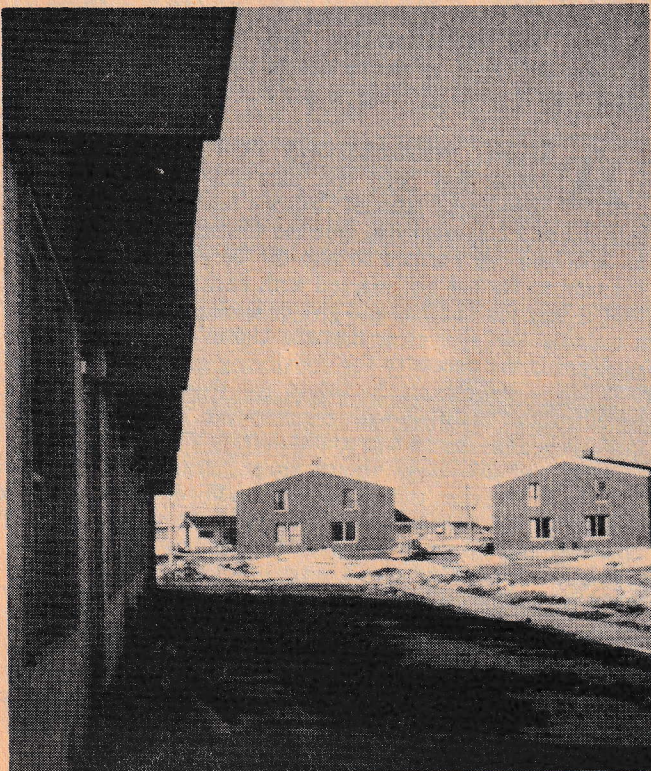

* We live in CHARLOTTETOWN and we're organizing

slum. For instance, if you live in the section of Moncton's East End around Pearl and Queen Streets, you have no easy access to a supermarket. You are dependent for all your groceries on small neighborhood markets, who could not — even if they wanted to — equal the prices offered by the big chains. And the big chains will not come into such an area because the market's not big enough. Result? Those who can least afford it pay most for their groceries. This is especially true when — as is usually the case — the resident has never thought of comparison shopping or of taking public transportation to a more competitively priced market.

ANOTHER PROBLEM is the nature of the relation of such people to their government. Whatever happened to the woman's complaint about the lack of a bathtub in her house? Bulmer is certain the complaint never came to his desk. Why not? Most likely because the woman — like most people in her position — is overwhelmed by the size and the unattainable majesty of government, and interprets the tone of voice of somebody's secretary as "the runaround." Now it never occurs to most people involved in government that people in general react like this — clearly Claire Bulmer, a veteran of city administration, would not likely be intimidated by someone's secretary or overwhelmed by the majesty of the government of Moncton, or think it likely that anyone else would.

Meanwhile, the woman in the bathroomless house is convinced that city hall just gives you the runaround.



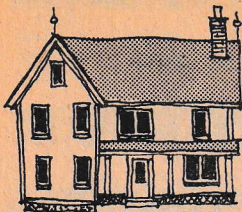
THE SLUMS OF CHARLOTTETOWN look pretty much like the slums of most other cities in the Atlantic Provinces. They're not large, they're not obvious from the highways, they're not spectacular. They're just a place where, for instance, four families live in one house with one bathroom—a bathroom which consists of a toilet with no seat and a wash basin which has never been connected to the water. They're a place where a man pays \$70 a month for an apartment which is heated by three oil stoves, which are so placed that to get into the bedroom or the bathroom you must squeeze through an eleven-inch space between a hot stove and a wall. They're a place where people use their bathtubs as coalbins, since they've never been connected to running water.

And they're a place where government builds "low-income" housing and then only lets middle-income, secure people with a good credit rating and between three and five children rent them—at a rate, sometimes, of \$130 a month. Where members of the Housing Authority that builds them express fears that admitting poor people into them will turn them into slums. Where politicians claim there's really no problem, and rely on the cooperation and good faith of landlords to comply with reasonable standards.

And you'd expect them—like most other Atlantic slums—to be a place where the poor reside in silent acceptance of a situation that they not only aren't aware they can change, but to which they often don't even know there's an alternative.

BUT SOMEONE IN CHARLOTTETOWN has discovered that there is an alternative. This winter, suddenly things started to happen in Charlottetown, things that have implications for everyone living in substandard and ill-kept housing in the Maritimes. An organization called the Poverty committee appeared among the residents of Charlottetown's low rent district and began making noises suggesting militancy. A city councilman, Addie MacDonald, began issuing statements calling on landlords to improve their facilities and to lower their rent or face city action—though, as in most cities, his call was mostly bluff. The provincial cabinet and the premier met with representatives of the Committee. Meetings have been scheduled with Robert Andras at which the city of Charlottetown is planning to try to get federal aid for new low-rental housing construction and for improvement of existing dwellings. And then, in January, a Tenants' Union sprouted in Charlottetown and began presenting a program to the city and provincial governments.

What had happened? As Alex Burke, newly-elected president of the Charlottetown Tenants' Union, explains it, "The thing that makes this different is that the people who live in the area are organizing it. It's not being imposed from above." The result of this is two-fold; the organization is closer to the problem and actually deals with the issues that are at stake for poor people living in inadequate housing, and it's willing to work harder because the people have a stake in it.



That it has worked is apparent from its accomplishments in its first few months of life. A list of regulations governing rental housing has been drawn up and formally presented to the provincial minister of health, to the cabinet, and to the premier. The regulations, Burke says, can be put into effect by a mere formality; they have only to be proclaimed by the cabinet to take effect. They were originally drafted in 1963 and somehow still remain a dead letter. The Poverty Committee has adopted the regulations and is hoping to have them proclaimed by the Cabinet and made a part of the bylaws of every city on Prince Edward Island, beginning with Charlottetown.

AS IMPORTANT, PERHAPS, is the formation by the Poverty Committee of the Tenants' Union, whose aim is to organize all the tenants of Charlottetown into a political force, to increase communication among the residents about the sort of conditions they live in, to organize the poor to begin working at the alleviation of conditions themselves. "Welfare programs," Burke said at one meeting, "are merely attempts to disguise the fact that we have failed to find more fundamental solutions to our problems. Now we—the real experts—must band together and bring solutions to these problems."

They plan to form a negotiating force to represent the poor in dealings with government agencies, and in general to be the voice of people in Charlottetown who otherwise have none. "It has been said that the poor are inarticulate," Burke points out, "but it is also true that many of those whom we are trying to reach don't want to hear us anyway."

Burke doesn't express much faith in the efficacy of the regulations the Poverty Committee is proposing—not because they're not comprehensive or enforceable, but because of his belief that at least part of the problem goes well beyond anything that a set of rules can impose on landlords and tenants. It will be good to have the rules, he says, but the basic problem must be attacked by organizing

the people to clean up their own environments, by attempting to undo the sociological and psychological damage done by poverty.

HE PROUDLY POINTS TO THE EFFECT of the mere existence of the union: "There's guys in it," he says, "that six months ago I wouldn't have trusted with a nickel, but now they're out hustling memberships and responsible for fairly large sums of money and we haven't lost a cent. Because now they've got something they're involved in, something they care about." In some ways, the existence of such a union is its own justification; it attacks the problems of anomie and alienation by giving people the belief that they can in fact have some control over their environment.

Another direct attack on the problem is the Union's tentative plan to set up co-op housing projects, a plan whose advantages over government housing are pretty clear. First, of course, is the fact that the federal government does not look likely to be of much assistance in the foreseeable future; second, government housing, even when it is well constructed and aesthetically presentable, is usually perceived by the poor as another gift, as another imposition by the government of its desire and wishes on the people, and so they do not keep up or respect the buildings—thus justifying the Charlottetown Housing Authority member's fears that poor people would turn the project into a slum. Co-op housing, on the other hand, has at least the potential of being genuinely responsive to the needs of the people who will live in it, and of being able to enlist their loyalties to its program. It may not have the capital behind it that government housing does, but the tenants are likely to demand less of themselves than they would of the government. And, as Burke points out, simply the act of organizing it tends to bring people out of their apathy.

AMONG SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION by the Union has been the idea that it take over an abandoned Roman Catholic school and convert it into 10 or 12 apartments. But the Church says it's already in debt and can't afford to give the building to the union; the city so far has not reacted with enthusiasm to the idea that it buy the building and give or lease it to the Union for a nominal fee. It is clear that the Union's most immediate problem is the necessity for convincing government that if you allow people to do things for themselves they are usually more satisfied with results, even if the result isn't quite as neat as the 18 low-rental units in Charlottetown.

Other plans? How about direct action, such as rent strikes, in the case of recalcitrant landlords? Burke says he wouldn't even want to discuss that until everything else had failed. If the Committee makes no headway at getting its regulations proclaimed and written into municipal law, if the government remains sceptical of co-op housing, if the Union finds it impossible to begin its housing projects, if things don't improve ... "we'd have to be awfully well-organized before we'd pull a strike."

And it looks as though one may not be necessary in Charlottetown.

