In early 1964, Students for a Democratic Society began setting up projects in the large cities of the North. The idea for the establishment of such projects had been sparked by the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. JOIN, on the North side of Chicago, was among ten projects set up by SDS and administered by a special department called ERAP (Economic Research and Action Project) that was financed by the United Auto Workers Union. The letters that make up the name of JOIN originally stood for Jobs Or Income Now, and the project was focused on the issue of unemployment and projected ideas regarding future problems created by unemployment in the city. Unable to build a constituency around this issue, the organizers, still fired up about organizing poor whites, moved into the Uptown area and began to take a survey to find out what problems existed in the community that might be used as issues to get community people involved.

Uptown is the "port of entry" for southern and Appalachian whites in Chicago. Also in the area are substantial groups of oriental, American Indian, Negro and Spanish speaking people and large numbers of old folks. Together these groups, mostly poor, give the area its character.

After considering the data they had gathered, the SDS organizers decided on the multi-issue community union model as the organization best suited for the purpose of organizing in Uptown. Various actions were initiated in the community and JOIN's presence was soon felt by its prodding of the newly established Office of Economic Opportunity ("War on Poverty"), through aggressive actions at the welfare office, through rent strikes, through a march on the notorious Summerdale Police Station protesting police brutality, and through other community actions.

As a result of these actions people who had never had any power began to
feel the knowledge that conditions in their lives could be changed and that they themselves were capable of making the decisions on how to go about making those changes.

About this time a sense of failure on the part of student organizers and a growing resentment against them on the part of community people became apparent. As tensions deepened between the organizers and the organized, charges of elitism (some of which were true) against the "students" began to be voiced by community people.

In the spring of 1967, the Welfare Committee of JOIN fell apart. Through the efforts of Dovie Coleman, a black welfare recipient who had been very active in JOIN, the group got together, renamed themselves Welfare Recipients Demand Action (WRDA), and set out to organize a welfare union that would get large numbers of welfare recipients involved. Dues were set high—$12 per year—and payable in advance, and the number one rule was that recipients had to help do their own fighting. This rule left no room for elitism (mother-henning), and in a few weeks WRDA doubled and then tripled their number. WRDA now has slightly over 200 members from all over the city, a fully mixed racial and ethnic organization.

Just before the Welfare Committee disbanded, the JOIN staff began considering the idea that if community people held the positions of power in JOIN they would be able to make the organization more acceptable to other community people, and so they formulated the idea of a JOIN Council and set it up as the ruling body of JOIN. The Council was able to carry out some of its aims, but it was still guided by "students" and council members felt dominated and intimidated by them, and so the Council too soon fell apart.

Paced with this situation and the example of WRDA's success, the remaining core of community people in JOIN felt the need for reconstituting
and re-defining itself. Through a deep and sometimes painful analysis and self examination it was decided to build our organization and movement on the perspective of poor and working people organizing their own people and community.

Confident in its new-found collective strength the JOIN Council was revived in early 1968. It voted that organizers with student backgrounds should leave so the organization under the control and direction of community people could again make its presence felt in the community. Direct action by this time had come to a halt and organizing was practically at a standstill. At this critical point WRDA decided to realign itself with this new JOIN by having a representative on the JOIN Council, and by giving support to JOIN actions in the community. JOIN in turn would share their newspaper, The Firing Line, with WRDA giving them publicity and support for their welfare rights actions.

JOIN is now in the hands of community people, and we feel this is a healthy development. We have a lot of hard work ahead of us as we are faced with trying to undo the damage of years and years of racism. Our task is to teach solutions to our many problems, solutions that cannot be found in the worn out racist platitudes of the KKK or George Wallace. It is up to us to build an organization that will speak to, for, and about our people in a language and with actions that they can understand and relate to. These things we must do if we are ever to have the mass base needed to change the conditions of our lives.

We see the upcoming Poor People's Campaign in Washington as an important and logical step forward, as an opportunity for developing unity among the poor of all races and groups, this common perspective as vital and historically necessary.
We of JOIN Community Union understand now that freedom and human dignity cannot be won for poor whites unless and until it is won for all exploited peoples. Organizing for change in a poor white area, to find new and better ways to run our country, is what JOIN Community Union is all about in Uptown, Chicago, Illinois.

JOIN Community Union
4441 N. Clifton Ave.
Chicago, Illinois 60640