

Epps Returns To Form Union Local

Jesse Epps, the controversial and sharp-talking former Memphis labor leader, returned yesterday to announce the formation of a chapter of the American Community Union, formerly known as the American Tenants Union.

Epps, who became a prominent figure for his actions during the latter days of the city's 1967-68 sanitation workers turmoil, visited Memphis as the first stop on a 30-city tour to recruit and establish organizing committees for the ACU. The union, of which Epps is president, is based in New York City.

The purpose of the union, Epps said, is to "secure better family living through collective bargaining." It moves away from the ATU, which was primarily concerned with the rights of tenants.

"The good of the whole, of the community as such, is unitive, healing and leads to prosperity," Epps, president of ACU, said in a prepared statement. "Through cooperation, even though some resources deplete or exhaust, others open up and new opportunities emerge which were not apparent before."

"The transition was made from ATU to



Jesse Epps

ACU out of such a realization, that all prosper together, or in the end, no one prospers because what one has will be taken from him by the other."

Epps, a former national representative

from Memphis to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and former president of the American Tenants Union as well as AFSCME Local 1733, has had controversy following in his steps for years.

He came to Memphis in 1968 after being involved in civil rights and union activities in Mississippi. While here, he played a major role in the sanitation strike and later in efforts to organize workers at several local hospitals.

But Epps soon became the target of investigations for misuse of money, both within and outside his union.

He was ousted from the leadership of AFSCME Local 1733 in 1971 after members expressed discontent over secrecy and his handling of finances, and in 1974, Epps admitted to misappropriating \$40,000 of AFSCME finances.

After resigning from the AFSCME, Epps moved to Bay St. Louis, Miss., where he became involved in an effort to build a housing project for blacks who had been left homeless since Hurricane Camille hit in 1969. The houses were never built, and

Epps was accused in a warrant sworn out by a partner in the government-backed venture of passing bad checks totaling \$10,000.

The charges were later dropped on a technicality.

In 1971, he was honored by Memphis ministers with a "Jesse Epps Honor Day." The event raised the \$3,900 Epps needed to keep his home on 1089 Ball from being auctioned off by the city. The home was scheduled to be auctioned because Epps had defaulted on his mortgage payment.

Yesterday Epps said his new union, which will be open to all Shelby County

residents, is to be headed by Willie Williams, the current president of the ATU local. The union is in an organizational stage, Epps said, and he hopes by the end of the year to have 100,000 members nationwide.

"It is fitting and proper that we begin here in Memphis," Epps said, pointing to the work of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. here. "We currently have no program, no vehicle by which to implement the dream which King espoused."

"We hope that Memphis can rise above the segregation and racism of the past and prove that they have moved from the '60s into the '70s and toward the '80s," Epps said.

Epps also announced the ACU's endorsement of Charlie Morris for county court clerk. Morris is running as an independent candidate. He also said the ACU will attempt to refurbish the Clayborn Temple AME Church, currently unusable because of damage by vandals.

"The restoration is not just the AME church's responsibility," Epps said. "We contend that all of us have a responsibility to it."

The ATU was founded in 1973 and Epps has been president since then. He is currently living in New York.

The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, Saturday, June 10, 1978