

DOOR-KNOCKING FOR BOAT-ROCKING

Community organizing brings neighbors together to pressure decisionmakers to solve a problem.

by Madeleine Adamson

Luckily, the wind was blowing the right way when a fire broke out at the Drexel Chemical Company or most of the city of Memphis would have been forced to evacuate. As it was, some 3,000 people had to leave their homes to avoid being contaminated by the highly toxic smoke. Two days later, 45 members of the Mallory Heights Community Organization/ACORN met and formulated a list of demands to Drexel. The most important was that the company halt production of dangerous substances in residential areas. After a heated public meeting and the proliferation of "Evict Drexel Now" signs on neighbors' lawns, Drexel gave in.

Up in Syracuse, flooding has been a severe problem in the Skunk City area for decades. Five years of study and discussion didn't improve the situation; Skunk City residents who favored the development of a flood retention basin were always less organized than neighboring towns that didn't want to share the cost of building it. Enter Syracuse United Neighborhoods (SUN), and within two weeks 120 people had formed the Skunk City Neighborhood Organization and packed a county hearing on the issue. Wearing SUN buttons and carrying signs, they took up all the seats in the room. After three hours of testimony, mostly by SUN members, the County Legislature took the unusual step of going into special session to approve a \$2.6 million retention basin project.

Thousands of similar success stories prove the old adage that "Getting together gets things done." Community organizations espousing this philosophy are part of a growing movement across the country with the common agenda of empowering low- and moderate-income people to influence the decisions that affect their lives.



Neighbors gather to protest an increase in utility rates, a common community organizing issue.

"A lot of people told me we were wasting our time, that we couldn't beat City Hall and big money," recalled Harley Rudd, a member of Georgia Action in Atlanta, after his group foiled the mayor's attempt to increase the city sales tax. "We showed that if people get mad enough and concerned enough they can get together and do something!"

Community organizing is not a new phenomenon, but in the last 10 years the number of groups has grown dramatically. So has their ability to tackle complex issues. Some of the organizations operate independently in single neighborhoods; others are part of statewide federations like North Country People's Alliance in New Hampshire or Oregon Fair Share; still others belong to national organizations like the 19-state Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) or National People's Action. Students work with all of these.

No matter what the specific focus or affiliation, the groups share some common organizing principles.

First and foremost is a commitment to *democratic decisionmaking*. Nobody pulls the strings from the top. Neighborhood residents decide what issues to work on, elect representatives to the organization's own decisionmaking body, and constantly fight for greater democratic participation in city affairs and, more

recently, in corporate decisions.

Community organizations appeal to the *self-interest* of neighborhood residents, bringing people together to take action on the issues that concern them most, winning concrete improvements in their communities and lives.

The hallmark of contemporary community organizations is *direct action*—face-to-face confrontations with decisionmakers, public demonstrations to build pressure and force concessions, tactics that involve large numbers of people directly in solving their own problems.

The Importance of Process

The issues community organizations address range from neighborhood improvements to utility rates to tax inequities, but the goal is not just winning on issues. It is *building power* for low- and moderate-income people. How campaigns are won is at least as important as what is won.

Two examples should help show how

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these principles distinguish effective community organizing from other efforts. The issue is nuclear power. In one town, an environmental activist forms the No Nukes Coalition. He writes a call to action to environmental, civic, and church groups; prepares a detailed study on the economics and safety aspects of nuclear power; and holds a teach-in. Twenty groups agree to cosponsor the teach-in, but only 10 send any participants.

The organizer hustles a foundation grant to hire a lawyer to intervene in a case pending before the Public Utilities Commission on the construction of a nuclear plant. He urges people to write letters to their state legislators in support of a ban on nuclear power.

The legislature fails to respond but the Commission is persuaded by the lawyer's arguments and agrees to delay construction of the plant pending further study. The coalition claims an important victory, but hardly anyone is around to celebrate.

In a neighboring town, a community organizer's research uncovers the fact that nuclear wastes are transported through town on a highway running through two low-income neighborhoods. She finds out that there have been three serious truck accidents on the highway in the past year.

The organizer puts the information together in a simple one-page flier and begins knocking on doors in the neighborhoods, talking to people about the danger of trucks carrying nuclear waste right by their homes. She organizes a meeting of concerned residents and they plot a plan of action. The group decides to pressure the City Council to pass an ordinance banning the transportation of nuclear wastes through town.

The first action is a visit by 15 members to City Council presenting the demand. After two weeks of stalling by the City Council, the group stages a demonstration on the highway with big banners. The media covers it, the group keeps pushing individual council members, and in four weeks the ordinance is passed. The victory is clearly the result of group action and buoys the group's spirits for moving on to the next campaign.

The examples are oversimplified but the contrast in process and results is significant. While the environmental activist was more concerned with the issue itself and took the route of traditional civic involvement and the use of experts, the community organizer appealed to the self-interest of neighborhood residents, involved them directly, utilized direct action, and, above all, built the organiza-

tion. Both effected change but the community organization will continue to achieve more lasting results.

How To Start

Winning campaigns and building successful community organizations is not as easy as the example above; there are no 10 sure steps to success. Community organizing is a combination of systematic hard work, creative strategizing, and flexibility in reacting to changing circumstances. So where does the organizer start?

The first task is *identifying and contacting potential members*. Most community organizations are turf based, structured along geographic lines. Initial

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contacts may include ministers, union leaders, or other influential members of the community who can, in turn, introduce the organizer to more neighborhood people.

The best method of recruiting members, though, is door-knocking, visiting every house in the neighborhood to acquaint people with the idea of community organizing and what it can do, and soliciting their views on what problems concern the neighborhood. One of the chief values of door-knocking is that it allows the organizer to identify a new core of potential leaders rather than relying on self-appointed neighborhood spokespersons who may not genuinely reflect the concerns of their neighbors. Like everything else in organizing, door-knocking should be done with a clear agenda—asking people to join or come to a first meeting—and in an orderly fashion—keeping records of every door knocked and the results.

Initial issues surface through door-knocking and by simply looking around and keeping eyes and ears open. In surveying the neighborhood, the organizer might find rundown vacant houses or traffic problems or inadequate garbage collection. But an issue is not a good organizing issue unless people in the neighborhood care about it. *Test the issue* on people; find out which ones are of most concern to the most people.

An issue also is not a good organizing

issue unless you can do something about it. The more specific, the better. You can't cure urban blight, but you can go after the city to board up abandoned buildings or challenge a bank to invest more mortgage money in the neighborhood.

In the beginning, most community organizations take on small issues that are winnable. The purpose is to build a track record for the organization and a feeling among the membership that collective action gets results. With a victory like getting a traffic light installed, the organization will have the confidence to tackle bigger issues.

With an issue in mind, the organizer's next job is *research*. Forget the academic-style research you learned in school; this time you need to think like a detective, searching out the bits of information that will inform your strategy and tactics. Who are the decisionmakers? What avenues are available for effecting change? What are the opposition's most vulnerable points? Who are your potential allies?

A critical piece of research is identifying the targets for your campaign—the individuals with authority to deliver what your group demands or to apply pressure to those who do. Specificity is in order. Both the bureaucracy and the corporations specialize in sending people through the never-ending revolving door. Understanding the decisionmaking process allows you to focus on specific individuals, concentrating the organization's attention and anger on a specific target. The rule of thumb is to personalize the target, make it real for people. It is difficult to direct a campaign at New England Telephone Company; it is easier to confront William Musier, the \$195,000-a-year president of the company.

Researching the target means knowing as much as you can about the individual. What corporate or charitable boards does he sit on? What country club and church does he go to? What has he said in the past about your issue? All of this information will help you determine what actions will exert the most pressure.

The other main research objective is looking for what organizers call handles—the *points of entry* into a campaign. Handles come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes it is an obscure law that gives you a new point of access—such as the Arkansas statute that allowed cities, and thereby voters, to set utility rates. Sometimes it is your target's unkept promise that justifies your position. Sometimes it

is a contradiction between what the target says on one occasion and what he has said on another—such as the difference between how a corporation values its property for tax purposes and what it reports to its stockholders.

Plan of Action

With the basic facts in hand, the group can develop a plan of action. The emphasis should, indeed, be on action. The kinds of actions used in community organizing are diverse to the point of being unlimited. The objectives are to build pressure, dramatize and polarize the issue, disrupt business as usual, force negotiations, and win concessions.

An example of an ACORN campaign in Denver illustrates some of the tried and true actions that often get results.

Jefferson Park is a low-income neighborhood bordering the city-owned Mile High Stadium, home of the Broncos football team and site of most major sporting and mass audience events in the city. With construction of the stadium came a sea of cars for every event and the encroachment of industrial and office complexes that threaten to destroy Jeff-Park as a residential neighborhood. For years, Jeff-Park residents complained about the

stadium, but their individual attempts to get action from the City Council consistently failed.

Preserving neighborhood streets for neighborhood people became the first organizing issue for the Jefferson Park ACORN Community Organization (JPACO). At the first home game of the season, 50 JPACO members dramatized the issue by passing out more than 13,000 fliers warning fans not to park in Jeff-Park. The message was, "If the city won't stop football fans from parking in our neighborhood, next week we will." The group hung "Don't Park in Jeff-Park" posters at every street leading into the neighborhood.

During the following week, 20 members took their preferential parking plan to the manager of safety, reminding him of his little used authority to enact experimental parking regulations in special situations.

When the bureaucrat tried to pass the buck, JPACO decided to carry out its warning to keep cars out of the neighborhood. They moved to reserve parking for neighborhood residents in a five-block area by putting chairs in the street with "Resident Parking Only" signs on them. As fans began driving up to park, JPACO

members handed them fliers showing where they could find free parking elsewhere. With 100 people in the streets, JPACO turned away all but six non-resident cars by kick-off time.

JPACO threatened to expand the blockade unless the mayor agreed to negotiate. He did and promised to increase police patrols and towing of illegally parked cars and to construct a footbridge between the University of Colorado parking lot and the stadium so fans could park there instead of on the street. The day after the bridge was completed, JPACO held a dedication ceremony christening it JPACO's Crossing.

The following week, JPACO handed out fliers thanking the 2,949 fans who used the footbridge but found that the parking situation in their neighborhood hadn't really improved. They met with the mayor again but he refused further negotiations. Angry at his response, JPACO decided to focus its next action on him.

"If the mayor won't get the cars out of our neighborhood, we'll put them in his," was the theme for the caravan to his house the following Sunday. With horns blaring and banners flying, 25 people descended on his block, knocking on his

Community Organizing Resources

The following organizations provide resources—including training, publications, internships, names of local groups—to community organizers. Educators and students may contact them directly.

Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), 628 Baronne Street, New Orleans, Louisiana 70113; (504) 523-1691.

ACORN, one of the two largest community organizations in the country, has 27,000 member families in 45 cities in 19 states. Short- and long-term internships are open to college students. (For additional information, see "Students as Community Organizers," *Synergist*, Spring 1978, pages 3-7; reprint 7.)

Industrial Areas Foundation, 675 Jericho Turnpike, Huntington, New York; (516) 549-1133.

Started by Saul Alinsky, the Foundation provides training and the names of local community groups.

The Institute for Social Justice, 628 Baronne Street, New Orleans, Louisiana 70113; (504) 524-5034 or 100 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02115; (617) 266-7130.

The Institute, which works closely with ACORN, provides training, lists of local groups, and publications. The latter include:

• *Community Organizing: Handbook No. 2* (August, 1977, 40

pp., \$2.50), which includes an overview of ACORN and readings on energy, health care, electoral politics, and research skills;

• *Community Organizing: Handbook No. 3* (April 1979, 32 pp., \$2.50), which gives an overview of the elements of successful campaigns, five case studies of direct action campaigns, and an interview with ACORN's chief organizer on tactics for community organizations;

• *Just Economics: The Magazine for Organizers* (bimonthly magazine, \$12 a year except for low-income persons—\$6 a year—and for libraries, businesses, and agencies—\$20 a year), which reports on direct action organizing, discusses issues in organizing, provides how-to information, and keeps organizers informed of each other's activities.

Midwest Academy, 600 West Fullerton, Chicago, Illinois 60614; (312) 953-6525.

The Academy's primary function is training community organizers.

National People's Action, 1123 West Washington Boulevard, Chicago, Illinois 60607; (312) 243-3035.

One of the two largest community organizations in the country, National People's Action is a network of neighborhood groups in 75 cities. They work together on such issues as housing, banking, and insurance.

neighbors' doors to ask them to call the mayor and tell him to negotiate.

In the end, JPACO's preferential parking plan was adopted by the City Council.

Petitions, marches, honk-ins, sit-ins, taking targets on tours of neighborhood eyesores, dramatizing issues with props (e.g., taking garbage to the mayor's office to protest inadequate garbage collection), vigils, pickets, and call-ins are all part of community organizing's arsenal of tactics.

Part of the job of planning a campaign is determining which tactics are appropriate to the target and within the group's ability to carry out. As a rule, tactics escalate as the campaign progresses; if the initial actions don't produce results, people will be ready to increase the pressure.

The Organizer's Role

Good issues, good research, and good campaigns are essential ingredients of community organizing, but the key, again, is people. The goal is to build the organization, develop the leadership, expand the membership, and stretch the limits of people's expectations.

Throughout this process, the organizer takes a backseat role. The organizer's job is to bring people together, help with

developing issues and strategy, provide the background research, and develop skills of the membership and leadership so they can effectively run their own organization.

Community organizers are skilled professionals with a long-term commitment to effecting change. They work long hours, often for low pay. While organizing is more than a full-time job, students can play a significant role in many ways. One is to be an intern for a summer or a semester with a community organization. Many groups offer internships in which students are trained as organizers and actually go through the complete process of starting a new neighborhood group from the initial door-knocking through a first campaign. Part-time help from student volunteers gives community organizations extra needed people-power and the student an opportunity to learn about community organizing firsthand. Volunteers might help out on tasks ranging from making phone calls to conducting research, preparing newsletters and press releases to setting up neighborhood meetings.

Students may decide to organize their own community groups, looking to existing groups for advice, but working with

an already established group has its advantages. First, students will have the opportunity to learn from experienced organizers. They might participate in much broader campaigns at the citywide, statewide, or national level. And they will have the confidence that their efforts are part of a long-range plan that will continue once they're gone.

While neighborhood issues are the bread and butter of community organizing—essential to bringing in new members and maintaining a solid base—over the past several years, community organizations have moved into much wider arenas and addressed more fundamental issues of economic and social justice. They have taken on corporations in struggles for lower utility rates and fair banking practices. Some have entered the political sphere, running members for local elected office. And they have made steady progress in building a broad-based movement dedicated to winning a fairer share and a greater voice for all low- and moderate-income people.

For students who aren't satisfied with the status quo, community organizing offers a career which is an unceasing challenge and holds the greatest potential for creating lasting change. ■

National Training and Information Center, 1123 West Washington Boulevard, Chicago, Illinois 60607; (312) 243-3035.

The Center offers short-term training at its home offices and long-term on-site training and consultation. Its publications include:

- *Dynamics of Organizing*, Shel Trapp (1976, 26 pp., \$2), a booklet featuring sections on power analysis, strategy and tactics, developing an issue group, coalition organizing, building power and victories, and the myth of the organizer;

- *Neighborhoods First: From the 70s Into the 80s* (1977, 27 pp., \$3), a review of community organizing drives throughout the country with a projection of targets in the next decade;

- *Disclosure* (nine issues a year, \$10), a newsletter covering neighborhood group activities throughout the country and research on current issues.

Add \$.50 for orders of \$5 or less and 10 percent of the order for those over \$5.

New England Training Center for Community Organizers, 620 Potters Avenue, Providence, Rhode Island 02907; (401) 941-4840.

Though its primary emphasis is training, the Center issues several publications, among them:



Homemade signs list the issues.

- *Building Blocks of Community Organization*, Mark Lindberg (1978, 46 pp., \$3), an in-depth guide to the basics of community organizing.

- *The Street Primer*, Rick Wise (1976, 28 pp., \$3), a brief introduction to organizing;

- *Up with the Ranks: How Community Organizers Develop Community Leadership*, Mark Lindberg (1977, 15 pp., \$3), a primer spelling out the seven principles of organizing and illustrating them through stories based on actual events.

Organize, Inc., 1208 Market Street, San Francisco, California 94103; (415) 552-8990.

Organize emphasizes training and publications, which include:

- *The Ideology of the Community Organization Movement*, Mike Miller (30 pp., \$2.50), a statement of the values, strategy, and program of the community organization tradition;

- *The People Fight Back—Building a Tenant Union*, Mike Miller with Tony Fazio, Spence Limbocker, Karen Thomas (70 pp., \$4 plus \$.50 for mailing), the story of the successful effort to organize a 500-unit low- and moderate-income housing development;

- *Notes on Institutional Change*, Mike Miller (1979, 10 pp., \$1), comments on community control and community organizing with an emphasis on the organizational impact of administering government programs, such as Model Cities.

Pacific Institute of Community Organizations, 3914 East 14th Street, Oakland, California 94601; (415) 532-8466.

The Institute will help those making inquiries get in touch with community groups on the West Coast. It also provides training.