

Reflections on Movement Building and Community Organizing

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Barak Obama's candidacy and election suffered more than its fair share of slings and arrows from his opponents. He's been accused of being a socialist, a non-citizen, a radical Muslim, a spendthrift, a terrorist supporter, and on top of all that, a community organizer. David Moberg's profile of Obama published in *The Nation* observed that he frequently referred to his community organizing background, asking supporters to treat his campaign as a social movement in which he is just "an imperfect vessel of your hopes and dreams. (April 16, 2007) Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin's dig at Obama's connection to community organizing in her acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention—that being a small town mayor was "sort of like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities," was quickly seized upon by a variety of sources. While articles in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* focused on assessing Obama's organizing experience and speculated on how his background in community organizing might influence his presidency, the right wing blogosphere had a feeding frenzy launching a wave of articles equating community organizing tactics with armed struggle.

In May 2008 Stanley Kurtz, a Contributing Editor to the *National Review*, wrote an online piece that began like this: "what if Barack Obama's most important radical connection has been hiding in plain sight all along? Obama has had an intimate and long-term association with the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), the largest radical group in America. If I told you Obama had close ties with MoveOn.org or Code Pink, you'd know what I was talking about. Acorn is at *least* as radical as these better-known groups, arguably more so. Yet because Acorn works locally, in carefully selected urban areas, its national profile is lower. Acorn likes it that way. And so, I'd wager, does Barack Obama." (*National Review Online*, May 29, 2008)

Obama's connection to community organizing has focused a spotlight on his presidency that will cause historians to view his actions and the field of community organizing through a different lens. While a number of articles have already begun to interpret Obama's initiatives in light of his community organizing experience, I'd like to look at the other side of the equation: Will community organizations be able to take advantage of this political moment to build a broader movement to transform our society? There are many potential entry points to explore this question. And, while I could examine trends or conduct a comparative analysis, the method I've chosen is a case study assessment of the movement potential of one of the most controversial community organizations in the country—ACORN.

Although few would argue with ACORN's success on specific issues, the question of the group's overall effect remains. Does ACORN's work help build a progressive movement? Over twenty years ago, in the closing chapter of one of the first studies of ACORN, *Organizing the Movement* (1986), I contended that the work of the growing networks of community organizations, while effective in winning local victories, was actually less than the sum of its parts. At the time, most community organizing networks were comprised of loosely federated and fiercely independent local organizations that seemed to have neither the vision nor the political will to do much more than replicate effective issue campaigns. While winning victories in local communities was important, I argued that the amalgamated efforts of hundreds of small community groups would not necessarily result in large-scale structural change. They were both too small and too focused on bread and butter issues. Instead, successful actions to change national policies to benefit poor people and people of color must necessarily combine internal organizational efforts to bridge race/gender inequalities with broad-based campaign efforts designed to reframe public debate and win concrete changes in social as well as economic policies. "The real question," I wrote, "is not whether community organizing networks will survive, but whether they will develop the *internal structures and external strategies* necessary to grow beyond a group of organizations waiting for a movement into a progressive movement for social change" (Delgado 1986). This article examines ACORN's work in relation to the elusive concept of "movement building."

Is It Really Possible to Build a Movement?

Movement building has emerged as the trendy term for social change work. From projects to support nonprofit movement building strategies (e.g. Building Movement.Org 2008) to foundation-supported efforts to build movements (Vega-Marquis 2003) to some organizations' forming "movement building departments" (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 2005) the notion of movement building tops the list of organizational imperatives for many progressive organizations.

While much debate and discussion focuses on the key priorities for movement building work, activists are reaching a consensus on one point: social movements result from conscious and systematic efforts to build them. This consensus did not always exist. As ACORN's new chief organizer, Bertha Lewis reflects, "as activists in the [19] 60s and [19] 70s, we fought for the rights of black people and poor people. We weren't trying to create a movement. We were just dealing with the issues in front of us. The movement just happened" (2006). Lewis's sense of history is similar to my own experience in the anti-Vietnam war movement and national welfare rights work. We were part of mass movements, but we viewed those efforts as the happy result of mass sentiment, circumstance, a supportive infrastructure—and luck.

Later, when I began to study social movements, the notion that they were not systematically created was reinforced in my graduate classes at Berkeley. We studied prerequisite political conditions, the kinds of infrastructure that helped support mass movements, and the resources necessary for mobilization and organization, and we debated the “revolutionary potential” of different constituencies. Our common assumption, however, was that while one could build organization and influence public sentiment, social movements could only be hoped for. They simply happened—or, more often, they didn’t.

Today the opposite assertion holds sway. Younger activists, especially, assume that it is both necessary and possible to build a large-scale social movement. One key reason for the contention that progressives should make movement building a priority is the issue of scale. Many activists point to the consolidation of global capital, technological advances that make worldwide communications almost instantaneous, and the planetwide detrimental effects of U.S.-initiated military, economic, political, and environmental policies. As Lian Cheun, former Director of the Center For Third World Organizing’s Movement Activist Apprenticeship Program (MAAP), notes, “the rise of right-wing conservatism in the U.S., coupled with these depressing political developments globally, has created a need in many of us to be part of something larger—something that fights back.” (Cheun 2006)

Although many activists agree on the need for movement building, little consensus exists on priorities for movement building activities. For instance, the Peace Development Fund’s Listening Project cited the “lack of an overarching set of ideas, themes, and issues that define the movement for the public at large” as the biggest challenge to movement building, concluding that that key components for movement building should include “vision, leadership development, addressing multiple issues, active bridging between various sectors, self-transformation, joint strategies, and coordination of resources” (1999). Taj James, director of the Movement Strategy Center, points to “recognizing and addressing structural racism and engaging and mobilizing our traditional base while communicating with the broader public” (2005) as key factors in a movement building strategy. The Marguerite Casey Foundation, a financial supporter of movement building activities, includes “clarity of message, working across generations, and technology sharing and data integration” (Vega-Marquis 2003). Activists Dan Berger and Andy Cornell, authors of *Ten Questions for Movement Building* (2006), refer to a process for developing power “by building coalitions, political infrastructure, and visionary, alternative institutions that prefigure the types of social relationships we desire—while simultaneously confronting the state, right-wing social movements, and other forms of institutional oppression.” One without the other, they argue, “is insufficient” (Berger and Cornell 2006).

While these components are not directly at odds with more traditional definitions of social movements, they certainly differ from those that sociologist Charles Tilly emphasizes (1997). He lists

the elements that differentiate social movements from other forms of politics as “sustained challenge; direction of that challenge to power-holders; action in the name of a wronged population; repeated public demonstrations that the wronged population or its representatives are worthy, unified, numerous, and committed; and actions outside the forms of political participation currently favored by the law” (Tilly 1997). The difference in emphasis between the movement building components suggested by practitioners and Tilly’s more traditional view are, at least in part, related to some practitioners’ emphasis on internal practices (for example, coalition building, antiracism, leadership development, resource sharing) as opposed to the external manifestations of those practices. Simply put, the activists’ emphasis is on the *process* that leads to creating the sustained challenge, while Tilly emphasizes the external *outcome*—the depth, breadth, and disruptive utility of the challenge.

Since the work of social justice organizations, including ACORN, combines internal processes and external outcomes, how do we determine which is more important in assessing ACORN’s movement-building contributions? Because ACORN’s organizational work has clearly tilted toward achieving external outcomes, this brief examination of ACORN’s work assesses if and how three interrelated variables: (1) the organization’s expanding size and scope of activities; (2) its ability to project progressive vision and values, and (3) the outcomes it achieves, contribute to building a broader social movement. If these are insufficient, what will it take for ACORN to have a greater movement-building effect?

Size And Scope

A key task for organizers is building organizational size and scope—developing an organization that has a demonstrative mass membership, strong allies, and the tactical ability to win benefits for its constituency while projecting a cohesive message to the public at large. Although ACORN is best known for its grassroots groups and raucous “in your face” tactics, an important dimension of the organization’s success is its ability to replicate those tactics in every major urban center in the country. Pointing to ACORN’s chapters in 700 neighborhoods, Manhattan Institute Senior Fellow Sol Stern calls ACORN “the largest radical group in the country.” “It is not only big,” he continues “it is effective, with some remarkable successes in getting municipalities and state legislatures to enact its radical policy goals into law” (Stern 2003). Critics are appalled by both ACORN’s size and breadth. Detractors point to the organization’s “presence in more than 100 cities with a national budget of \$37 million” (Malanga 2006), “two radio stations, a housing corporation, a law office, and affiliate relationships with a host of trade-union locals” (Stern 2003), and its successful use of “intimidation and other tactics to push for higher minimum wage mandates and to trash Wal-Mart and other non-union companies” (“The ACORN Indictments” Wall Street Journal November 3, 2006). And they are not wrong. As ACORN’s national executive director Steve Kest points out, “When we want to project something nationwide our size

insures that a basic level of stuff will happen—and it will happen in a lot of places” (2006). ACORN’s ability to “make stuff happen in a lot of places” is due in no small part to the interrelationship of four organizational components: constituent organizing, providing services to constituent members, aggressive activity in the electoral arena, and ACORN’s newest component, transnational organizing.

The one component that most activists seem to agree is essential to movement building is organizing. In their 2005 *Nation* article challenging progressives, analyst Jean Hardisty and Center for Community Change director Deepak Bhargava wrote that although organizing has always had an uneasy place in progressive circles, “no policy paper or slick message will ever replace the power of organizing” (2005). *Black Commentator* columnist Bruce Dixon agrees, noting, “mass movements don’t happen without masses. Organizers and those who judge the work of organizers must learn to count” (2005). Peace Development Fund’s Listening Project not only cites the need for grassroots organizing, it contrasts organizing to mobilizing: “Mobilizing may be good for winning reforms, (but) organizing develops critical analysis among people and develops leaders” (Peace Development Fund 1999).

The heart of ACORN’s work is neighborhood organizing. By engaging poor people in the issues that directly affect them, ACORN is able to tap human talents and resources that much of the rest of society has written off. When asked why he joined ACORN, one community resident responded, “No one ever came to my door and asked for my opinion before” (ACORN 2005). ACORN’s membership base of over 200,000 families provides leadership in local and national campaigns and grounds the organization in the lived experiences of low-income communities. In addition to the organization’s neighborhood-based work, strong ties to the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) dating back to the early 1980s has enabled ACORN to work in collaborative campaigns with unions and initiate its own efforts to organize childcare workers and people forced into workfare programs under the 1996 welfare reform act. Clearly, ACORN’s membership base is critical to the organization’s success.

However, although local organizing is what ACORN is most well known for, it is not all the organization does. (See Table 1.) After thirty-eight years, its work encompasses a wide breadth of activities. While it is not surprising that the organization’s infrastructure includes a policy and research arm, a national campaign staff, and a communications office, activities also include the operation of radio stations in Dallas and Little Rock. ACORN Housing, one of the largest housing counseling operations in the country, serves between 30,000 and 35,000 families a year. Steve Kest says, “There used to be a lot of debate in organizing circles about whether organizing organizations should deliver services, whether to emphasize clients or constituency. I think the mix we have works well. Mortgage counseling brings people into our offices where, if they’re willing, we can involve them in campaign work. It also gives us real nitty-gritty knowledge on how issues of housing and mortgage discrimination really affect low-income families. So, when we sit down with a target or a legislator to negotiate for

changes in policies, because of the volume of the work, we can legitimately talk about trends. Plus, we know what changes to push for, because we know exactly how our members are getting screwed.”

Table 1: ACORN and ACORN-Related Organizational Initiatives

Organizational Component	Value Added
Membership chapters in 39 states and 98 U.S. cities. International organizing projects in Peru, Canada, and Mexico, the Dominican Republic Council, and India.	The membership gives the organization a legitimate base in low-income communities of color and enhances its ability to launch campaigns with replicable activities in multiple locations—including transnational work. The membership base also provides a source of organizational income that is not subject to foundation whimsy.
National staff infrastructure	Staff enables ACORN to initiate national strategies, use centrally generated research, and replicate policy advocacy and media messages.
ACORN Housing	ACORN Housing partners with ACORN campaigns directed at HUD and mortgage lenders to assist and counsel members in purchasing housing and to monitor campaign results.
ACORN Financial Justice Centers and Tax Access and Benefit Centers	The Financial Justice and Tax Benefit Centers offer free tax preparation in 62 ACORN offices and partner with allies in an additional 24 locations. Both of these service units also recruit organizational members.
KABF and KNON Radio stations	Both stations are on the air 24/7 and provide access to a broad range of social change activities through a mix of news, cultural programming and public service announcements.
Project Vote	Project Vote contracts with ACORN to conduct voter registration and education efforts to increase the number of minority and low- and moderate-income citizens participating in the electoral process.
Living Wage Resource Center	This joint project of ACORN and the Labor Studies Program at Wayne State University has tracked living wage initiatives nationally, convened living wage organizers to learn from each other, and provided materials and strategies to state and local campaign efforts.
Organizer’s Forum	This forum gives organizers from different networks the opportunity to collectively analyze new issues and technologies, reflect on past work, exchange ideas, strategize, and discuss problems and approaches with practitioners outside of their immediate networks.
SEIU Locals 100 and 880	Although this relationship is not as strong as it was in years past, both these locals of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the International have worked collaboratively with ACORN to organize low-wage workers and fight for worker benefits.
Social Policy Magazine	Provides a venue for interchange and analysis among organizers, activists, and public intellectuals.
Working Families Party	Certified as a political party in five states—New York, Connecticut, Delaware, South Carolina and Oregon—the WFP’s New York operation, with 21 chapters and the ability to muster over 150,000 votes has had the greatest impact. It has endorsed and run candidates, and successfully advocated for an increase in the minimum wage, reform of the state’s draconian drug laws and health care for low-wage workers.

“Scale matters,” observes ACORN’s founder, Wade Rathke. “It was because we had the structure in place in sixty cities that we were able to raise foundation money to test our ability to locate people who were eligible for the earned income tax credit (EITC).” (Rathke 2006). Commenting on another advantage of the mix of services and organizing, Bertha Lewis observes, “It provides different points of entry for people to relate to or work with the organization. So, people experience us differently—some people think we’re the housing people, or the education people or the union-organizing people. The counseling also gives us an opportunity to do ongoing monitoring. It’s not enough to expose predatory practices. We have to make sure that the banks do the right thing” (2006).

In addition to its service work, ACORN is also directly involved in electoral work. Unlike many community organizations that avoid the electoral arena, ACORN has developed political platforms and endorsed and run political candidates since the early 1970s. In 1976 ACORN launched the 20/80 plan—an effort to expand its organizational base from three to twenty states over the next four years and to use the 1980 presidential campaign to raise issues of concern to low-income people and build the organization’s power. The effort succeeded, and ACORN has continued to be involved in electoral politics ever since. ACORN’s electoral efforts have expanded to include major voter registration efforts through Project Vote, resulting in the registration of over half a million voters in 2006, and the development of the Working Families Party (WFP)—a direct extension of the organization’s ambition to create opportunities for ACORN members to push policies and principles that serve their political interest. Although Working Families has been certified as a political party in five states—New York, Connecticut, Delaware, South Carolina, and Oregon—it is in New York that the party has had its greatest impact. New York governor-elect Elliot Spitzer called the WFP “a major force in state politics” (Working Families Party 2004), while a conservative columnist writes, “the far-left party won 80,000 votes statewide in the last presidential election and 100,000 in the last U.S. Senate race—the strongest showing of any third party except for the Conservative Party. . . . One-third of Gotham’s new city councilors ran with Working Families’ endorsement” (Stern 2003). By 2006, the party was able to produce 150,000 votes. With twenty-one chapters across the state, the WFP played an important role in winning a minimum wage increase in New York, reforming the state’s draconian drug laws, and fighting for increased health coverage for workers.

Like the organization’s service work, the Working Families Party offers ACORN’s constituents yet another opportunity to become politically engaged. In some cases, that political engagement has actually led to an expansion of ACORN’s organizational role. For instance, as Lewis recounts, “In 1998 we ran a petition campaign to create the Working Families Party in New York, and Gabriel Toks Pearse, a Nigerian Professor at Brooklyn College, sent some of his students over to work with us. He liked the

culture of the organization and the commitment to low-income people's issues, so he became an active member. Now he's back in Nigeria and wants to build an ACORN chapter. So, next week I travel to Lagos to meet with an organizing committee and talk about how to start the first chapter" (2006). The trip to Nigeria is not ACORN's first venture into international organizing. In the last four years, the organization has formed ACORN International, expanding the group's organizing efforts to Peru, Canada, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and India.

ACORN's trademark ability to replicate campaigns from city to city and to direct actions at the same corporate or governmental target in multiple localities has been a key element of the organization's success. How do the global components of the organization mesh with the work of the domestic chapters? "Frankly, we are operating way past our experience. Although the issues in each country are surprisingly similar, the conditions and culture are very different," says Rathke (2006). "For instance, the notion that you really don't approach people with a preset agenda and that the issues are actually defined by people in the community was initially tough to get across to our new organizers in India. In Peru we learned that a three-month training period in the states for an organizer not familiar with our style and philosophy was simply not sufficient. We needed organizers who really understood the dynamics of both countries. We learned both of these things the hard way—but we learned them." (Rathke 2006).

One example of ACORN's ability to apply its organizing approach cross-nationally is the group's campaign against Sherwin-Williams. In May of 2006 ACORN released *Covering Our Communities in Toxics*, a report prepared by the organization's research staff. The report documented that Sherwin-Williams sold lead paint knowing that it was toxic and contributed to air pollution, and that the company failed to conduct lead dust education classes in violation of agreements with attorneys general in all fifty states. ("ACORN Fights Sherwin-Williams on International Fronts" 22 November 2006). In an ACORN press release issued six months after the release of the report, ACORN president Maude Hurd said that "the poisonous effects of Sherwin-Williams' years of neglect has spread across two continents" and announced ACORN protests at Sherwin-Williams' headquarters and stores in Toronto and Vancouver, Canada; Tijuana, Mexico; Lima, Peru; and Buenos Aires, Argentina, as well as demonstrations at six U.S. retail, manufacturing, and distribution sites in Little Rock, Arkansas; Jackson, Mississippi; Arlington, Texas; Orlando, Florida; Hartford, Connecticut; and Atlanta, Georgia. "These companies are global," observed Hurd. "If we want to affect their actions, we've got to build organizations that have the ability to take action across national boundaries. People in those organizations are not outside allies, they're in the same boat we are—they just live in another country" (2006).

Clearly, ACORN's activities cover a wide social and economic span. And, while size has been key to ACORN's impact, it also has a downside. Smoothly and accountably coordinating offices and staffs in ninety-eight cities, and managing large amounts of money flowing through multiple affiliated organizations, requires bureaucratic systems that are not necessarily consistent with either a movement organization or charismatic, visionary leadership. This problem became particularly apparent in the summer of 2008 when newspaper accounts reported a major embezzlement of organizational funds in 1999 by a senior ACORN staffer who is a member of founder Wade Rathke's family. The discovery had a number of detrimental effect on the organization: staff/board conflict; anger from board members who were not informed of the embezzlement; resignation of key staff, including Rathke; countless "I told you so's" by detractors; a focus on fiscal malfeasance by the press; sanctions and cries of anguish from current and former foundation funders; and a grinding slowdown of organizational activities.

While theft, even in social change organizations, is less rare than many of us would like to think, the lack of an ongoing staff/board system of mutual accountability points to a structural weakness and raises an organizational dilemma. The structural weakness is clear: there was not enough fiscal transparency. The organizational dilemma is less easy to define, but it is reflective of the current disarray in organizational leadership and the question of organizational direction. For almost forty years, ACORN has been led by Wade Rathke, a brilliantly strategic and charismatic, though very controversial, leader. Many senior staff were recruited by Rathke in the 1970s and have remained a core of talented organizational actors. Common ideas and history, friendship, trust, and personal loyalty have helped hold ACORN's senior staff together and move the organization forward. At this juncture, many of those connections have been severely tested, and some are permanently broken.

Thus, although ACORN's victories have made significant differences in the lives of the organization's members, the stretching of the organization, the impetus to bring its actions to scale without developing the internal systems to support that scale have actually set the organization back. Given these recently disclosed events and leadership changes, questions of the future direction of the largest community organization in the United States are, I believe, even more important to assess. In this tumultuous period, ACORN is facing its greatest test: Will the organization survive and thrive? If it does, what kind of organization will it be?

Size and scope are clearly necessary components of social movements. However "numbers on the street," while necessary are not always sufficient to achieve structural change. As social scientists Snow and Benford (1988), and Lakoff (2004), have pointed out, the framing of issues can define social problems, galvanize people into action, and suggest solutions. How successful has ACORN been in projecting vision and values and reframing public debate?

Projecting Vision and Values

From the colonial rebellion against England to abolitionist, civil rights, and antiwar activism, to the women's and gay rights movements, ideas have played a key role in reframing a commonly held notion of fairness and justice and projecting a vision of a "just future." As writer Jean Hardisty (1999) notes, much of the success of conservative politics can be traced to the Right's ability to use a combination of fear and appeals to commonly held values to develop and popularize a vision and then deliver the public policy to actualize it. Growing out of the anti-ideological community organizing efforts of the 1960s and 1970s, ACORN has resisted both the party-line politics of the Left and the right-drifting Democrats. Has this resistance to a conventional ideological alignment rendered ACORN less effective in projecting vision and values?

As early as 1979, the ACORN People's Platform defined the organization's position in seventeen key issue areas. Neither a top-down nor a staff-generated document, the platform was the result of small group meetings in seventeen states. It called for many corporate reforms, including ending discount rates for commercial consumers of gas and electricity; taxing windfall profits of corporations in the arenas of housing, health, food, and energy; and cleaning up 30,000 hazardous waste sites. It also asked for guaranteed airtime on cable TV for community groups. Ratified at ACORN's national convention, the platform also addressed workers' rights, health access, neighborhood safety, and community development. The process and the product were radical for the time; however, the eclectic platform was less a vision of the future than an internal consolidation of many of the issues that local ACORN groups had worked on. Although the platform unified the organization, it projected neither a framework for those outside neither the organization nor a clear path for ACORN's future.

It was not until the mid-1990s that ACORN began to use its communicative resources intentionally. The organization's two radio stations regularly host discussions on ACORN's issues, ideas, and political positions, and the quarterly *Social Policy* magazine provides a forum for feature stories and analysis of the work of progressive community and labor groups. "*Social Policy* and the radio stations give us the ability to create and frame discussions—especially among our members and with allies," says Kevin Whelan (2006).

The group has also been successful in projecting issues and frames through mainstream media. A Google search for ACORN-related newspaper articles found 686 links for the period from November 12 through December 13, 2006. Articles ranged from reporting on ACORN's demands for rebuilding housing in New Orleans to coverage on a report on lending discrimination in California, the announcement of an ACORN-endorsed effort to introduce a state-based earned income tax credit in North Carolina, and a story about the possible move of the New Jersey Nets to Brooklyn following

ACORN's support for the hotly debated Atlantic Yards development project. ACORN's work, even when it is soundly criticized, is nonetheless news.

Neither the internally directed work of ACORN's publications and radio station nor the voluminous reporting on day-to-day work, however, necessarily reshapes public debate. "What's worked in the realm of ideas," says Kest, "is to develop a replicable policy that pushes the idea and then to initiate campaigns that force the policy into the public eye. That's exactly what we've done with the Living Wage work" (2006).

The outcomes of the ACORN's living wage campaign have been little short of astounding. In 1994, a coalition of labor (led by AFSCME) and BUILD, an affiliate of the Alinsky-founded Industrial Areas Foundation, initiated a campaign in Baltimore to require city service contractors to pay a living wage. Using the Baltimore campaign as a model, ACORN successfully replicated living wage campaigns in St. Louis, Boston, Los Angeles, San Jose, Portland, Milwaukee, Detroit, Minneapolis, and Oakland—bringing the national total to 122 ordinances (Living Wage 2007). In addition, in 2005 ACORN organized coalitions in Ohio, Missouri, Arizona, and Colorado that included labor and other progressive groups in efforts to raise the state minimum wage through ballot initiatives in 2006. The initiatives passed handily in all four states.

Passing the initiatives, however, was only one part of the outcome. "We've managed to change the way people think and talk about work and wages," says Steve Kest (2006). Kest is not alone in thinking that minimum wage initiatives and living wage ordinances have transformed the public conversation about work. In a 2006 interview in the *New York Times Magazine*, former labor secretary Robert Reich points out that "whatever the minimum wage's limitations may be as a policy issue, . . . it demarcates our concept of democracy with regard to work" (Gertner 2006).

ACORN's living wage efforts were not immediately successful. Campaign efforts in the late 1990s in Denver and Houston, as well as the state of Missouri, all failed. "We got killed the first time around in Missouri, I think we got a little over 40 percent of the vote," remembers Kest, "but this time at the polls (2006), we got over 75 percent. That's a real change" (2006). To what does ACORN attribute its success in the Living Wage campaign? "There are a number of things," says communications director Kevin Whelan. "First, we had to build broad-based support. We knew we couldn't do this by ourselves. Second, attempts to pass living wage ordinances were springing up all over the country, so we had to figure out how to support those efforts even when we weren't directly involved. That's why we worked with the Labor Studies Department at Wayne State University to publish a 'Living Wage Resource Guide' and set up the Living Wage Resource Center. Third, we had to keep at it. We lost many of our initial campaigns. In Houston, for instance, we lost 4 to 1. We used the opportunity to learn what works,

and to build our alliances so that the next time out we'd do better. Now we're winning, but it's after over ten years of effort" (2006).

Patience and persistence paid off. As David Neumark, Senior Fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California, observed, "How many other issues are there where progressives have been this successful? I can't think of one." (Gertner 2006, 40). The Living Wage Resource Center carries the full text of 140 living wage ordinances and lists twenty states, twenty-eight colleges and universities, and sixty-three cities or counties where there are ongoing campaigns. Says Steve Kest, "It is no accident that Nancy Pelosi has the minimum wage on the top of her agenda. We've changed the debate on the issue" (2006).

Campaign work is not the only way ACORN attempts to project and consolidate ideas. In 1999, ACORN formed the Organizer's Forum, an effort to enable organizers from a variety of sectors to "reflect, regroup, and then move forward as practitioners in their common work." The forum's board of directors includes organizers from three major organizing networks and union representatives from both sides of the recent split between AFL-CIO unions and the breakaway Change to Win unions. Programmatically, the forum sponsors international dialogues with labor and community organizers doing innovative work. These dialogues take up to twenty U.S.-based organizers abroad for an exchange of ideas and have included discussions with Landless Rural Workers in Brazil (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Dalit Solidarity Peoples in India, and feminist organizers from the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work (FSWW) in Turkey. Program coordinator Barbara Bowen says, "On the one hand, it's been a challenge to really understand the culture and conditions that these groups are working in. On another level entirely, the dialogues have developed a real sense of solidarity and shared mission among the participants. And that's one of the things we're trying to build" (2006).

In addition to the international dialogues, the Organizer's Forum has also sponsored biannual seminars on a variety of issues to advance the work of organizing, including Challenges to Immigrant Organizing, Technology and Organizing, New Constituency-Based Tactics, and Bringing Framing to Organizing. Presenters in these seminars have included community and constituency organizers Marcella Diaz, an organizer with New Mexico's Somos Un Pueblo Unido; Dan Sellers, director of the Ruckus Society; Jennifer Krill with the Rainforest Action Network (RAN); ACORN's own Steve Kest and former Illinois head organizer Madeline Talbott; labor leaders Stephen Lerner and Eliseo Medina (SEIU), and Charles Lester (AFL-CIO). In addition to practitioners, policy advocates and public intellectuals have also made presentations, including Rockridge Institute pundit George Lakoff; pollster Celinda Lake; Donald Green, author of *Get Out the Vote! How to Increase Voter Turnout*; Clarissa

Martinez of the National Council of La Raza; Pomona College professor Heather Williams; and scholar-activist Peter Drier.

Reflecting on her recent return from an Organizer’s Forum dialogue in Turkey, Netsy Firestein, Executive Director of the Labor Project for Working Families, says, “I was really struck by the commonalities in issues we’re faced with—in both unions and community settings. I think the real value of the dialogue is that it forced me to step outside of my immediate work—it gave me some perspective” (2006). Jeff Fox, former president of the New Democratic Party of British Columbia and Director of Organizing with the B.C. Government and Service Employees’ Union, remembers his first experience with the Organizer’s Forum. “When I went to the new technology forum in Minneapolis, at first I felt like a fish out of water. I hadn’t had much experience dealing with faith-based organizations and the technology stuff was pretty much a mystery to me. But after a day, once I understood what the technology could actually do, I was immediately able to make contributions about the potential strategic uses of the technology in labor organizing. It was both challenging and stimulating” (2006). “The Organizer’s Forum,” says Rathke, “has given us the opportunity to rip the covers off and really talk about our work. People have been wildly frank. It gives us the opportunity to build trust *before* we discuss possibilities for working together in the future” (2006). Bowen adds, “In initiating the forum, we’re taking some responsibility for stewardship. There are very few opportunities for people who are steeped in this work to actually learn from the successes and failures of other organizers. The Forum creates a space where constituency-based organizers can grapple with questions about our work, drawing on experiences outside of our immediate networks” (2006).

In summary, the principal way that ACORN has shaped public discourse is through its issue and campaign work. However, the organization has also developed mechanisms for systematic reflection and refining ideas through *Social Policy* and exchanging ideas and building solidarity among disparate networks in the United States and abroad through the Organizer’s Forum. While none of these approaches is perfect, they are self-conscious efforts to address the dearth of progressive ideas and the current collection of isolated issue silos that passes for a progressive landscape.

Outcomes

This chapter has explored two critical elements of movement building: how ACORN has used its size, scope, and national structure to pressure corporate and governmental targets, and its ability to build broad alliances, develop policy alternatives, and reframe public debate. In this section, given that the bottom-line question for organizers at the end of an organizing campaign is—*What did we actually get?*—I’ll examine ACORN’s major accomplishments.

“The change must move social policy *and* benefit your members,” says Bertha Lewis. “That’s where you really build power and it’s what attracted me to ACORN. We’ve been criticized for it—but that’s what really makes us a potent force” (2006). ACORN’s outcomes over the years have included school reform efforts that stopped school closings in Des Moines, won free transportation to schools in Little Rock, and established alternative schools in Brooklyn, Queens, St. Paul, Oakland, and Jersey City. The group’s housing and community reinvestment efforts have led to agreements with banks in St. Louis, New York City, Washington, D.C., and other cities, making more than a billion dollars available for loans in low-income neighborhoods. ACORN has lobbied successfully for the passage of a national homesteading bill and pressured the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to change policies and procedures to make it easier for low and moderate-income people to purchase HUD-owned properties. ACORN also pushed HUD to revamp homesteading programs that turn over vacant houses to low-income residents in Philadelphia, Detroit, Brooklyn, Bridgeport, Chicago, Phoenix, St. Louis, and Little Rock.

The group’s environmental justice work has forced companies to clean up, move, or cancel plans for toxic chemical plants, dumps, discharges, or waste incinerators in Memphis, Ft. Worth, Philadelphia, Des Moines, New Orleans, Dallas, Minneapolis, Jacksonville, St. Paul, Chicago, and St. Louis. ACORN has also organized parents of lead poisoning victims to pressure local governments for improved screening and treatment in New York, Detroit, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., and expanded childhood immunization in New Orleans.

Each of these accomplishments demonstrates the organization’s ability to coordinate strategies, develop and actualize policy alternatives, replicate pressure tactics, and negotiate clear-cut victories. But, according to Heidi Swarts, ACORN’s low-income membership “has fewer resources than church based organizations, used boisterous tactics that may have alienated officials, and was less successful than church-based groups in achieving policy outcome” (2002).

Swarts’s observations are at least partially correct. ACORN’s family-based membership base, built almost exclusively through field recruitment, does have fewer resources than organizations built through institutional church memberships. She is also correct in her observation that ACORN’s tactics intimidate some public officials and corporate personnel. In fact, Sol Stern of the Manhattan Institute recounts just such an instance, where the mayor of Baltimore was confronted with a protest demonstration at a banker’s dinner. Stern’s story notes that the mayor “thought it was a pretty cruddy thing to do” but admits that ACORN still got \$50,000 a year to provide housing counseling—“despite, or perhaps because of the intimidation” (2003).

Conservatives are not the only critics of ACORN’s tactics. New York-based advocate Mark Winston Griffith writes, “It’s hard to see their members as . . . more than animated props and set pieces

in ACORN’s elaborate political theater” (Griffith 2005). “Sure we use disruptive tactics,” admits Steve Kest. “We have to use the power of our members to make our case. But it’s not just a question of tactics, it’s a question of results” (2006). And how are ACORN’s results measured? A recent effort by independent consultant Lisa Raghelli (2006) to measure the outcomes of ACORN’s organizing examined the monetary value of ACORN’s successful work between 1995 and 2005 in the following arenas:

- The passage of 11 living wage ordinances and minimum wage increases in Illinois, Massachusetts, Florida, New York, and the City of San Francisco.
- Legislation limiting predatory lending in Mass., New Mexico, California, New York, and New Jersey, and improvements in federal regulations.
- Agreements negotiated with some of the nation’s largest subprime lenders, including Household Finance, Wells Fargo, and CitiFinancial, to change abusive practices and provide financial assistance to borrowers trapped in harmful loans.
- Fee reductions on high-cost tax Refund Anticipation Loans sold by H&R Block, the biggest commercial tax preparation company in the country.
- Helping 5,000 low-income households in 2004 claim the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and receive free tax preparation. (Raghelli 2006)

Raghelli puts the total monetary value of ACORN victories for the last decade at “\$15 billion, or an average of \$1.5 billion per year since 1995.” (Raghelli, op.cit.) (See Table 2)

Table 2: Monetary Benefits of Acorn Organizing, 1995–2005

Campaign	Monetary Benefit
Living and minimum wage increases	\$ 2,237,645,466
Predatory lending	\$ 6,265,776,423
EITC and tax preparation	\$ 8,036,546
Loan counseling and CRA	\$ 6,099,012,514
Housing development	\$ 33,559,000
Local infrastructure and public services	\$ 350,254,300
Budget cutbacks averted/restored	\$ 226,230,000
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>\$15,220,514,249</i>

These figures--combined with the steady expansion of ACORN's membership base through unionization and community-based campaigns, the successful passage of significant legislation, numerous local victories, transnational expansion efforts, and ongoing activities to build alliances and increase the analytical capacity of staff and members--suggest that as an organization ACORN has been successful in accruing power and benefits for its low-income base. But is ACORN a successful movement builder? Interviews with ACORN staff and leaders indicate that many are not sure they wanted to build a movement.

"Movement building has not always been our focus," says Kest. "What we've emphasized is developing an organization that enables movements to persevere, contest for power, and deliver results. There's a movement out there among immigrants. ACORN's role is to help our immigrant leaders provide strategy, structure, and program to that movement so that we can help advance their agenda over the long haul" (2006; 2007). Bertha Lewis adds, "Most people concerned primarily with movement think of mobilizing—they don't think of building a permanent institution. In order to multiply your effect you need real organizations. Without institutions there are no protracted movements" (2006). ACORN communications director Kevin Whelan has a different view. "I would resist the notion that movement building and organization building are two different things. You can't have a movement without directly engaging the people most affected by racism and inequality and challenging them to take action. We do that on a daily basis. We also do a tremendous amount of coalition work and are part of coalitions to preserve affordable housing and pass inclusionary zoning laws in places like Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis. All of our living wage work is coalitional. I think the vast amount of what we do is movement building." (2006).

Even though ACORN is involved in coalition work, its primary task is organizing low-income people—predominantly people of color—to act in their own interest. *How does ACORN's work contribute to movement building despite internal protestations that the organization's primary task is building power for its members?*

- (1) ***Organizing poor people.*** It may not sound like a big deal that ACORN still organizes poor people. But in a society where so-called progressives strategize about capturing the imagination of soccer moms and Nascar dads, a commitment to organizing poor people and doing so directly gives the organization a legitimacy and authenticity that is not replicated in any other national organization. What kind of movement would we have if poor people were left out?

- (2) ***A multiracial constituency.*** Although the commitment to organize the poor and the interest in organizing a multiracial constituency were part of the original “southern strategy” mandate set out by the national Welfare Rights Organization before ACORN became an independent entity, it is admirable that the organization still adheres to the principle. Nonetheless, the organization has racial tensions. The senior staff of ACORN is still predominantly white in a membership organization that is almost 90 percent people of color. However, whereas thirty years ago ACORN studiously avoided addressing issues of race and racial justice, in the last ten years its work in school reform, predatory lending, housing, and environmental justice have all pointed to racial disparities and worked to address institutional racism. One of the criteria for movement building articulated by Taj James (and cited earlier in this article) is the ability to address racism. ACORN is by no means perfect in this arena, as current staff/board tensions mentioned earlier reflect, but it is one of the few national organizations that has actually launched campaigns with explicit demands related to race.
- (3) ***Challenging the “beauty of localism.”*** ACORN has successfully consolidated local campaign efforts into national results. Not only was ACORN the first community organization to develop and refine a series of replicable organizing models to engage different populations of low-income people, the organization expanded the notion of how to build power by establishing federated branches in different states and has developed the infrastructure to support multistate and national campaign efforts. The group’s ability to aggregate local living wage work into state legislation clearly flies in the face of my prediction twenty years ago that the amalgamated efforts of hundreds of small community groups would not necessarily result in large-scale structural change. As one of the group’s conservative critics writes, “ACORN decided instead it would work city by city, starting in the most liberal places, to enact local wage legislation” (Malanga 2006). Another concurs, “Unlike the old New Left, ACORN is patient, willing to achieve its goals by a thousand modest increments” (Stern 2003). There is no doubt that ACORN’s strategy to initiate progressive policy reform through local and state campaigns has been extremely successful.

- (4) ***Willingness to experiment with and build alternative institutions.*** Berger and Cornell (2006) argue that a key component of movement building is “building coalitions, political infrastructure, and alternative institutions while simultaneously confronting the state, right-wing social movements, and other forms of institutional oppression.” ACORN has rejected the traditional community organizing practice of building a wall between organizers and service providers—the classic “clients or constituents” debate Kest mentioned earlier. Instead, the organization has managed an uneasy balance between providing housing services while fighting redlining, on the one hand, and starting and managing schools while advocating for quality education, on the other. ACORN does not do these things equally well. It is, for instance, much better at fighting for social justice than modeling successful pedagogical approaches in education. However, because it is a federation, it has the ability to learn from its mistakes and to transfer cumulative lessons to membership and staff.
- (5) ***Consolidating ideas, strategies, and people.*** ACORN’s development of the Organizer’s Forum is becoming a new arena for developing ideas, sharing strategies, and offering organizers opportunities for collective reflection. In addition to the work of the forum, ACORN’s outreach to nonorganizers—public intellectuals, policy analysts, and planners—demonstrates an understanding that moving a large scale agenda will take intellectual capital as well as a membership base.
- (6) ***Politics on top.*** From its earliest days, ACORN has been willing to advance its interests in the electoral sphere. From candidate endorsement, to organizational expansion based on political opportunity, to issuing direct challenges to the Democratic Party, to large scale voter registration drives and development of the Working Families Party, ACORN has viewed the electoral arena as a key space in which to vie for power.
- (7) ***Internationalization of membership.*** ACORN has not only begun organizing partnerships in neighboring countries (as have the IAF and Gamaliel Institute), it has also learned from the experiences of organizers in Canada, India, and Latin America and initiated transnational fights over environmental safety and

immigrant rights. ACORN was not the first U.S.-based community organizing network to initiate projects abroad, but because it is one organization with many chapters, it is currently the only U.S.-based network with the ability to launch and coordinate multiple actions to affect targets in many localities globally.

- (8) ***Tough, hell-raising tactics.*** In a society where more and more community organizations are emphasizing, “relationship building” as the cornerstone for political discourse, ACORN is still ready to be rude—to demonstrate the power and importance of militant action. Conflict and an oppositional culture are always central to movement building.

Tell No Lies

So, ACORN is a sophisticated animal. It operates on many levels, is potent on a number of fronts, and has outlived many critics and an even larger number of friends. Even though ACORN’s major stated task is not movement building, in order to achieve its goal of building power for low-income people, ACORN may have no alternative but to expand its movement building efforts. In the spirit of Amilcar Cabral’s urging to “mask no difficulties, tell no lies and claim no easy victories,” there are three areas related to movement building that I think the organization should consider.

First, ACORN’s internal structure must catch up to its external ambition. Earlier in this chapter I pointed to the differences between ACORN’s emphasis on external outcomes or product versus the importance that younger activists place on the relationship between product and process. As ACORN’s current internal disarray illustrates, we ignore or deemphasize internal organizational processes at our own peril. In a way, the attacks on ACORN’s voter registration efforts before the 2008 election actually gave the organization a reprieve from internal strife. The external threat served to unify staff, board members, and allies. However, when the dust cleared, the internal tensions, caused in large part by a lack of organizational transparency, remained. ACORN cannot use its own political experience and clout to contribute to a broader movement until it develops an infrastructure that clarifies and rationalizes its many organizational components *and* builds additional developmental infrastructure to increase the skills and talents of grassroots leaders and newly recruited staff.

Second, ACORN should consider developing and activating a more thoughtful approach to less powerful potential allies. Over the years ACORN has had varied ongoing relationships with local groups. It has tended to work well with more powerful allies (for example, unions), mobilize the resources of liberal groups (such as the Democracy Alliance), and neutralize, absorb, or ignore less powerful allies. Mostly this approach has worked. However, for some groups—legitimate indigenous

community-based organizations—this approach has often caused unnecessary and long lasting enmity. It is an old axiom in community organizing that you make alliances to “borrow power, never to lend it.” But ACORN is in a different place than it was thirty-eight years ago. It has grown up. As Lewis points out, ACORN is an institution. As an institution, its organizational leadership role must expand beyond the important task of developing the unheard voices of its primary constituency. It must also figure out how to work productively with smaller, less powerful groups, allowing them to maintain their own identities and to contribute to even more successful outcomes.

Finally, ACORN should consider initiating a process to redefine and rearticulate its politics. Over twenty-five years ago, ACORN developed the People’s Platform as a tool to consolidate new affiliates with the collective political experience of the group’s existing membership. By articulating the aspirations of the membership, the platform presented an alternative set of social priorities and arrangements. Although ACORN’s recent efforts to promote ideas have been important byproducts of its Katrina and living wage work, both are single-issue efforts. To move large-scale policy reforms on multiple issues, ACORN may need to envision a new People’s Platform. Such an endeavor could engage current members and potential allies in a process that could articulate political principles and the policies and programs to realize them. It could also expand the scope of the organization’s work into broader social issues. At a minimum, an endeavor to redefine and rearticulate ACORN’s politics could help update the organization’s implicit vision and, in the process, make it explicit. At best, ACORN could help catalyze a vision critical to movement building.

ACORN has been active on issues of economic inequality, the bailout, and the foreclosure crisis. However, although the organization has taken progressive positions, it has been significantly less articulate on immigration policy, the Iran/Afghanistan wars and a host of post-911 threats to civil liberties that affect the organization’s constituency. To survive and thrive in these turbulent times, ACORN will have to shake itself up, move out of its comfort zone, and demonstrate its commitment to values and principles that are bigger than the bread and butter issues for which it is known. It is that element—the stepping outside of our experiences—that forces people and organizations to really grow and makes others take notice. And who knows? It might just galvanize a movement.

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