



Building the Ranks:

ACORN Organizing & Chicago Homecare Workers

▪ *Keith Kelleher*

Every few months our office receives some piece of direct mail concerning a conference or seminar on union organizing put on by some professional salesperson. The piece extolls the virtues of professional sales techniques for "selling the union" to prospective union members. We throw these advertisements away. Nothing could be more foreign to ACORN's way of doing things.

The idea that a union organizer's job is to "sell" his or her union is totally alien to our model for labor organizing, a model which was developed out of ACORN's years of experience with successful *community organizing*. When we organize a company, the organizer's job is to be a catalyst or contact person, to listen to peoples' perceptions of what they would like to see improved where they work and to help them realize these aspirations through self-organization and action.

ACORN—the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now—formed the United Labor Unions (ULU) in 1978 with the purpose of organizing low-wage workers in industries and regions that traditional unions were not organizing. Last year the ULU affiliated with the Service Employees (SEIU).

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When we first started our labor organizing drives, we did not know a lot about what we were doing. But we always went into them with a disciplined and professional "make it happen" attitude that typifies a lot of the work we do. And, in every case, we have won something:

—in Boston and Chicago thousands of homecare workers organized with improved wage and benefit packages and grievance procedures.

—in Detroit, hundreds of workers in small shops organized and the only fastfood workers' union contract that we know of in the world.

—in New Orleans, thousands of previously low-wage workers organized in hospitals, nursing homes, public facilities and hospitality services.

We are by no means without failures, and we experience the same problems many unions and other progressive organizations face in the Reagan years. In many ways, our experience in union organizing has been sobering. But we think we have developed an alternative model of union organizing that has proven its potential in specific cases. Our initial successes allow us to hope that our approach to labor organizing can help reverse the trend toward declining membership in the labor movement.

ACORN's Roots in Community Organizing

ACORN was founded in 1970 in Little Rock, Arkansas, by Wade Rathke, formerly head organizer for the National Welfare Rights Organization in Massachusetts. Its mission was to unite black, white and Hispanic welfare recipients with working people in the same community organization to fight and win on a wide range of local issues.

Since its initial founding, ACORN has spread to 26 states and more than 35 cities, with over 60,000 families paying dues of \$16 per year to support the organization. ACORN has earned a reputation for being able to build and maintain multi-class, multi-racial and multi-issue organizations that win through direct action. Typical ACORN campaigns focus direct action on stop signs at unsafe intersections, inadequate or nonexistent city services, or toxic wastes. More recently, through its National Squatting Campaign, ACORN has used direct action to turn over abandoned houses in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods to families willing to clean them up and move in. ACORN also has an effective and growing canvass operation that contacts 600,000 families a year.

ACORN's organizing model is based on several different predecessors: the direct action model of the National Welfare Rights Organization and of Saul Alinsky; the dues collection model of the United Farm Workers, Cesar Chavez and Fred Ross; and the "Boston Model" of door-to-door sign-up of members developed by Bill Pastreich, a former Alinsky and Welfare Rights organizer and now head organizer for SEIU in Massachusetts. ACORN's overall conception has always been to build a "Union in the Neighborhood" that organizes on issues targeted, researched and acted upon by the members.

The ACORN model is simple: pick a low- and moderate-income neighborhood that is obviously lacking in power or representation and start knocking on doors! ACORN assumes that an organization can be built in a neighborhood like this, and it is the organizer's job to go out and make it happen.

The organizer is required to knock on doors (at first alone, but later with other members), sign up member families and collect dues, target and develop leaders, and, most importantly, *listen*. An organizer is not a salesperson trying to sell a product. An organizer is a catalyst who listens to what people want to see changed in their neighborhood and assists them in building an organization to realize these goals.

The typical ACORN organizing drive lasts 8 weeks, at the end of which a big neighborhood meeting is held. Everyone in the neighborhood is invited and the members choose three issues to work on: An immediate one which is winnable and which establishes credibility, a second one which is winnable but will take a little longer, and a third for a longer range campaign. Members also elect officers, collect dues from new members and set a time and place for the first direct action campaign on the immediate issue the group has chosen.

The first action is typically something the group feels they can win—getting a stop sign at an unsafe corner; getting a particularly dirty lot cleaned up; getting an abandoned house torn down or tearing it down themselves. This is why people join ACORN and what ACORN members and staff pride themselves on— *together through action we get things done*. A typical first action differs from neighborhood to neighborhood, but most likely is one where a public official who is responsible for a particular problem is invited out to the area of the problem to be held accountable by the residents in that area. If the official refuses to come out, it is all for the better—the group carools down to his office, makes some noise and confronts the official there.

All actions are planned and strategized well beforehand, and

leadership prepares to handle the situation through role-playing. Frequently, the media is invited to be there so as to bring the maximum amount of pressure upon the city official. In the action itself, with the city official as well as with the media, an organizer is *never* to speak up or be seen as the spokesperson. An organizer's job is to help the leadership empower themselves and the membership at an action, thereby beginning to change the power relationships in the community. Any organizer who is quoted on television or in the media or who takes over an action is to be sharply reprimanded and disciplined and, in some cases, if this "leader-organizer" complex is a habit, that organizer should be fired.

The ACORN community organizing model, then, is based on a handful of basic principles and techniques: direct action on winnable issues to achieve victories; democracy to assure membership control and leadership accountability; dues collection and internal fundraising to insure financial stability; and membership and leadership recruitment and training to assure a lasting, growing and viable organization.

ACORN Moves into Labor Organizing

The ACORN National Executive Board decided in 1978 to get into labor organizing with the formation of United Labor Organizations (ULO), which was later to become United Labor Unions (ULU).

United Labor Organizations started organizing unemployed and underemployed minimum- and low-wage workers in Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit and New Orleans. Initial targets centered around CETA workers in an attempt to get these quasi-public workers organized into unions for higher wages and benefits.

Successes in organizing existing CETA workers were sporadic and uneventful. But ULO organizers and members had more success organizing the unemployed to get CETA jobs. Large demonstrations in Detroit, New Orleans and Philadelphia won jobs for a lot of the participants and sparked national inquiries into what CETA money was really being used for. In many cases big city mayors were using CETA money to pay firemen and policemen, instead of hiring the low-income unemployed the program was supposed to target. But, even though we could mobilize thousands of unemployed and win some jobs, ULO could not maintain an organization. Thus was formed the United Labor Unions.

The ULU was formed to organize low-wage workers in



... *Chicago Homecare Workers protest at Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services.*

industries and regions of the country where traditional unions would not, could not or did not organize—most notably, home health care workers in Boston and Chicago; fastfood workers in Detroit; hotel workers in New Orleans, and workers in small, low-wage sweat shops in Philadelphia.

The ULU organizing model borrowed a lot from our ACORN community organizing experience as well as from our experiences organizing the unemployed and CETA workers.

Because of the sophistication of modern union-busting management consultants, we realized when we first started that traditional union organizing methods would not work. We realized that the best way to organize for our purposes was to *build an organization* first. We knew that we had to build an organization that could sustain itself through a one- or perhaps two-year campaign that it often takes to get a signed contract.

We do not pass out flyers in the beginning of an organizing drive; we do not start passing out cards on a hot tip at a company; we do not approach management first; and we do not approach workers as "salespeople" for the union trying to sell the union's benefits as if we were selling insurance or vacuum cleaners. Instead we rely on the basic Build-the-Base organizing principles that made ACORN the largest community organization in the country.

The Labor Organizing Model

Our union organizing model, like most, has several steps and variations, all designed to mobilize members and leaders to take action for themselves to change wages, benefits and workplace conditions and to win the dignity and respect they demand. Below is a step-by-step outline of the process we follow in an organizing drive. Like any model, it has to be used flexibly in adjusting to specific situations and events.

Step 1: Targetting

We never base our organizing plan on "hot tips" because these types of drives often fall apart soon after they start. We develop an organizing plan by first surveying all the places in town in a particular industry. We go to every homecare agency, for example, and gather information by talking with workers about conditions at each shop until we have enough information to assess whether a company can be organized or not. Once we have all this information on file, then we target the most likely ones for an organizing drive and start the list building there.

Step 2: List Building

This is the process through which we build up our list of contacts at any establishment by again talking with workers and slowly building up a list of peoples' names, addresses and phone numbers. Once we have a sufficient pool from which to draw, we start house visits.

Step 3: House Visits

These early house visits are meant to find leadership on which to build an Organizing Committee. We don't ask people to sign authorization cards on these house visits, but we do ask them to join and to start paying dues.

We want to start dues collection early in the organizing drive so that people know they are expected to have a financial and moral commitment to the union and that paying dues is part of being in a union. We feel strongly that you have to deal with dues upfront and hard or else it will come back on you later on.

As we are doing our leadership house visits, we try to build up the responsibility of individual workers to the organization—making them aware that the organizer is not the union, but that everyone who works in that shop is "the union." This personal commitment to their own union—backed by a concrete financial "investment" in it—serves to destroy management's attempts later

on to paint "the union" and its officers as an outside force.

Step 4: Leadership Development

As we are doing house visits, we look for people who will be potential leaders. Later on, these potential leaders will be asked to chair meetings, pass cards, sign up members, and may even be elected to temporary offices by other members. The people we look for are not the big-mouth, know-it-all types, but the hard-working, God-fearing people who come to work on time, work hard and are sincerely invested in doing better for themselves and their families. We do want people who can express themselves, but mainly we look for the loyal, hard-working people who have the respect of other workers and who are willing to work and fight for their union. Once we have visited enough people, we put out the call for the first Organizing Committee (OC) meeting.

Step 5: Organizing Committee Meeting

Leaders who have emerged through house visits chair the meeting and take responsibility for different parts of the agenda. In the first few OC meetings people volunteer to bring coffee and donuts—which helps strengthen the commitment of members to self organization and makes them realize that whatever they want they are going to have to do for themselves, that "the union" is not a fat cat provider. The central theme of the first meeting is *participation* by everyone present on "Why We Need Our Union" and "How to Win Our Union."

Group discussions and group decisions are key. The organizer's role should be limited to making sure people are involved; he/she should not be seen as the speaker but rather as a resource person called upon by the chair to help explain technical complexities the group might get hung up on at a first meeting. Votes should be taken to start passing authorization cards, and everyone present should sign a card and start paying their dues, if possible. They then should go through the list of employees and commit to signing up the others and collecting dues.

Subsequent OC meetings are usually once a week until we have enough cards, then once every two weeks. Stewards and spokespeople are elected on an temporary basis. Once enough cards are collected, the OC should plan an action against the employer, demanding recognition as well as more specific short-term changes that the OC thinks can be won.

Step 6: The Recognition Action

The Recognition Action is done not so much in the hope of



...SEIU 880 members confront the boss.

gaining recognition (although this does happen in a small number of cases), but to get the OC members and other members to "come out of the closet" in front of the boss. The Recognition Action gives workers their first real sense of the power of group action and is usually a tremendous "high" for all those involved. It also gives the workers a chance to intimidate the boss for a change, and it puts management on notice that the workers are well organized and that if they try to mess with people, the OC will take swift and appropriate action.

At the Recognition Action itself, the stewards and leaders are the spokespeople. Role-playing should be done beforehand at a planning meeting, and the action itself should be loud, with lots of chanting and singing. A Recognition Agreement is prepared and authorization cards are brought along just in case a recognition agreement is possible.

Step 7: Election Campaign & Afterwards

By the time we demand recognition and file for an election, the organization should already be in place. Members should have elected temporary stewards, started dues collection, and established a system of people who are willing to do house visits with an organizer or by themselves as well as a system of phone

callers, leafletters and other communications people. In addition, they should have started their own newsletter, filled with articles written by workers and plenty of cartoons. It is also good to have various union social events during the organizing drive.

With even a semi-stable organization, the union should be able to withstand attacks by the consultants, and stewards, leaders and members should be geared up to take over captive-audience meetings the boss tries to set up. The key factor in winning the election and keeping a stable organization after the election is the members' ability to mobilize and do the house visits with or without an organizer.

This step-by-step model needs to be used flexibly to adjust to specific circumstances. For instance, if the OC is not strong enough to collect dues, but will collect authorization cards and do a Recognition Action, then we concentrate on getting cards and winning the election—though we are always upfront about dues. But this is the basic model we use and that has worked for us in organizing and then sustaining an organization through elections, negotiations and strikes.

The Chicago Homecare Organizing Project

One organizing drive where we've used this model is in our ongoing organizing of Chicago homecare workers. Begun in the Fall of 1983, we have had some initial successes in this drive and the future looks positive.

The homecare industry is in many ways "quasipublic." The Illinois Homecare System was set up by the state of Illinois as an alternative to institutionalization of senior citizens and handicapped in hospitals, nursing homes and other state facilities. It is one of the most cost-effective programs in state government, saving the state millions of dollars a year on institutionalization costs. The money for the program comes from state general revenue funds and a Medicaid Waiver from the federal government. Originally, the state ran the program itself through the Illinois Department of Public Aid, but in 1980 it began subcontracting to for-profit and non-profit vendors. The state also saw the program as "Workfare" for welfare recipients to get off aid and out working. Many of these workers (more than 10,000 of them statewide) were transferred to the private vendors when the state started subcontracting. Today, most workers are either present or former aid recipients. The workforce is primarily black and Hispanic and overwhelmingly female.

The industry is tremendously labor-intensive. Workers basically

perform any task the client asks—general housekeeping, laundry, cooking, cleaning, bathing, shopping, meal planning, bill paying, escorting to and from the doctor, general companionship, and other personal care such as trimming finger and toe nails, helping with medication and general hygiene. The homecare worker provides vital homecare services to two of the most vulnerable groups in our society—the abandoned, low-income, homebound elderly and disabled.

For all of this work, the average homecare worker receives a minimum wage (\$3.35) or slightly above (in rare cases as high as \$4.25 an hour) and no benefits or regular pay increases. Frequently, they have to travel all over town to visit two or three clients out of their own pockets. The vendor agencies, however, do quite nicely, and are reimbursed from \$5.60 to \$7.00 an hour for every hour of service performed. It is a scandal and a crime that the workers who perform some of the most important and necessary work in our society are treated this way, especially workers who deal with a most vulnerable and at-risk population. This is what the Chicago Homecare Organizing Project has set out to change.

Before our affiliation with SEIU, ULU Local 1475 had started successfully organizing homecare workers in Boston. We were under the impression then that we were the only people organizing this workforce, but we later found out that SEIU in New York and California and the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees ("District 1199") in New York and Philadelphia had organized or were in the process of organizing homecare workers.

From our humble beginnings in Boston, we have more than a thousand dues-paying homecare workers under contract to what is now SEIU 1475. SEIU also represents some 30,000 homecare workers in New York and California. "1199" represents thousands under contract in New York and Philadelphia, and an independent union in California has several thousand members under contract. Clearly, this is a growing field and one that is ready for unionization.

The ULU began organizing in Chicago in late 1983. Our initial research revealed 12 for-profit and non-profit vendors providing service under contract to the state of Illinois. Both for-profit and non-profit were paying minimum wage and no benefits. After much legwork and research, we targetted the two largest vendors in Chicago—Staff Builders and National Homecare Systems, Inc., who together employ almost 1,000 homecare workers.

We won our first representation election at National Homecare Systems in January 1984 by a 60% margin and finally signed a



... *homecare worker with client.*

contract under an 11th-hour strike notice in June 1985—over a year-and-a-half of negotiating. We won a slight improvement in wages and benefits as well as establishment of a grievance procedure and a modified union shop.

Staff Builders is another story and is turning out to be typical of our organizing drives. The employer went to the Labor Board arguing that the State of Illinois is a "co-employer" and that, therefore, the NLRB has no jurisdiction over this unit—a ridiculous argument but one that the Reagan NLRB is "considering" these days. After being overruled by the local Board, the company appealed to the National Board. An election was held in June of 1984, which we believe we won handily, but the ballots were impounded and still sit waiting on a decision from the Board.

Since that time, we have won elections at Harriett Holmes Home Health (@110 employees), Community Care Systems (@300 employees), and believe we won at the YMCA (@400 employees), where ballots also have been impounded on the "coemployer" argument. In addition, we have filed on a 2,700-person statewide unit of the Department of Rehabilitative Services, which is also tied up in a similar "co-employer" argument at the State Labor Relations Board. We have active organizing committees at three other large vendors.

Though several of the employers have temporarily stymied our official recognition with their Labor Board maneuvers, our organizing committees are actively defending homecare workers through direct action.

We use the NLRA's "Weingarten rights" to represent workers' grievances on disciplinary charges, and we've won back pay at two agencies by filing minimum wage complaints with the Department of Labor. And last summer our members at Staff Builders visited the executive director's home in suburban Oakbrook.

That action was fun and the reception predictable. We emptied our bus at the end of the boss's block and marched through the neighborhood chanting and singing, bullhorn's blaring, passing out flyers with our complaints and the boss's phone number and address. We marched up to her house, wading through dogs released by friendly neighbors, and knocked on the door. (The house was a beautiful split-level and, as we could see through the windows, was chock full of paintings, antique furniture, food processors and every other modern convenience, and standing guard outside were two luxury Cadillacs. The members went wild. As one put it, "That's our money. We do the work and she spends the money on this.") We tacked our demands for wage and benefit increases on her door and headed back to the bus just as the police arrived. The following week, we received a letter from the company's attorney saying the boss had resigned. Three weeks later almost all employees received wage increases.

We've also put the heat on state bureaucrats and legislators for allowing the vendors to maintain slave labor conditions with taxpayers' money. The actions against the state began with a 50-person protest against the head of the Illinois Department of Aging in Chicago and was followed up with two bus-loads of homecare workers rallying on the steps of the state capitol in Springfield. These actions forced the state to set up a Special Task Force on Homecare to investigate and change the system so that workers can receive decent wages and benefits. Union leadership and members have taken an active role on the Task Force, and we expect some positive changes.

Meanwhile, we maintain an active leadership core at all of the companies where we have done drives, and hundreds of workers continue to pay associate membership dues with no return economically except a chance at a union contract and a deep, almost religious, faith that "We need a union and we will win."

Looking to the future, our leadership has approved increases in associate member dues so that we can continue to be more

financially self-sufficient. We hope eventually to be able to expand our discount-and-benefit plan for members and associate members to include discounts on uniforms, car repairs and on Certified Nurses' Assistant (CNA) training. In conjunction with ACORN, we are already helping members get better deals on getting their utilities turned back on, and we plan to expand this. We are also looking into the possibility of starting our own union homecare cooperative to bid on a state contract to provide homecare to clients. There has also been discussion of starting our own hiring hall where we could train our members to get CNA certificates and then get a state contract to supply trained union personnel to the agencies and the state. A lot of this is only in the idea stage and not even close to being implemented, but the potential could be enormous.

Client organizing has also been discussed and implemented on a small scale. We plan in the near future to expand this by organizing among clients for better quality services as well as higher wages and benefits for workers. Again, our ACORN community organizing experience will come in handy to unite clients and workers along common lines.

Conclusion

Just as our community organizing experience has brought a different approach to labor organizing, our experience with union organizing has initiated some changes in ACORN's community organizing. We have recently begun to experiment with different forms of Recognition Agreements between ACORN community groups and public utilities or government bodies, hoping to formalize our relationship much like union contracts between workers and employers. We have also been experimenting with different forms of dues deduction such as bank drafts, which could make our dues collection much less staff- and member-intensive and provide a steadier income flow for our community organizing operations.

Our experience at building our base, our union organizing model and our commitment to organize the unorganized with SEIU holds great potential for increased union organizing in previously unorganized and growing service industries like homecare, private maid services, and the hospitality industry. The next several years hold great promise for this new community-labor marriage and for the labor movement as a whole. ■