



Time for an Organizers Association

An Overhaul for the Long Haul

■ *Kim Fellner*

Many of us began our lives as organizers at a moment in the 1960s when the word had meaning and magic, when the larger culture placed some value on mobilizing the powerless. But in the last 15 years, we have witnessed a return to the passive ethos of charity, a focus on ameliorating symptoms without addressing their causes. What is a homeless shelter but the poorhouse revisited, and what more a "thousand points of light" than a call to alms?

We all know that charity alone will not solve the problems we face. Racism and sexism. Economic exploitation. Homelessness. Hunger. Illiteracy. Environmental destruction. These are not misfortunes but injustices.

Which is why—in unions, in community organizations large and small, in the environmental movement, and in the ongoing battles for human and civil rights—organizers still struggle to fulfill their vocation.

We persist, but we are too few; and while we may survive, we often do not flourish. The larger culture no longer reinforces the value of our work, making it difficult both to persevere and to

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draw a new generation to our ranks.

And although few of the organizers I know aspire to sainthood, many make deep sacrifices for their work. They are called upon to practice poverty without the consolation of community, to give up personal lives and comforts without proper physical or spiritual sustenance from the organizations that employ them. Forced to confront the problems and pressures of their work without adequate support, many run out of energy to sustain themselves in the context of movement work.

Good organizers, says Si Kahn, director of Grassroots Leadership in North Carolina, "have rage at injustice at the core, but at the same time, as someone once said, are guided by feelings of great love.

"I think organizers can survive living in motels, the hours, the demands, so long as they have a chance to feel they are changing history. They cannot survive when they feel they no longer make a difference, when they are no longer redressing injustice. We need to make sure they're doing that, and then let them know they are heirs to a proud tradition. People who struggle for justice are the prophets of our time. It's that kind of call."

DREAMING A NATIONAL ORGANIZERS ASSOCIATION

The National Organizers Association (NOA) is envisioned as a membership association to foster the survival, encourage the vocation, and bolster the effectiveness of organizers. It has its seeds in our own search for a larger, supportive community with which to share our work, test our ideas and renew our energies. It has as its larger vision the promise of generating connective tissue between the scattered builders of our progressive movement.

It is also fueled by the respect, affection and gratitude we have for the organizers we've met along the way. Yet these individuals who breathe life into a panoply of organizations and causes are overlooked when it comes to credit, support and compensation.

This neglect is not only detrimental to organizers. It is also a detriment to the larger progressive movement. The high burnout rate among experienced organizers and the high turnover among new ones makes it difficult to create institutional history and culture; to build on experience; to learn from defeats and maximize victories; to develop stable leadership; to mentor a new generation of organizers.

A 1985 Grassroots Leadership Burnout Project report estimates that of every 100 organizers, only half survive two years and fewer than ten make it through a decade. A recent survey of 45 Twin

Cities community organizers, cited in the *CURA Reporter*, found that only 10% want to make a career out of community organizing, and 50% plan to leave in less than three years.

In order to weld all our disparate organizations and causes into a coherent and successful progressive movement, we need continuity—and we need a growing community of experienced organizers. To enable these activists to use their talents to the fullest, we need to make sure they are properly compensated, supported and recognized. We need to provide them time to replenish skills and energies and opportunities to inspire a new generation of organizers. We need to build a community that counterbalances cynicism with hope, that makes organizing a viable way of life for dedicated people, not a road to burnout and self-destruction for near maniacs.

That's why we need a National Organizers Association.

A COMMON SEARCH

The need for secure environments in which to share experiences and think through thorny issues appears widespread among both labor and community organizers. In 1989, Cathy Howell of Grassroots Leadership conducted a survey of 24 community organizers, balanced for race and gender, and found the following frequently cited needs:

"To spend time with people from—and to visit—other organizations different from mine"; "To get to talk with others about, 'Where are we going?' and 'Who's we?'"; *"To do consciousness raising around racism—both to get it for myself and then help others and work it into the organizing process"; "To work on my own self-awareness and give others tools to build self-esteem"; "To reach a day-to-day balance between personal and organizational needs"; "To create a career path for organizers who don't want to be administrators or directors";* and mentioned by almost everyone, *"To keep people in the work!"*

That same year, I received a mid-career Samuel Gompers Fellowship from the Center for Labor-Management Policy Studies at the City University of New York. The result was a paper entitled, "In Search of the Movement: 1960s Activists in Labor." The interviews touched on many of the same issues as Cathy's survey: working to the exclusion of a personal life, low wages, inadequate training and the difficulties of survival in stultified bureaucracies.

Although Gompers would probably have hated it, the paper was widely disseminated in the organizing community and drew a torrent of responses. Many spoke eloquently to people's doubts and dreams, and the need to draw strength from community. One respondent reflected:

"For years when friends ask me, 'Why work with unions, they're so bureaucratic and out of touch?' I would talk of a 'new generation' that would someday come to the fore and be ready to respond to transforming moments and movements. I promised them and myself that when the right day came, we would be perched, like the CIO forces of the '30s, ready and prepared to resuscitate a social movement. But lately I've been discouraged.

"I can't give up the dream yet," he adds, "but I wonder what it will take to unleash it. Maybe part of our job is to just have confidence in history and in ourselves. Last week I went to a conference and was fed there, simply by the caring and mutual support of friends. We need more moments like those, that network of caring. . ."

Almost every letter expressed the desire for more opportunities to be nourished by each other. So why not?

WHAT'S AN ORGANIZER, ANYWAY?

The first question everyone asks is, "Who and what is an organizer? How do we decide who's in and who's out?"

If there's a pat answer, we don't know it. We do know this: Organizers help those who previously lacked power to instigate change. They help bring hope where there is none; they reinforce



people's sense of their own dignity and self worth; they encourage cooperation and community; they help groups in conflict resolve their differences in a progressive way.

Organizers function under a variety of titles, in a huge array of organizations. Some are executive directors of struggling groups, some are educators and trainers of activists, office workers in justice campaigns, preachers, community development workers. Some are actually called organizers. But all do the job of either bringing new people into an organization or bringing people to greater activism.

Theresa Freeman, organizer for the Vermont Toxic Education Project describes herself and her colleagues simply as "justice workers."

ASKING THE QUESTIONS

Clearly, the definition of organizer varies greatly. At one end are those who argue that "no one is a real organizer except me, the people I've trained and/or those who work for my organization." On the other extreme is "everyone who is active is an organizer." As is often the case, the truth is somewhere in between.

Instead of arbitrarily making that decision, the NOA Organizing Committee is testing out an Organizers Census in which we ask the respondents what about their work makes them an organizer. From those self-definitions we suspect that useful parameters will begin to emerge.

The census has other uses as well. To begin with, there is startlingly little known about the people who do organizing. An inquiry about union organizers last year revealed that neither the Department of Labor nor the AFL-CIO can tell you how many there are, much less *who* they are. The same situation exists in the other movement sectors.

And while there are a number of networks that link organizers (ACORN, The Midwest Academy, the Coalition for Third World Organizing, the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute, individual union organizing departments, even the Cornell Industrial and Labor Relations Alumni Association) many organizers have not been through any of these training processes and/or work in relative isolation.

The truth is, we don't know quite who's out there, or how they're connected to each other. We don't know even the most basic data regarding ethnicity, age, gender, religion, class, or "relationship status"—even though we worry about the issues that flow from this information.

We also don't know what career paths organizers follow or whether they move from one broad interest sector to another (i.e., from labor to environment?, from community to labor?) or whether the concept of "an organizing career" is an oxymoron.

The Organizers Census will provide information, not merely on who, where and how many there are, but also: job history; why they consider themselves organizers; what draws them to the work; why they leave; what would make it possible for them to stay; and what an association of organizers might look like and do to be most useful to them.

And finally, we can try to answer one organizer's all important question: "Do organizers ever eat lunch?"

IS IT A UNION?

After, "Who you calling organizer???" the second question, asked with either hope or suspicion, is: "Is this a union?"

We don't know whether that will be the end result. But we do know that one of NOA's goals is to create nonexploitative standards of employment.

Frequently, the organizer's willingness to sacrifice for the cause falls victim to exploitation (knowing or unknowing) by the employing organization or agency. Many of these groups have little money; forced to choose between paying the printer or the organizer, they will choose the former. They will call upon the organizer's commitment and play on her or his guilt to forestall requests for better salaries, health coverage, vacation time or pensions. Unfortunately, the tendency to exploit the organizer frequently persists even when the institution becomes more financially secure—and is too often justified by citing lofty principles.

These employment issues are not merely important for the usual reasons of workplace equity; *they also embody a critical class issue for the progressive community.* A disproportionate number of community organizers have been white, young, college educated, mobile, and from families that can financially subsidize their activism. There is a growing concern that extremely low wages and no benefits discourage participation by persons of color, women, the poor and the working class, heads of households, older people, and disabled persons.

As one aspiring organizer, a single parent in her mid-thirties explained, "When they told me they thought I was the wrong person because they were looking for someone who would work seventy hours a week and be always on call, I said, 'Wait a minute, you're supposed to be a union and you're telling me this? It's

extremely sexist. I'm willing to work hard, but I also need to spend time with my son.'"

Yet few issues are as controversial among activists as the question of whether staff should be unionized.

One of my friends, an organizer of long standing, opposes unionization of organizers on principle. He argues that organizers teach not only skills but values. If they want others to sacrifice for the cause, they must set the example, working long hours for little money, becoming a role model to which potential activists aspire.

Furthermore, he notes, successful organizing requires that intensity of commitment, that single focus of passion; in a world of limited resources to confront major injustice, it's one of the few weapons we have.

But there are other viewpoints.

"People who see themselves as the empowerers of others will also take care of themselves, while those who see themselves as sacrificing for others often forget," said one woman.

"The United Farm Workers, for example, substituted shared community culture for good treatment. I feel that we may love the work we're doing, but we're still employees.

"Of course, you always have to worry about crossing the line and being self-serving," she adds, "but that's true in any action you take. I think if you put yourself in a different class there's a danger of losing the anger. But I find that people who have the vision don't lose it, but those who never had it will never get it."

Another woman who has organized in both labor and community groups explains, "Organizers should not have to be heroes in the classic sense of working day and night, and they also should not be expendable, to be used up and disposed of."

Most organizers I've interviewed believe that while minimum standards are crucial, unionization of movement workers has potential dangers. Some have been in unions where staff representation led to the creation of "porkchopper" business agents—a disproportionately well paid group of business reps with a lot of seniority and little motivation. Others worry that staff demands will threaten the survival of economically frail but important community organizations. Ironically, a number of advocates for keeping staff salaries low are individuals with trust funds or financially secure families, who do not ultimately have to survive on their organizing salaries.

On the other hand, most recognize that exploiting organizations often pay a high price in turn-over and effectiveness. "Alinsky training taught that an organization has to be able to raise its own money, and the chief resources they buy with that money is

talent," says one organizer. "Over and over, I've seen the Left make the mistake of not hiring staff, or hiring staff at \$10,000 a year who don't know anything, and they almost always fold."

Steve Kest, who heads ACORN, notes that their policy about salaries has changed over the years. "It used to be that the pay was very low. We were dealing with middle class kids getting out of college and we were pretty rigid, we made no exceptions."

However, as the organization has evolved, an increasing emphasis is being placed on trying to retain both experienced old-timers and new recruits. And there is an attempt to pull that new talent from the groups being organized—poorer communities, and predominantly women of color.

"Our base pay is higher and we've become more flexible," Steve says. "We've given a lot of thought to these issues." ACORN also provides health benefits, maintains a college fund for organizers' children, and has even tried to establish pensions.

Indeed, the desire of staff to organize is fueled not only by concrete economics but also by organizational culture. In situations where well-off volunteer boards argue against staff raises, or where there is a huge wage disparity in compensation between the top and the bottom (as in most unions), or where money is spent on things instead of people, staff unionization is much more likely to become a justice issue.

The National Organizers Association is a vehicle for discussing these controversial matters, trying to apply collective need and creativity to the problem—perhaps developing some national standards based on experience, individual circumstances, and organizational resources and setting some minimums.

Most of the organizers we spoke with are interested in exploring ways to provide healthcare, pension, sabbatical and educational benefits through a communal, multi-employer plan. This would facilitate the portability of benefits from one organization to another; an important consideration for organizers who, by nature, tend to have a succession of jobs.

At least some of these issues are likely to have a major impact, not only on who feels able to become an organizer, but on the ability of committed individuals to remain organizers.

MATTERS OF THE MIND

While the unionization question piques and intrigues organizers, there are many other dicey issues organizers are yearning to discuss. Another goal of NOA is to give organizers a safe forum for reflection and analysis of organizing principles and practice,

removed from the internal politics of their employing organizations. The absence of such a vehicle frequently makes organizers feel intellectually stale and lethargic, cripples cross-fertilization between movements and dampens creative thinking about common problems.

Take, for example, the question of leadership.

Organizers do the day-to-day work that keeps thousands of small organizations running—and in many cases they help start them. These organizations deal with the whole range of issues and constituencies in American society: neighborhoods, spouse and child abuse, senior citizen concerns, occupational health and safety, working conditions, job discrimination, housing, taxes, conservation, child care, and dozens of others.

Within these organizations, organizers play a critical role in shaping values and attitudes. How an organization deals with difficult issues of gender, race, aging and disability, democracy and authority, consensus and conflict, has a great deal to do with the organizer's own ability to deal with these issues. In fact, many organizations bear the imprint of the organizers working with them.

However, because of some complex factors in how the culture of organizing has evolved in this country, that contribution is rarely acknowledged or encouraged, and sometimes denied.

Gary Delgado, who headed the Center for Third World Organizing and is now the Director of the Applied Research Center in Oakland, California, stresses a general consensus, that "Organizers provide developmental leadership; they develop the capacity of other people."

Yet, often organizers find themselves in the odd position of being expected to develop and implement the organizational agenda, while at the same time denying that they are leaders. This can create peculiar warps in organizational power and accountability structures. Organizer Marshall Ganz, now studying at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, prefers to acknowledge organizers as "leaders of leaders."

These issues also play into questions of longevity. "The Alinsky model for community organizations was that we should only expect to be in our jobs a year or two," says one organizer, "but I stayed five. It's hard to be long-term because part of an organizer's job is agitational and, when you do that, you make enemies, and those enemies stay around to haunt you forever."

On the other hand, a number of organizers stated that many organizations needed continuity—perhaps a three to seven year commitment—before a transition could be made. "I've been in

too many situations," says SEIU's Sandi Polaski, "where an organizer leaves or is sent elsewhere before the example and values he or she has set take root. Where strong internal leadership has not yet developed, the organization will backslide and, in a short while, the progress that was made is hardly evident. Someone else has to start over."

Related to the issue of leadership is that of organizing styles—not only the more traditional discussions about charismatic vs. supportive or hierarchical vs. consensual—but increasingly issues of gender, race-ethnicity, and class.

"I think women are quicker at gaining rapport, striking up an initial interaction," Gary Delgado observes, "while men are stiffer and less willing to put out anything about themselves.

"But rapport and respect are not the same. Women still have to struggle for respect. We don't know much about the power of vulnerability vs. charisma, what's a weakness or a strength, and how it works out there."

"I think it's a little like teaching was for me," says one female organizer. "I had to find the style into which my personality fit, and it took a while. But once I did, it was easy, it was all honey."

ISSUES OF THE HEART

The goal of organizing is to build collective power, but the glue to the struggle lies in community. Ultimately, the purpose of NOA is to build what Martin Luther King called a "beloved community," where the skill, dedication, and sacrifice of an organizing vocation is shared, nurtured, strengthened, respected, and rewarded.

This is perhaps the most critical yet most elusive goal of all, yet it's as important for us as for the people we organize. We need not only victories—for which there are no guarantees, no matter how worthy and robust the struggle—but also work filled with possibility and meaning.

As a colleague on the West Coast described it, "My image is that this whole career of mine is like a kid bouncing on your parents' bed. You don't want to hit your head on the ceiling, you don't want to fall off the bed.

"But on the other hand, it's no fun if you don't test the limits. How high is the ceiling, how broad is the bed. How can you get those old white guys to move from here to there, how can you expand the size of the playing field. I like that part of my job, and once in a while, I feel like I get somewhere. It ain't SNCC, where we felt there were no limits. But it ain't P.S. 94 Bronx, where there were nothing but limitations."

We want to build a vocation that people want to become part of, and stay in. An organization through which we can become magnets and mentors for our successor generation.

We want to develop a culture of organizing that cuts through isolation, that reinforces strengths, that praises and celebrates achievement, both individual and communal—a community that is purposeful, optimistic and that sings.

"Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime," Reinhold Niebuhr said, "therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love."

In this cynical world, we need each other to survive. ■

INTERESTED IN NOA AND THE ORGANIZERS CENSUS?

We're still in the very early stages. If you are interested, please fill in the attached form with your name, address, phone, employer and job title. We'll keep you posted.

Meanwhile, if you can, send money! It's hard work and we could use the help. Checks for tax deductible contributions can be made out to Riverside Church (NOA).

YES. I'M INTERESTED IN HELPING NOA HAPPEN.

NAME _____

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All ideas for census questions, structure, concerns, issues gratefully accepted. Please write.

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