ACORN Calling

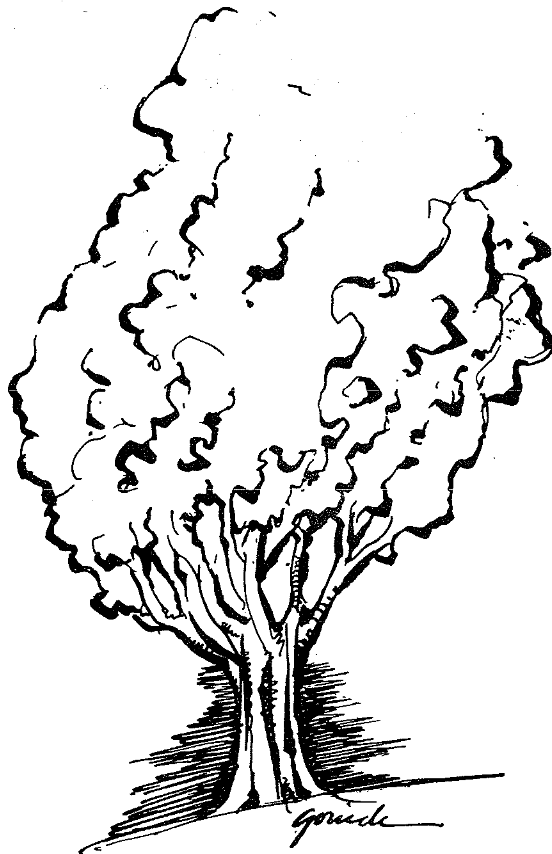
Door-to-Door Organizing in Arkansas

by ANDREW KOPKIND

From Little Rock to Mountain Pine, ACORN is one of the most ambitious and successful statewide reform movements in the country.

Arkansas is not a likely seedbed of progressive reform in America. Its capital, Little Rock, is still a landmark of resistance and a metaphor for reaction to change in contemporary social history. Its most famous native son these days is Wilbur Mills: a figure that evokes more mirth than movement in his political constituency. Other Americans tend to think of Arkansas—when they think of it at all—as a state without character or culture, stuck in the middle of nowhere, between the cracker South and the cowboy Southwest. The location is accurate in many respects, but Arkansas is full of surprises. Not the least of them is ACORN, a league of low-income community organizations that has already broken the images and patterns of the past and is on its way to changing the political complexion of the state. With luck, ACORN could become a model for wide-ranging experiments in popular politics across the country.

Arkansas Community Organizations for Reform Now—ACORN—is a lineal descendant of the organizing campaigns of the 1960s, which began in rural southern counties, spread to northern black ghettos and white slums, and moved into specialized constituencies such as welfare recipients, migrant workers, and public housing tenants. The group's proximate parent is the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), which paid for organizer Wade Rathke's start-up time in Little Rock in 1970. But ACORN's more distant antecedents in Arkansas are the militant populist movements of an earlier era, when the IWW was agitating among the lumber workers and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union was stirring up the sharecrop-



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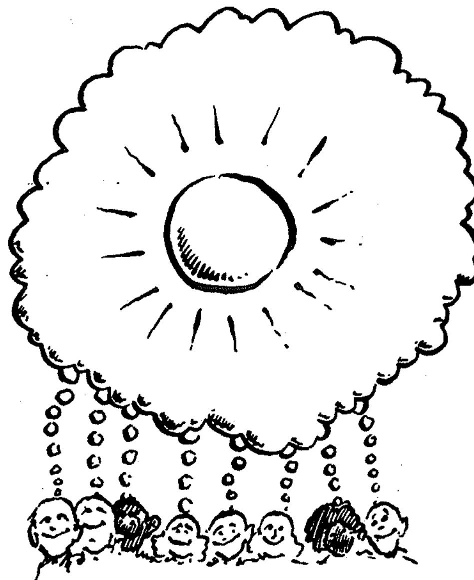
pers. Former governor Orval Faubus's father was a Wobbly, and as one of those ironies for which Arkansas is justly famous, Orval himself, the segregationist hero of Little Rock, was red-baited early in his career for having attended leftish Commonwealth College in his youth. If there is a populist tradition at all in southern America, its rusted remnants are there in Arkansas soil.

Wisely, ACORN does not feed overmuch on the rhetoric of long-gone movements, although its literature draws occasionally on populist promises: "The People Shall Rule" is the state motto as well as a handy ACORN slogan in its campaigns to win power at the community's grass roots. There's no common consciousness of radical populism easily available to organizers, even if there are trace elements of it in the anger and pride of most Arkansans. ACORN's strategy is tailored to fit the pique of people of modest ideological means. A typical organizing drive for one of ACORN's 70-odd neighborhood groups will begin with a struggle for better street drainage, a long march for a traffic signal, or a maximum effort against stray dogs. But from such small battles ACORN has gone into larger wars: property tax reform, utility rate limitation, control of city and county government, environmental safety and conservation, corporate responsibility, neighborhood integrity. Now five years old and growing steadily, ACORN by all accounts is an important force in Arkansas.

"It's got as much clout as organized labor here," former prison commissioner Robert Sarver told me. Now Arkansas is not Michigan, and labor in Little Rock is not quite the power that it is in Detroit; but ACORN is probably the strongest independent organization in a politically underdeveloped state. And as Sarver added, "It can't do anything but get stronger."

How ACORN fell into Arkansas and how it grew is not easy to understand at a time when many other brave experiments in community organizing are dying or dormant. Its success in Arkansas and its potential for development elsewhere (an ACORN spore began growing in South Dakota this year) has a lot to do with the intelligence with which Wade Rathke fashioned the organization in the first place and the sensitivity with which he directs it now. It would be inaccurate as well as impolitic to identify ACORN's progress too closely with his leadership; it is a diffuse and in many ways decentralized organization, and he is not the spellbinding, charismatic figure familiar to many movements in recent history. Rathke keeps his public visibility low in Little Rock, and he has built a consensual decision-making group of local "folks" and full-time organizers. But no one I met in Arkansas discounted his importance to ACORN. "A project like this is never any better than the leadership," Sarver concluded, "and Rathke provides the best."



Arkansas was not an unlikely place for Rathke to settle and build. A southerner at various times in his life, he had dropped out of Williams College in the late sixties and had begun working for the NWRO in nearby Springfield, Massachusetts. At 21 he was the group's chief organizer in the state. But like others in that campaign, he had come to find the base of welfare mothers and their children too thin to support heavy political weight.

"The next-door neighbor to the welfare recipient was just as antagonistic to the recipient as anyone else," Rathke said one day recently as we sat in the rambling frame house that serves as ACORN's headquarters in Little Rock. "In Boston, only one out of every nine people receives welfare; in other states, it's one out of sixteen. With the welfare issue, you're always dealing with a minority. We all knew that we had to break out of the single-issue campaign. I wanted to build on a majority constituency rather than on a minority, where the next-door neighbors are in it together, not fighting each other."

Arkansas appeared as an intriguing locale for the experiment in majority organizing. For one thing, it was the lair of Wilbur Mills, then the most powerful manipulator of social and economic legislation in the country; before Mills self-destructed with his own folly, no political opposition to his power was operating in Little Rock. Arkansas was also the home state of Johnnie Tillman, executive director of the NWRO,

and she encouraged Rathke's project. And the state's regional diversity and mixture of moods seemed to offer space—if not support—for new political forms.

"It's hard to get a sense of Arkansas," a transplanted northerner who teaches in Little Rock insisted when we began the inevitable conversation about regional character. "It doesn't have the static class system of Virginia, or the yahoo mobility of Texas. It's somewhere between, and somewhat different from both." A local ACORN member added, "Arkansas doesn't have much of a history, at least that people here know. The Civil War set us back to where we were before we were a state. The frontier was just yesterday."

Rathke was attracted to the range of organizing possibilities: the cotton plantation communities of the Mississippi Valley, the ranch and farm towns in the west and north, and Little Rock itself—a smallish city of 135,000 which is still the biggest metropolis between Memphis and Dallas. Little Rock, like few other capitals, is also the largest city and at the same time sits in the middle of the state: an accessible epicenter of money, government, and population.

Winning Big

Perhaps it could have happened anywhere, but for those reasons and others, ACORN organizers moved into Little Rock in June 1970, with a six-month salary grant from NWRO. They found six neighborhoods of low-income residents and listened to local gripes. "We found a sentence in one of the [welfare] manuals that said that poor people had a right to get furniture," Rathke recalled, and before long ACORN had negotiated with then-governor Winthrop Rockefeller for a "furniture warehouse." Steadily, ACORN built neighborhood organizations throughout Pulaski County, where the cities of Little Rock and North Little Rock comprise a sixth of the state's population. Groups like the Centennial Neighborhood Association, the Woodrow to Pine Neighborhood Association, and the Nine-Seventeen Community Organization seemed to grow overnight. Their "issues" then included school lunch programs, public housing conditions, welfare rights. Then in the summer of 1972, ACORN launched a metropolitan "Save the City" campaign, waged along the geographical and political lines of eight constituent community groups in a "corridor" from the municipal airport to University Avenue—the dividing line between the inner, older city and the affluent suburbs.

"Save the City" combined a package of concerns: blockbusting by real estate agencies to promote "white flight"; the need for a park in a predominantly black neighborhood; and the range of traffic, drainage, sewerage, and stray-dog issues customary in low-income neighborhood organizing. That combination encouraged cross-class and interracial action. The largely white Oak Forest Residents Association's campaign against blockbusting—"We Like It Here"—was directed against the powerful real estate industry and its key developer, Billy Rector. It was never allowed to turn into a racial exclusion drive.

"The target was the real estate board and the real estate companies," Rathke insisted. "The white neighborhood group always argued it was in favor of diverse neighborhoods, but the industry wasn't allowing people to keep that diversity."

Barbara Friedman, a Little Rock organizer who has worked for ACORN for two years, explained:

We could have gotten hundreds of more members with a racist position, but we kept it what it was, political and economic. After all, the issue was never "integration." The campaign didn't come out of a situation where blacks wanted to move into Oak Forest and whites wouldn't let them. It was a question of the real estate industry starting panic selling by whites so that they could move them into more expensive new all-white suburbs way out of town, and at the same time turn a quick commission on the resale to blacks.

It is not always easy to remove racism from such a campaign, but to ACORN organizers, rhetorical purity and revolutionary consciousness-raising were less important motives than solid gains in the right direction.

"We don't cut issues racially where that isn't relevant," Hot Springs organizer Meg Campbell told me. There's no point, she said, in constructing rhetorical enemies who cannot be defeated. Short of race warfare, black people cannot triumph over whites; but whites and blacks can win against real estate agencies or real estate boards, and they do. Winning is what is important in organizing, and it's almost an obsession with ACORN.

Victories and a great deal of hard work—by low-salaried organizers and low-income residents—have paid off for ACORN. It now has upwards of 5,000 dues-paying families ($1 a month or $10 a year), nine regional offices in the state, and about 70 neighborhood and 3 nongeographical membership groups under its umbrella. The membership is approximately 60 percent white, 40 percent black. Most have family incomes at or below $7,000 a year; in Arkansas, this category includes roughly 70 percent of the state's population.

The big victories are big indeed: cutting the size of a huge coal-burning power plant in half and assuring control of its sulfur emissions; winning almost half the seats in the Pulaski County "legislature"; electing ACORN-endorsed candidates to city and school councils; forcing the gas company to rebate $6 million to consumers. These objectives can be won only when neighborhood power is consolidated into regional and state organizations. So the statewide network is under constant construction, even when only blockwide neighborhood issues seem to be at the center of the stage. By 1977—only a year off the original schedule—ACORN should have a projected complement of 15 regional offices in every corner of Arkansas.

The trick is to keep the scores of neighborhoods (soon, perhaps, hundreds of neighborhoods) active all the time. Staff organizers and local committee officers (who often act as part-time organizers) have to inject winnable battles into a group's activities when older drives bog down. For example, the Centennial Neighborhood Association's campaign for a $150,000 park on the site of an abandoned high school was stalled for two years while suits to free federal funds impounded by President Nixon were in litigation. But the group simply went on to other matters. As Barbara Friedman, who is the staff organizer now responsible for CNA, explained:

The beauty of a multi-issue organization is its ability to get "wins" while one issue is dragging on for one reason or another. And no issue is unconnected to any other. All the traditional issues in neighborhoods have the ability to get to the heart and the roots of the political process.

In one Little Rock neighborhood, the lowliest complaint began a campaign that led to a change in city administration and, as a consequence, contributed more to the ACORN group's political sophistication than the harangues of propaganda could ever do. The South End Community Organization was agitated about the presence of an eyesore ramshackle house that the owner would not demolish, though it was condemned by the city and obviously unrepairable. When pressed, the Little Rock city attorney, Joe Kemp, answered ACORN's demands with evasions, to the effect that he had neither the time nor the money to enforce condemnation codes. So ACORN members, as Friedman put it, "did a little muckraking on him," and found that he was commingling his law practice and his city job. The exposure produced a full-time city enforcement office to deal with vacant lots and condemned housing, thus changing a practice that had endured 17 years. The neighborhood association got its eyesore removed, and ACORN got a bigger "win."

Acorn Town

The possibility for what Rathke calls "the first ACORN town" came into view in early 1975, when Hot Springs organizer Steve Holt "discovered" the little town of Mountain Pine, a community of mill-hands working at a nearby Weyerhaeuser Company plant. More accurately, Mountain Pine discovered Holt. An almost embarrassingly favorable article in the *Hot Springs Sentinel-Record* ("ACORN Working to Humanize Government") brought dozens of calls from residents in the area seeking help with local problems. Two requests for ACORN assistance came from Mountain Pine, and when Holt visited the town he immediately saw its political potential.

From the end of March to the middle of April, Holt and his local Mountain Pine contacts went "door-knocking," the traditional beginning of an ACORN organizing drive. Residents were canvassed about their interests, grievances, and needs. Two mailings—a letter and a flyer—were sent to every family in town: 310 households arranged in crowded rows in the two racially divided neighborhoods. Mountain Pine had been built as a company town by the previous owners of Weyerhaeuser's paper mill, and the housing patterns had never been broken.

Curiosity about ACORN's chances in Mountain Pine grew as the doorknocking and circularizing intensified. Playing a long shot, Holt went to a local Jaycee's meeting and, as he said later, "tried to co-opt them for ACORN; they're not really generic Jaycees but a bunch of guys at the plant who didn't know what else to call themselves." Many promised to come to the first meeting; none showed up.

Thirty people did come to that first meeting, three-and-a-half weeks after Holt first started working in Mountain Pine: "We had to compete with a revival at the main church in town, a union meeting at the plant, a heavy rainstorm, and a chicken pox epidemic." Those who attended talked about eight or ten issues: city cleanup, loose dogs, parks, street and sidewalk improvements, waste removal, traffic problems, telephone service. Twenty-three Mountain Piners signed up that night.

Three weeks later, almost a third of the town was in ACORN. During those weeks, Holt steered the newly formed Mountain Pine Community Organization—soon known as MPCO throughout the ACORN network—toward two issues he knew it could

win: installation of a long-promised, long-postponed traffic signal at a railroad crossing where local residents had been killed; and reduction of telephone rates along with improvement of service. The first was easier than anyone expected. Holt found out that money for the signal had been appropriated twice, but despite pressure from the state representative and senator, the highway department was resisting installation pending a projected road-widening program. MPCO held a "press conference" at the crossing and the Hot Springs newspaper obliged by publishing a picture of the people looking fearfully and resentfully down the tracks where the accidents had occurred. The next day, Holt called the highway department commissioner to set up an appointment for MPCO.

I told him I was bringing 30 folks up to Little Rock to see him, and in five minutes he agreed to put the signal in immediately. Then he asked me to let him announce it through the state senator, but I said "no way," and I put out the story right away.

In the next three weeks MPCO increased its membership to 80 families. What's more, we got three officials–the county judge and the representative and senator–who ordinarily wouldn't want to be associated with ACORN, moving on our agenda. After our press conference, they called up the papers and said they'd support us. The papers remarked that they were responding to ACORN pressure.

The issue of telephone rates and service for Mountain Pine seemed more difficult at first, but Holt was counting on Southwestern Bell's anxiety about its pending request for a statewide rate increase. ACORN is perhaps known best for its campaigns against the utilities: it already had forced the Arkla Gas Company to rebate $6 million to customers, and it had drastically curtailed Arkansas Power and Light's plans for the White Bluff power plant at Redfield, which would have spewn sulfur into the farms of the southeastern valley. Campaigns were underway against nuclear power projects and other utility rate and expansion programs. So Southwestern Bell was more than circumspect in its treatment of ACORN and the constituent organizations. The telephone utility was running quarter-page ads in the state's newspapers urging Arkansans to bring their old directories to ACORN's recycling centers (a small project that helps ACORN's internal financing). Bell executives suddenly began dropping in at ACORN regional offices just to "see if everything's all right."

The Bell manager was eager to come to the meeting about telephone rates [Holt said with a small smile]. About 40 people showed up, and they spoke up and knew what they were talking about. Because Mountain Pine is poor, the phone company ignores them. Rates are twice or three times what they are in Hot Springs, and you have to wait years even for a four-party line or a semiprivate line. But by the end of the meeting, the manager had agreed that it was "time for rates in Mountain Pine to come down," and he had given us a commitment to equalize rates, improve service, make retroactive refunds, and give us access to their waiting list.

On the sunny afternoon I was in Mountain Pine, phone company trucks were parked at several sites in town, keeping the manager's promises.

"I didn't want issues that would immediately make conflict with local government," Holt said of the first month's organizing in Mountain Pine. "I hoped we'd get noncontroversial issues, that we could win, and that would give people the experience of fighting for something important—and winning."

That experience was easily assimilated in Mountain Pine. "It's the companies running the people rather than the people running the companies," Ellen Johns, the wife of MPCO's chairman, said as we spoke in her living room. The Johnses have one of the more comfortable of the small homes in town. On the afternoon I visited them, Ellen was going over household accounts while Wilburn was getting ready to go out on MPCO business. Behind us, the black-and-white television set was silently unreeling a soap opera.

"I got involved with ACORN just a few weeks ago, because of the rates we had to pay for our new water service, about $15 a month," Wilburn began. "A man can keep going in circles about those things if he is all alone, whereas a community can get action. I've seen ACORN on TV fighting rate increases, and I figured we could do it here."

"We fought the phone company by ourselves, individually, and it got us nowhere," Ellen added. "A lot

of people are afraid of these companies where the companies should be afraid of us."

"People have looked down on Mountain Pine," Wilburn continued ruefully. "They call it a camp. They consider us transients. They figure we don't have enough people who will stand up and fight for something. But now I think truly that the people of Mountain Pine will hold together and fight."

Organizing Power

Mountain Pine is small. But Garland County is small, too, and Arkansas isn't so big. If MPCO is successful and continues to grow, and if—as Holt hopes—a few other small communities in the county become "ACORN towns," more or less, the combined strength will be considerable. Hot Springs, the county's largest city, already had three ACORN groups: two neighborhood associations and one Senior Citizens Action Organization (SCAO) which cuts across geographical lines to represent the city's disproportionately large population of the elderly.

You have no idea how many issues old people have [organizer Meg Campbell said]. They have a lot of free time and on the other hand, not a lot of time left, so they're raring to go. Health care is a tremendous issue, and bus fares, housing, rent control, even the matter of how long the "Walk" lights are on at intersections. You'd be surprised at how important things like that are to old people. They want old people on the city council and participation in running all these programs which are supposed to help them. No one else thinks of that. An organizer has to hold them back sometimes, they're so energetic.

SCAO's first victory was the passage of state legislation easing restrictions on the availability and advertising of generic drugs for prescriptions. Laws protecting the drug industry had made the cost of prescriptions needlessly high. ACORN made the drive for new legislation a statewide campaign; members came to Little Rock for a pharmacy board hearing and a press conference, and Governor David Pryor, elected as a moderate in last year's election, rushed to support ACORN's demands. "He needed to do something for senior citizens," Campbell explained. "He got their votes in November and he owed them something."

Steve Nichols, Pryor's legislative assistant, attributes the new drugs laws to ACORN's work. "ACORN first came to the governor with the proposal," Nichols told me. "They get the credit for the legislation—some might say the blame." Nichols himself is thankful for ACORN's research and support: "They're a great resource to me," he said. But his patronizing tone points up ACORN's sticky situation, between popular movements and political establishments. At times, the good will of moderate politicians can be smothering, as they try to drain oppositional content from ACORN's campaigns. If it's true that each little demand has the potential to get to the roots of the system, it is also true that such potential is not inevitably realized. The organizers and the executive board of community group chairpeople have to weigh every campaign to avoid the traps.

As ACORN gets more members and more power, it may produce more conflict with the old order. An indication of this happened last year, when hundreds of members from the organizations in Little Rock and North Little Rock won elections as justices of the peace, entitling them to seats on the archaic Quorum Court, a kind of county legislature that had fallen into political disuse. Representation on the court is apportioned on the basis of one justice for every 200 residents. Pulaski's court now has 476 members, making it (they say here) the largest single legislative body in the Western Hemisphere.

ACORN won about 200 seats—a "factual majority," Rathke thought, since hardly anyone else on it ever attended sessions. As the day of assembly approached, the ACORN members (all nonpoliticians from ACORN's low-income neighborhoods) organized themselves into floor teams. They discussed strategy for weeks before the budget session, and they did extensive research to back their demands for equalization of funds and control over disbursements. When the key vote came on the budget approval question, ACORN seemed to win: Rathke counted a 12-vote winning margin, a newspaper reporter said it was closer to two votes, an opponent thought it was a tie. But the county judge, who is the "executive" in the Quorum Court system, declared ACORN's position lost, and the prepared budget passed for the year. ACORN's justices walked out. The judge proceeded to hold what ACORN calls illegal votes of the remaining members, and efforts to reverse his action have so far failed.

Atomic Hill, a black ACORN member who was a floor leader for the justices (the ACORN caucus was racially mixed, half and half) told me about the day:

It was all smiles until we got there. They tried to put a lot over on us. They promised us we could see the budget three weeks ahead of time, but they didn't print it until the last week, and many of our people never got copies. A lot were unclear about what the money was

for, where it came from, and the budget wasn't broken down for us to understand. Like there was one item for $3,500 for a "machine" that no one knew what it was for. We wanted to pass only one-sixth of the budget for two months, until we could figure out where it was going. But the judge just wouldn't let us. He said the others won, just because he wanted to. At this point we got up and left, and the assistant district attorney said, "arrest them!" But we just walked out.

The matter of the budget is gone for good, but the people weren't discouraged. Society's set up that way. People who live in a well-to-do area get a better break than the people in a low-income area. ACORN–it's opened people's eyes. We get along well, just like a family, black and white: in order to stick together you've got to act like one big happy family. The only way ACORN can help you is if you help yourself. The organizers can give you the benefit of their experience, but you've got to help yourself.

In fact, the organizers seem to be an extremely adroit staff of professionals who usually can determine the fine line between manipulation and support. Organizer Steve Holt in Mountain Pine frankly chose the group's first two issues, and arranged the first election of officers to have Wilburn Johns chosen chairman.

"But you have to let people work on their own agenda," Holt said later. "If the organizer gets too possessive, the organization kicks him out, or disappears; it's self-defeating."

Barbara Friedman, who also trains organizers (both for ACORN and for outside agencies who contract for ACORN's courses), thought that "manipulation can be an unrealistic hangup. A good professional organizer can tell early on who would make the best officer. We use common sense and try to be sensitive to the feelings of the members, but we don't agonize and torture ourselves."

That attitude emerges as ACORN's only "secret" ingredient for success. The agonies that plagued the student organizers of many of the projects of the sixties do not seriously affect ACORN's staff.

We have a stable staff [Rathke said]. After five years they know what to expect of me. They know I have no political interests and I'm not going to run out the back door–two things that killed a lot of other organizations. We don't hire organizers without at least one year's commitment, and an option by us to extend that. All our organizers are full time. Most of them make $37.50 a week after taxes, which I made until a few months ago when the people who have been here the longest were raised up to $4,000 a year, if they made a two-year commitment to stay. At the NWRO I was making $8,000 a year, which is more than the people I was organizing, and it was a source of resentment. Here, almost all of our executive board makes more than our staff.

The organizers come from out of state, for the most part: Steve Holt and Meg Campbell, for instance, went to Harvard and Radcliffe, and both taught in Massachusetts before settling in Arkansas. Barbara Friedman went to the University of California at Berkeley, heard about ACORN in a Vocations for Social Change publication, and came to Little Rock to check it out; she stayed. The out-of-state organizers seem to have come with no heavy ideological baggage. They are not radical intellectuals who see their work "among the people" as direct steps to a predictable revolution. They clearly express a radical sensibility; most are recognizable children of the movements of the sixties, but not adherents to particular sects. Perhaps they are the kind of people who would have been Peace Corps volunteers in 1963. But the social history of the last decade has given them a different political context for their interest in community development.

It may be their very lack of revolutionary ideology that carries them through the arduous and often enervating work of organizing. The young SDS radicals of the sixties who toiled in somewhat similar projects needed the certainty of imminent revolution to make their work meaningful. Otherwise, organizing was a depressing, often desperately slow, task. When the organizations did not gel, the new leftists moved back to the campus or on to more quickly gratifying forms of political action. ACORN does not need a revolution to validate its existence. It is enough that it is an increasingly powerful pressure group. It would be better if it could contribute to deeper changes in the political economy of the state—or the nation. But ACORN will not stand or fall on the development of radical reform of "the system." Organizers and members get and give enough support in day-to-day organizing experience to sustain ACORN in the likely political contexts of this generation.

Rathke hopes that daughters and sons of active ACORN members, who now do volunteer work at the regional offices, will choose to become staff organizers when they're older. Almost all of the organization's financial resources are internally generated—"like a labor union's," Rathke said —from dues and incidental odd sources, such as rummage sales, recycling projects, training contracts. ACORN is not tax-exempt and little foundation money comes in; no federal funds are accepted. Indeed, many

ACORN campaigns are waged against the government, in one form or another: demands for revenue sharing, block grants, citizen participation demands, supervision of utilities.

Despite the usual problems of organizing—the uneven pace, the backing and filling of campaigns, the occasional attacks by authorities, and the generally cynical mood of the society—ACORN people remain astoundingly optimistic. For one thing, they do not expect "the revolution" to come at once, nor do they fantasize themselves an instant vanguard for it. Unrealistic expectations and self-images hastened the demise of earlier organizers. ACORN does not worry itself with cosmic questions of historical mission and revolutionary inevitability.

We are concerned with how we expand our statewide campaigns, on the model of our drives against the utilities and the drug industry's influence [Rathke said]. We're thinking about the mass municipalization of electric companies. There are issues we'd like to put to an initiative vote that we couldn't get through the legislatures. We've done pretty well in supporting candidates for city councils and school boards, and in some mayoralty elections. In Little Rock, we carried 98 percent of the precincts where we have our organizations for the candidates we support. There may never be a day when an ACORN member is governor or mayor; but there may be a day when they do not need to be. We'll have the power to influence those who are in office.

There are dozens of campaigns we can try. We've always believed in using underdeveloped or abandoned political institutions–agricultural co-ops, electrical co-ops, quorum courts. We can begin to tie things together that way. For example, ranchers up in Jonesboro are in an ACORN co-op, and we're trying to get their cattle into the six food buying clubs we've set up in our regional offices. We want to have a lot of things fall into ACORN.

If ACORN can keep winning, a lot may fall. "We like to encourage the members to dream," Steve Holt said. "What would they like to see happen to their lives, their communities?"

"Our dreams are the same as the members'," Meg Campbell added, at the end of a long day's organizing in Hot Springs. "If all I was doing was getting condemned houses torn down and longer "Walk" lights at intersections, you couldn't pay me $500 a week to stay here. But I'm staying."

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