

# Enraging the Right

*ACORN has long inspired anger, envy and debate – and that’s just from the Left. But a recent attack from the Right prompts an appreciation of the venerable grassroots organization by two Shelterforce veterans.*

By John Atlas and Peter Dreier

It’s not everyday that a powerful right-wing think tank takes aim at a grassroots organization – after all, there are many groups working in the trenches on behalf of the poor.

But not all of them have the track record of ACORN. That’s why *City Journal*, the influential journal of the conservative Manhattan Institute, accorded several thousand words to ACORN and its work in its Spring 2003 issue. According to writer Sol Stern, ACORN’s “rad-

ical” agenda poses a “serious threat to the urban future.”

ACORN and its many allies should be flattered that *City Journal* takes its work so seriously as to view its grassroots organizing as a real threat. But Stern gets so many things wrong that it might lead people of good conscience – including some elected officials, funders, and journalists – to get the wrong impression about ACORN’s remarkable track record at mobilizing the poor to promote re-

forms at the neighborhood, municipal, state and national levels of government.

In fact, ACORN is merely a placeholder for Stern’s fury. What he’s really angry about is the progressive policy agenda that ACORN – and many other community, labor, environmental and other groups – espouse. To Stern’s horror, ACORN does not support the conservative “trickle down” mantra that the poor will be better off if we cut the size of government, slash social programs and reduce regulations on business, such as the Community Reinvestment Act, rent control and other consumer protections. Stern simply equates almost any public intervention in government – at the municipal, state and federal level – as bad policy.

Other organizations, including unions and AARP, have more low-income members, but among groups that do “community organizing” among the poor, ACORN is the nation’s largest. Moreover, it’s been around since the 1970s and has grown steadily. ACORN is not without its weaknesses and challenges. But among the thousands of community organizations around the country with their various success stories and outstanding service programs, none of them have been able to achieve what ACORN has accomplished: a national organization with local chapters and the ability to simultaneously wage organizing campaigns at the neighborhood, city, state and federal level.

## ACORN 101

Few people recognize how hard it is to build membership-based community organizations among the poor. It is extremely labor-intensive, requiring constant attention to identifying and developing leaders, building organizations, fundraising, engaging in traditional



Photo by Clare Crawford, courtesy ACORN

California ACORN members gathered in Sacramento in May for a demonstration on the state of education and childcare.

lobbying and occasional direct action, conducting research and policy analysis, media savvy and other skills.

ACORN's efforts to organize and empower the poor are inspiring. So too is its longevity: It has been doing this successfully for more than 30 years. Many community groups, despite the best intentions, are unable to sustain their work amid victories and defeats. They can't seem to juggle all the myriad aspects of effective community organizing. ACORN has been able to do so, despite overwhelming obstacles, because it insists that the poor be taken seriously in the political arena, and thus focuses its work on developing strong organizations led by poor people.

Stern recognizes ACORN's breadth and depth. He also understands (and laments) that ACORN's vision and style inspires many young people to work long hours for low pay as organizers and staff persons:

Walk through just about any of the nation's inner cities, and you're likely to find an office of ACORN, bustling with young people working 12-hour days to 'organize the poor' and bring about 'social change.'...ACORN has 120,000 dues-paying members, chapters in 700 poor neighborhoods in 50 cities, and 30 years' experience. It boasts two radio stations, a housing corporation, a law office and affiliate relationships with a host of trade-union locals. Not only big, it is effective, with some remarkable successes in getting municipalities and state legislatures to enact its radical policy goals into law.

Stern accurately outlines ACORN's agenda: living wages for the working poor; improvement of housing conditions through rent subsidies and access to credit; help for people on welfare to get off welfare into reasonable jobs, including child care subsidies, health care for their kids and job training; and improvement in the physical and fiscal condition of public schools in the cities.

But Stern misses the boat on why ACORN has succeeded where others have not. ACORN's most impressive attribute is its ability to work simultaneously at the neighborhood, local, state and federal levels, so that its chapter members are always "in motion" on a variety of issues, and so that its local organizations can link up with their counterparts around the country to change national policy on key issues that can't be solved at the neighborhood or municipal level.

ACORN is neither a "top-down" nor a "bottom up" organization. It is a "federated" organization with a base at the local level. Its staff works to build strong local organizations



Photo by Catherine May, courtesy ACORN

*ACORN members nationwide rallied against Bush's tax cut plan in Washington, DC in March. Local chapters have not shied away from confrontations with public officials, or even breaking into a bankers' dinner wielding huge inflated rubber sharks, as the Baltimore chapter once did.*

and local leaders that can influence municipal and county governments, and local corporations (such as banks) to address the needs of the poor and their neighborhoods.

Local organizing defines ACORN's core issues, but when national leaders and staff recognize problems that are energizing members in several cities, they can consider whether the issue would be more effectively addressed by changes in state or federal policy. ACORN employs a staff of researchers and lobbyists in its national offices in Brooklyn, NY and Washington, DC to serve the needs of local chapters. Issues such as welfare reform, redlining and predatory lending provide ACORN with organizing "handles" at the local, state and national levels. ACORN also pays considerable attention to training and developing its leaders and staff. It has its own training center and frequently brings its staff and local leaders together for retreats and training sessions.

#### **ACORN and IAF**

ACORN is frequently compared with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the organizing network founded by Saul Alinsky in the late 1940s. ACORN and IAF have chapters in some of the same cities, and often work on similar issues (schools, housing, public services), but they never work together (that's another story). ACORN tends to recruit its members through door knocking in poor neighborhoods; IAF uses religious values as a unifying force, working with churches and

other existing institutions. As a result, IAF's local chapters usually have more members than ACORN's and in some cases have a somewhat stronger internal culture.

The IAF has built strong local multi-issue organizations among the poor and the nearly poor in many cities, but it has not sought to build the kind of federated organization that can wage policy campaigns at the national level. The IAF is, instead, a network of local and regional organizations that have little contact with each other, except at occasional meetings among the lead organizers in each region. That is why, ironically, the IAF – whose Baltimore affiliate (BUILD) mobilized the first successful "living wage" campaign almost a decade ago – was not able to translate that pioneering local victory into a broader movement, while ACORN has used its federated structure to help sustain a national "living wage" movement, with victories in dozens of cities.

#### **Inside/Outside Strategy**

Another one of ACORN's strengths is its combination of "inside" and "outside" tactics and strategies. It is not shy about using the in-your-face tactics that Stern derides. A few years ago the Baltimore chapter attracted public attention when members piled garbage in front of City Hall to protest lack of services in poor neighborhoods, wielded huge inflated rubber sharks to disrupt a bankers' dinner and staged a protest in front of Mayor Martin O'Malley's home.



*ACORN and SEIU Local 880 joined forces in support of immigrant rights in Chicago. ACORN has been adept at establishing its presence in cities, building membership through organizing and forging the necessary alliances to move its progressive agenda.*

As Stern reports, Mayor O'Malley was upset. Even some of ACORN's sympathizers, such as Baltimore city council member Lisa Joi Stancil are sometimes uncomfortable with the group's aggressive approach. Stern refers to a story in the Baltimore Sun that quoted Councilwoman Stancil saying "There are boundaries, and they don't seem to have a problem crossing them."

ACORN is unapologetic about its tactics, in part because it not only helps draw public attention to neglected issues but also helps build membership. ACORN's success in Baltimore boosted donations and swelled its local membership to 2,200. Equally important, these tactics typically get results. Public officials who decry ACORN's tactics wind up agreeing with its agenda – or at least negotiating with its leaders to forge compromises. Indeed, Stern acknowledges ACORN's relentlessness and effectiveness:

*In cities where ACORN has been entrenched for years, its relentless campaigns have forced local policies to the left. In Chicago, for instance, ACORN took on the administration of Mayor Richard Daley over a law to raise the pay of employees in firms doing business with the city. Although the advocacy group initially failed to win*

*approval for its wage bill, which Daley strongly opposed, ACORN pursued the mayor tenaciously, picketing him as he welcomed delegates to the 1996 Democratic national convention and bursting into a closed city council meeting to garner publicity for itself. After three years, it won the bill it sought. ACORN used that victory as a catalyst in Chicago, which has become one of the organization's most effective chapters. Last year, it successfully expanded the wage law in the city.*

In California, ACORN expanded its membership when it took up the cause of hundreds of working-class tenants threatened with eviction by a Japanese real-estate company that sought to sell their apartment buildings. Now armed with a \$300,000 annual budget, ACORN has become a force in the state capitol of Sacramento, where it recently helped push legislation that makes it more difficult for landlords to evict tenants. In Los Angeles ACORN helped write and pass wage legislation just like the one in Chicago. Stern gets their political strategy correct:

*ACORN worked to influence existing city councils and state legislatures; it has also thrown itself into municipal and state elections, registering 500,000 new voters in low-income communities around the country. With the labor-union allies it*

*has cultivated, it has even helped create new parties that have scored real successes. Chicago's ACORN leader, for instance, won a seat on the Board of Aldermen as candidate of the leftist New Party. Similarly, in Little Rock, several ACORN members, including the group's state chairman, have won election to the Board of Directors (as the city council is called) as members of the New Party, which shares ACORN's member list, as well as its mantra of "Think locally, act locally," as the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* reports.*

As Stern correctly notes, New York houses the most successful of these parties, the Working Families Party, launched and co-chaired by local ACORN president Bertha Lewis. The 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 New York City Council members ran with Working Families' endorsement. The party isn't a typical "third" party that seeks to deflect votes from liberal Democrats but is a "fusion" party that works for progressive candidates, either their own candidates on their ballot line or sometimes supporting progressive Democrats or Republicans as Working Family candidates.

### **The Progressive Tradition is Alive and Well**

Oddly, Stern seeks to discredit ACORN by comparing its work unfavorably to the efforts of Jane Addams and the settlement house movement at the turn of the 20th century. Addams, an upper-class college educated woman, started the nation's first settlement, Hull House, in Chicago in 1889 and the idea soon spread among reformers in cities across the country. According to Stern, "Hull House and its many successors emphasized self-empowerment: the poor, they thought, could take control of their lives and communities through education, hard work and personal responsibility."

In fact, ACORN is doing exactly the kind of work that Addams and her colleagues at Hull House would be doing if they were alive today. Like ACORN, Addams supported organized labor and lobbied for legislation that was considered radical in its day. She fought slumlords and corrupt politicians. She fought to outlaw child labor and for women's suffrage. Like ACORN she mobilized community residents to support pocket parks, playgrounds, garbage collection, police and fire protection and closed sewers. Like ACORN, she was not only committed to empowering individuals, but to strengthening the fabric of the neighborhood as well.

## ACORN has the ability to simultaneously wage organizing campaigns at the neighborhood, city, state and federal level.

Indeed, in her day, many people considered Addams – a socialist, feminist, pacifist and union supporter – a dangerous radical. Had he been writing a century ago, Stern would have lambasted Addams and other Progressive reformers for promoting socialism.

ACORN's policy agenda is in the populist and New Deal tradition of saving unfettered capitalism from excessive greed by pushing for tenement housing reforms, workplace safety laws, the minimum wage, aid to mothers and children, Social Security, the right of workers to organize and bargain collective for better wages and working conditions, subsidies to house the poor, and policies that encouraging banks to make mortgage loans to boost homeownership.

Stern also warns that ACORN is burrowing "deep within the system, taking over its power and using its institutions." Indeed, ACORN's activists and leaders work within the system, organizing the poor to play hardball politics. Like conservative foundations and think tanks such as the Manhattan Institute that have burrowed deep within mainstream institutions,

pushing an ideology that benefits large corporations and real estate interests, ACORN is committed to organizing the less powerful to make changes that will make life better for them.

Stern seems more troubled by ACORN's tactics (and its successes) than by the real menace of poverty amid plenty. Indeed, you could read Stern's article and think that poverty was hardly a problem facing America in the first decade of the 21st century. (See Jack Newfield's March 17th article in *The Nation*, "How the Other Half Still Live" for the real story). The fact is that 12 percent of our nation's population (frequently 20 to 25 percent in many of the largest cities) is poor. About one out of five American children live in poverty, the highest rate by far among the world's highly industrialized nations.

ACORN can perhaps be faulted for not expanding further; with the money and resources to organize the working class families in our cities and older suburbs, its impact would be even greater. These families are one or two notches above poverty, but still not part of that shrinking group of "middle class" Americans who have stable and secure jobs, health insurance, secure pensions, paid vacations, own homes, send their kids to good schools, and afford to pay for their college tuition and room and board. These are the "swing" voters – or nonvoters – whose numbers and political clout are key to forging a progressive coalition.

During the past decade, the revitalized labor movement began focusing on these Americans, but there is still enormous work to do. Community organizations can play an important role and ACORN provides activists and funders many lessons on how to do it well. ♦

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### RESOURCES

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