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Progressive Jews Organize

A new wave of grassroots Jewish activism is emerging around issues like housing, healthcare and education.

Peter Dreier and Daniel May September 13, 2007 | This article appeared in the October 1, 2007 edition of *The Nation*.

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At a meeting in February at Shir Hadash, a Reform synagogue in Los Gatos, California, Larry Mitchell rose to address the overflowing sanctuary. "In 2001, my son was diagnosed with Crohn's disease," said the 55-year-old Mitchell, a synagogue member for more than twenty-five years. The room fell silent. "Our insurance went from \$700 a month, to \$800 a month, to \$900 a month. By 2005, our insurance premiums were \$1,700 a month." As he concluded and returned to his seat, the audience erupted and rose for a four-minute standing ovation. The crowd was clearly not used to hearing a member of their congregation speak so openly about such matters, generally considered private.

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Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen

Marielena Valverde, a middle-age Mexican-American woman, followed Mitchell to the podium. Speaking Spanish to the largely Anglo audience, she explained that after going without insurance for most of her seventeen years cleaning chemical labs, she was finally able to get on her husband's plan two years ago. But when her premiums increased by \$85 a month, she could no longer afford the policy. "We don't mind paying something in order to have health coverage, but the costs are so high there is no way we can cover our family." As she finished, the crowd rose once again in sustained applause. Onstage, several State Assembly members and county supervisors listened politely. When congregation members asked if they would support a universal healthcare bill in California, each politician readily agreed.

Two months earlier, Mitchell and Valverde had been strangers. Mitchell is from the affluent neighborhood of South Palo Alto and owns his own business. Valverde lives in San Jose and works as a janitor. Yet through the involvement of synagogues and churches in interfaith community organizing efforts, Jews like Larry Mitchell are learning what they have in common with people like Marielena Valverde.

The assembly at Shir Hadash was organized by Peninsula Interfaith Action (based in San Carlos) and People Acting in Community Together (based in San Jose), both part of the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO), a national network. The two organizations have brought fifty religious congregations together to organize for social justice. Around the country, there are now about 200 local community organizing groups that build political power by mobilizing members of churches and synagogues. These organizations are affiliated with four major community organizing networks--the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the Gamaliel Foundation, the Direct Action and Research and Training Center (DART) and PICO.

From the early labor and settlement house movement, to the civil rights and antiwar struggles, to environmental and feminist organizing, Jews have been disproportionately involved in progressive causes. Saul Alinsky, the father of community organizing, was Jewish,

but he worked primarily with Catholic and Protestant congregations, starting in Chicago in the 1930s. That legacy has persisted. The last several decades have witnessed an upsurge of congregation-based organizing on issues like housing, healthcare, education and city services. But synagogues were only marginally involved in these crusades. A rabbi would show up at a press conference to express support or a temple's social action committee would write a letter or a check to support the organizing.

Synagogues often have many progressive members, but their social action activities are typically limited to the safer realm of charity projects like tutoring at schools or donating food to a homeless shelter. Ernesto Cortes, the IAF's Southwest director, remembers when left-leaning Jews in Texas would tell him, "You'll never get the synagogues involved in organizing."

But this picture is beginning to change. A growing number of rabbis and their congregants are no longer satisfied with the charity approach. A new wave of Jewish activists, from synagogues and other groups, seeks to challenge (and learn from) the rise of the religious right. They want to renew the Jewish ethic of *tikkun olam*--healing the world from social and economic injustice. Until the late 1990s, few Jewish congregations were involved in the burgeoning multi-issue grassroots organizing coalitions. By 2000 twenty synagogues had joined one of these local interfaith activist groups. Today nearly 100 synagogues are involved, and the number is growing steadily.

The foundation Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ) has helped catalyze this movement. In February more than 300 leaders from sixty-three synagogues came together at a JFSJ-sponsored conference outside San Jose to discuss their involvement in community organizing. They attended workshops on identifying new leaders, sharing personal concerns so they can be transformed into public issues and mapping out local political and corporate power structures.

Simon Greer, 39, a former union and community organizer who now directs the JFSJ, explains, "Jews have always supported social justice issues, but they often see those issues as affecting other people." "People may say, 'I don't know where to find affordable care for my aging mother' or 'I can't find good public schools and we're priced out of the private schools,'" observes Greer. "But they usually see those as personal problems, not political issues. Community organizing helps people see that those are political issues, too."

Fran Godine, a leader at Boston's Temple Israel, one of the first synagogues to invest heavily in organizing as a member of the IAF-affiliated Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), recalls the initial stage of the organizing process, which typically begins with one-on-one meetings and small living room gatherings. "We quickly discovered that there were people in our congregation who were really struggling," she says. "People were worried that their children could never afford a home in the area, worried about what was happening to their elderly parents. The idea that we were all comfortable turned out to be a myth."

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