

ACORN stirring up controversy with reform efforts in Bridgeport

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BRIDGEPORT -- Mayor John Mandanici calls them "a bunch of bullies and rabble-rousers." But Superintendent of Schools Geraldine Johnson says they are "a real force in the community to encourage people who wouldn't (ordinarily) get involved."

They're talking about ACORN — the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. Since forming in Bridgeport 17 months ago, the organization has grown to 1,085 members and has seen many of its objectives met, such as improved textbooks and facilities in the schools and more policemen in the streets.

ACORN's roots go back to Little Rock, Ark., where in 1970 welfare rights supporters formed neighborhood units. There are now ACORN offices in 45 cities in 22 states. Bridgeport's is the first and only one in Connecticut; there are no current plans to start a chapter in New Haven because the national organization is short on funds.

The Bridgeport members are combatting problems affecting low- and moderate-income residents who formerly felt they had no way to fight back. They pay annual dues of \$16, which, along with fund-raisers and donations from private foundations, keep the organization going.

ACORN has 12 neighborhood groups in Bridgeport, all meeting periodically to discuss their grievances. These might include the need for more stop signs or traffic lights, improvements in a park, new sewers or keeping a library branch open. If a particular group has an issue affecting the entire city, it will be taken up by ACORN's executive board.

"Education is the main issue for us," said Elizabeth Martinez, who shares the chairmanship of the East Side neighborhood group. "That's our future, our children. I want mine to have a better education. I don't want them to drop out. We have to fix this problem now; we can't let it go down the sink."

"This isn't an outside staff coming in and saying, 'Do this, do that.' We are people who live here, and we don't plan to leave. I'd like to live in a neighborhood I'm proud of, and my children are proud of."

But Mandanici, who has locked horns with ACORN on numerous occasions, believes the organization is being steered by outsiders.

"They come in from other cities," he said. "Their leaders are from out of town."

"They're out to cause ferment in the community. They're trying to be a political force — they even endorse political candidates. If it was a force for the good, I'd welcome it. But they're led by rabble-rousers. We've documented this."

"There's absolutely no need for a group like ACORN," Mandanici said. "They don't need to go into the neighborhoods. We have aldermen representing those areas. I'm appalled at people paying \$15 (sic) when the city could have handled these issues anyway."

Mandanici said he can't give ACORN credit for anything, not even in the schools. "We started a textbook account when we (this administration) took over. I didn't need ACORN to do that."

But the schools superintendent said ACORN has effectively prodded the school board to move rapidly on problems such as deteriorating textbooks and crumbling school buildings.

"Some positive things have come out of their struggles," Johnson said. "They seem to do a good job of corralling people

around issues. They create an immediate awareness of critical situations, and sometimes make us move our timelines around. Without outside pressures, no institution moves as fast as it should."

The source of this "ferment" is a cluttered office on a second floor walk-up, located in an unpretentious building in downtown Bridgeport. At the top of the stairs stand a blackboard with the message: "Great oaks from little acorns grow."

Staff director Margaret Cary said ACORN "has not and will not endorse political candidates." She said ACORN is now forming a political action committee in Bridgeport, which will take stands on candidates, but this will be separately incorporated and financed. She said the committee has not yet endorsed anybody.

Cary said the "outsider" charge is a common tactic of opponents. She said she came to Bridgeport from Philadelphia and the office's two other full-time workers came from New York, but that all the other members live in Bridgeport.

The members scoff at the radical "rabble-rouser" label. "This is what frightened people at first," said Elizabeth Ratliff, co-chairwoman of the Marina Village group. "They said, 'Here comes another violent, revolutionary group.'"

"But when some people from those old 1960s groups came to see me, I had to shut 'em down. I told them, 'You didn't succeed. The stuff you burned down is still gone.' You have to know what you're really about. We are the people. We don't want that violent thing anymore; we've had enough bloodshed. You need guts the other way, not being afraid to take on your alderman or mayor."

Ratliff was one of the ACORN members who toured schools in Bridgeport's different neighborhoods, comparing what is offered to children in each region. "We saw the difference in better areas. We saw the remedial reading classes, the better books, teachers taking time with students. We don't have this in our schools. When a child is born in poverty and he's not given a good education, he doesn't have a chance. We're not going to sit back and have our children sit in this slop."

Following the tour, ACORN gathered its troops, bringing 150 angry parents to a school board meeting. Since then, new social studies and reading books have been obtained, and repairs made in the various schools. Several ACORN members were appointed to the board's School Goals Committee for further improvements.

ACORN also took on a waste conversion plant built in Bridgeport by the Connecticut Resource Recovery Authority. ACORN members wearing nose masks marched to the plant to protest the odors which neighbors had complained about. The plant has recently been closed for financial reasons.

"But people in New Haven should get their act together," Ratliff warned. "There's a plan to build the same kind of plant there." (CRRA wants to build four energy-recycling plants at undisclosed locations in New Haven, North Haven, Wallingford and Naugatuck.)

Bridgeport's ACORN members would like to see a chapter open in New Haven, but they say ACORN's national organization has little money to hire organizers. E. Stedman Cargill, who chairs the ACORN board in Bridgeport said, "Our problems are financial, since we are self-supporting."

But Cargill said hard work is more important than money to sustain community organizing. "What it really takes is time and effort."