ACORN's leadership is drawn exclusively from the general membership of the organization. Each local ACORN group elects a set of officers. Those officers, working with the ACORN staff, have responsibility for seeing to it that the decisions of the local group membership are implemented. The officers organize the necessary phone calling in preparation for an action, put together the statements and other materials needed at actions, work with the staff in order to ensure that the necessary technical support work is taken care of, take responsibility for seeing to it that dues are collected and that new members are signed up, etc..

In addition, one leader from each group sits on the ACORN Executive Board, which is the policy-setting and decision making body for the entire organization. The Executive Board, it should be pointed out, is composed entirely of the elected leadership of the organization. No staff members, not even the Chief Organizer, have a seat or a vote on the Executive Board.

One should, actually, speak of Executive Boards rather than of one Executive Board. Each city or region has its own Executive Board, which meets every other week to make plans for the city or region. In addition, in each state there is a state-wide Executive Board, which is composed of all the members of the city or regional Executive Boards and which meets every other month. The state-wide Board sets the overall policy for the entire state-wide organization. All decisions concerning finances, what campaigns and issues to work on, what areas of the state to expand into, and so on, are decided by the State-wide Executive Board.

And, with the birth of the Association, there is now an Association Executive Board. The first meeting of the Association Board was attended by 60 Executive Board members from throughout the three state Associations. Due to the distances involved, the Association Board meetings will in the future be attended by elected representatives from each state Executive Board. The Association Board will make decisions and set directions in areas that concern the entire Association: Money questions,for example, as well as plans for expansion into other states, plans for multi-state and national campaigns and issues,etc..

Who are these Executive Board members? Like the rest of ACORN membership, they are white and black, and, in Texas, brown, low to moderate income working people. A recent Little Rock Executive Board meeting, for example, included the following people: A retired Missouri-Pacific blacksmith, a housewife whose husband is a postal worker, a dishwasher at the local VA hospital, the owner/operator of a one-man carpet cleaning service, and unemployed electrician, a carpenter, a worker at the Timex factory, and a secretary. In the Northwest part of Arkansas a number of Executive Board members are Ozark dairy farmers and chicken growers. In the Delta region, family cotton and soybean farmers join the barbers and factory workers from town at Executive Board meetings. These are the people who built the organization, and these are the men and women who run it.

The Executive Board of the Association employs--and consequently has the power to fire-- ACORN's Chief Organizer (currently Wade Rathke). The Chief Organizer, in turn, heads the ACORN staff, and the power to hire and fire staff members. There are approximately thirty staff members, most of whom are organizers responsible for working with one or more of the local affiliated groups. In addition to the organizers, there are a number of organizer-support positions: An office manager and office workers, a research department, a legal department, and an administrative (budget, staff recruitment, fund-raising, and special projects) department.

The support staff, which is centrally located in Little Rock, puts its skill and expertise to work for the entire Association. Each organizer, in contrast, is responsible for working with local ACORN groups in a particular area. There are, for example, three or four organizers in the Little Rock area responsible for working with the Little Rock affiliates; two organizers run the Fayetteville regional office, and are responsible for working with local groups in the Northwest part of the state; and so on across the multi-state operation.

Role of Organizer

The organizers are highly skilled professionals, committed to making a career out of organizing. They are paid, full time employees of ACORN, and all of them work six or seven days a week, 10,12, and 14 hours a day. They have chosen to live on an ACORN salary ($2,400 for 2 years, then $4,000 a year upon making a committment to stay for at least another two years), for they understand that higher salaries means fewer organizers, and fewer organizers means fewer members, fewer local groups, and a diminished chance of achieving power.

The organizers are all given extensive training in the ACORN model of organizing. ACORN organizers are not just set loose on the street and told to start organizing; in ACORN's view, organizing is a highly skilled craft, not something that anyone with a good sense of politics and a desire to make something happen can quickly learn on his or her own. Consequently, three years ago ACORN set up the Arkansas Institute for Social Justice to train organizers to meet ACORN's personnel needs. The Institute, drawing upon the skill of its own instructors, and upon the experience and expertise of veteran ACORN organizers, trains ACORN's organizers both in the classroom (through extensive use of written materials prepared by the ACORN and AISJ staffs) and in the field (through an apprenticeship program with experienced ACORN organizers).

What exactly do the organizers do? First of all, an organizer is responsible for putting together an organizing drive; i.e. going into an unorganized neighborhood and, over a period of about six weeks, seeing to it that a new local ACORN group is formed. Once a local ACORN group has been formed, the organizer is responsible for working with that group. The organizer helps the group develop campaigns, and issues, tactics, and strategy. The organizer works to develop strategic and tactical skills among the membership and leadership. The organizer acts as a liaison between the local membership/leadership and the organization's support staff in Little Rock. If the group needs technical or legal assistance in a particular area, or further research, the organizer arranges for the appropriate support staff to do the necessary work. Finally, the organizer works with the Executive Board in his region or city on the development of regional and city-wide plans and directions.

Organizing Drive

Let's take a closer look now at an organizing drive. The organizing drive is of primary significance in the ACORN methodology. Each ACORN affiliate is created through an organizing drive. Which is to say, each ACORN group is created from scratch. ACORN does *not* build coalitions or congresses of existing groups. We have already talked about the importance of making the *organization* itself, rather than the particular issue of the moment, the cornerstone of the whole ACORN model. The only way the organization itself, and the