



campaign, but was also recommended by Missouri members who have waged several tax-reform and wealth-redistribution fights.

The guiding assumption of the ACORN platform is that the American political system has failed the American people. The notion that the corporate state has trampled the citizenry animated the conference.

The idea is hardly new. What is new is who is articulating it. The ACORN platform contains such traditional reformist goals as "lifeline" utility rates and anti-redlining provisions, but also more structural demands for the creation of publicly owned utilities and banks. It calls for national health insurance, but also demands the establishment of a health system controlled by democratically elected community boards.

ACORN members have long been opposed to the glittering "urban renaissance" that rebuilds the inner cities for the wealthy. In the short run, that fight will continue, as ACORN members oppose Federal giveaways and tax

abatements that provide, in the words of a Texas leader, "the greatest possible good to the smallest possible number." In Philadelphia, St. Louis, Tulsa, Detroit, Austin, and elsewhere, ACORN members have issued the call for "redevelopment for people."

In the long run, however, it will be necessary to make basic changes in the way investment decisions are made, and on this point the ACORN platform is clear: "Establish democratically elected neighborhood boards with jurisdiction over all public investment, major private development, and zoning matters within the neighborhood."

ACORN's leaders have no illusion about their organization's ability to "make the platform happen." It will be a living document only if the movement behind it becomes broader and deeper. In the 1980s, ACORN will be looking for support from labor unions, civil rights organizations, women's groups, and others.

The question remaining for ACORN and other "new populist" groups is whether they can continue to grow and build in a climate of reaction. Most progressives think of the 1970s as

a "bad" decade, and no one knows what the 1980s will bring. But there are some hopeful signs.

The new working-women's organizations reflect an analysis and organizing agenda based on economic issues. There are encouraging developments in the trade union movement—rank-and-file caucuses talking about democracy in the workplace and the union are not as rare as they used to be.

The issues are certainly there. Anti-tax sentiment can be molded into anti-corporate anger. Resentment of "big government" can lead to understanding of the workings of the corporate state. The energy crisis can compel people to confront the realities of our profit-driven monopoly economy.

The recession that is upon us will make it easier to draw the lines and identify the options. As the standard of living of low- and moderate-income Americans continues to decline, we must be ready with organizations and programs that offer a way to fight back. We must rediscover the meaning of social and economic democracy. If the spirit of born-again democracy takes firm root, it may turn out to have grown from an acorn.