

concept of organization generally, can achieve this position of importance is if each and every member goes through the process of actually creating and building the organization. Affiliating pre-existing organizations via a congress or coalition makes it extremely unlikely that individual members will ever actually have the experience of building their own organization.

The members of pre-existing organizations bring into a congress or a coalition loyalties to their own organization (be it a church group or a PTA or whatever) as well as to the new coalition organization; they can never feel the same type of commitment to an organization that the people who actually helped build it have. Further, there is no guarantee that the members of the pre-existing organizations have any commitment even to their original organization; it may be an undemocratic top-down organization where the only members with an understanding of the importance of building organizations are leaders. In other words, affiliating pre-existing organizations might give you a claim to a lot of members, but there's no guarantee that all those members are going to have any understanding of the fact that organizations are not built 'for better schools' or 'for safer streets', but to address that basic maldistribution of power.

Virtually all ACORN members attend the first meeting-- the founding meeting. If you will-- of their local ACORN groups. They are there actually building the organization themselves; it is not handed to them fully formed and ready for their approval. As a result, ACORN members own their organization; they are committed to seeing it succeed.

The organizing drive itself begins with the choosing of a neighborhood to organize in. This happens in one of two ways: Either ACORN is invited into a neighborhood by some of its residents, or the Executive Board picks, for various strategic reasons, a neighborhood to be organized. The Board might choose a neighborhood because it is in a city council ward where ACORN isn't as strong as it would like to be; or because the racial or income character of the neighborhood will help give the overall organization its vital balances; or because an important issue that might affect the whole area (a new highway, for example) is making its first appearance in that neighborhood.

In either case, the first job of the organizer is to search out contacts in the neighborhood. If the organization has been invited into the neighborhood, this is relatively easy: The people who issued the invitation provide the initial contacts. In the absence of an invitation, it is usually possible at this time to find friends and relatives of existing ACORN members who live in the neighborhood, or old ACORN members from other neighborhoods who have moved into the target neighborhood. If the new neighborhood is in a completely new city, or even a new state, the contacts still exist: Unions and churches, for example, have helped ACORN with initial neighborhood contacts. Where all else fails, random door-knocking or super-market lines always turn up a few people who are turned on by the idea of ACORN and willing to work to form an organization in their neighborhood.

The next step is to mold the initial contacts into an organizing committee-- typically 10-20 couples in a neighborhood of 1,000 homes-- and the organizer, utilizing, respectively their knowledge of the neighborhood and his understanding of what sorts of issues are appropriate for an initial organizing drive, and basic ACORN organizing techniques develop a set of issues that they feel will strike responsive chords in their neighborhood. All the while the organizer is selling the organizing committee on the importance of ACORN;

ultimately, the ability of the organizing committee to create an effective local group depends to a great extent on their own understanding of the necessity of creating such an organization.

Once the initial set of issues has been developed, the organizer and the organizing committee begin to systematically contact everyone in the neighborhood. The organizing committee will typically write a letter explaining ACORN and the nature of their involvement in it, and that letter will be sent to every household in the neighborhood. The letter is followed by a personal visit, by a door-knocking team, usually by the organizer and a member of the organizing committee. During those visits, ACORN is explained, issues are discussed, actions hashed out, questions answered, and the first meeting laid out. The goals of the door to door contact are to legitimize and personalize ACORN by presenting the organization through another resident of the neighborhood, to draw the person who is being visited into a discussion of neighborhood and larger issues that that person might not have ever thought through or articulated before, to explain the basic concept of 'getting organizing to get something done', and to get a commitment from the person being visited to attend the initial meeting of the local group. Membership is explained at this time, and many join.

Lesson

A short digression on the type of issues which the organizer and organizing committee focus on: A typical discussion on the doors will usually hit upon a number of issues, ranging from whatever state-wide and city-wide issues ACORN is working on at the time to a couple of local issues specific to the particular neighborhood in which the drive is taking place. These local issues-- the need for a stop light, for example, or for improved drainage, or for a crosswalk, or for getting the city to clean up a vacant lot-- are extremely important to the ultimate success of the drive. For one thing, they give the organization a local flavor, which is necessary in order to counter many people's suspicious questions of 'outside organizations.' Even more important, these local issues are usually issues which are winnable. An organized group-- especially an organized ACORN group-- can usually pressure a city traffic department to put up a needed street sign, and can usually pressure a city public works department to see that vacant lots are cleaned up. Those initial 'wins' are often the first experience many neighborhood people have ever had of successfully fighting city hall or local institutions. By winning a stop light, people begin to understand the effectiveness of organization. Something tangible has occurred in their neighborhood and it has occurred because people got themselves organized and formed an ACORN group. The fact that you sometimes can beat City Hall, provided you are organized, is a critical lesson which ACORN members learn right from the start.

The door-to-door work takes about a month, and leads up to the first meeting of the new local group. The organizing committee runs that meeting, and the emphasis once again is on the necessity of creating a permanent neighborhood organization. Veteran ACORN members or leaders from other groups are on hand to talk about what ACORN is doing in other areas of the city or state, and the organizing committee sets out tentative plans for dealing with the issues that have emerged during the discussions between the organizing committee and the organizer and between the o.c. members and other neighborhood residents. Finally, people are asked to join ACORN (typically 40 per cent will sign up and pay their dues at that first meeting, while another 60 per cent will have already joined during the door-knocking phase), and temporary officers