

Lobby of Have-Nots Nettles The Southern Establishment

By ROY REED

Special to The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1976

LITTLE ROCK, Ark., Oct. 2—An unusual political force that began six years ago in Arkansas is nettling the economic and political establishments with a widening swath across this region.

It is the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, popularly known as ACORN.

The association is a collection of 120 neighborhood organizations in low-to-middle-income communities in six states. It claims more than 7,000 member families.

It began in Little Rock, spread through other cities and towns in Arkansas, then expanded to several major cities in the surrounding states of Missouri, Texas, Louisiana and Tennessee. It also established branches in South Dakota at the invitation of Senator James Abourezk, a Democrat, who heard in Washington of ACORN's growth.

Most Potent Have-Nots

The membership is about 60 percent white and 40 percent black. Most members have incomes of less than \$8,000 a year.

These people have long had little to say about how they were governed. That is changing so rapidly in Arkansas that some observers are calling ACORN the most potent organization of have-nots in this region since the Southern Tenant Farmers Union grew out of rural Arkansas in the 1930's.

ACORN's main adversaries have been local governments and utility companies. It fights the governments for better services and facilities in low-income neighborhoods and it fights the utilities on everything from high rates to pollution.

It recently added banks to its list. In the November election it will be battling the wealthiest financial institutions, the largest businesses and industries and the most powerful utility in Arkansas. And it will be fighting powerful interests in Missouri to remove the state sales tax from food and drugs.

The organization still finds time for cores of local battles over flooded yards, dogs on the loose and intersections without stop signs.

ACORN was indulged at first as the visionary tinkering of post-Vietnam War youths looking for a cause. Now that it has become a threat—and the membership rolls have taken on as many old folk as youngsters—the country clubs and chambers of commerce that historically have run things in towns like Little Rock have begun to stir uneasily.

A few weeks ago, Mayor George Limberley of Little Rock denounced an ACORN plan for lowering electric rates as "socialism in the worst degree." State Representative Boyce Alford of Pine Bluff has called ACORN a threat to capitalism.

Headed by Retired Blacksmith

Similar alarms are being sounded in the board rooms and council chambers of several other cities of the region as ACORN extends its reach.

The chairman of the Arkansas board of ACORN is a retired railroad blacksmith named W. Willard Johnson. His enthusiasm for socialism is about as deep as Barry Goldwater's. He is leaning toward President Ford in this year's election.

"Most of our people are conservative," he said.

But Mr. Johnson, unlike the rich real estate men and bankers who make the big decisions here, has never had much clout at City Hall.

He and his neighbors in southwestern Little Rock complained for years, without results, about poor drainage that caused flooding in their yards and in some of their houses.

They heard about ACORN and some decided to join. With help from the organization, they got a \$960,000 Federal grant to rework ditches and streets in the neighborhood. And they have a promise from the corps of engineers of a longterm drainage plan.

First Goals Are Modest

ACORN'S first projects in a newly organized neighborhood generally are modest campaigns such as improving garbage collection and getting traffic lights installed. Winning is important. The young professional organizers feel that they need repeated victories to keep the members enthusiastic.

Once the members learn that they can attain power by organizing, they usually set their sights higher. Then the various groups in an area join to fight for lower utility rates or equalized tax assessments or a slate of candidates for local office.

ACORN'S founder and chief organizer is a 28-year-old Williams College dropout named Wade Rathke. He has lived in various parts of the country, the longest in New Orleans. He began as an organizer for the National Welfare Rights Organization in Massachusetts.

Mr. Rathke and George Wiley, the late head of the welfare rights group, decided that a more effective organization might be built if it had a broader base than one composed of welfare clients alone. With Mr. Wiley's encouragement and initial financial aid, Mr. Rathke chose Arkansas with its diverse population and geography to test the theory. He came here in 1970.

Mr. Rathke, who is white, was determined to avoid the race-baiting that destroyed Southern populist movements in the past. He made sure that ACORN always a solid mixture of black and white members.

"There's something about ACORN," Mr. Johnson said, "it doesn't make any difference what a person's skin is. That's one benefit I think I've gotten out of ACORN. Our people have common problems and they try to help one another, not kick them in the butt because they're black or Catholic or something else."

An example of ACORN's power was the passage of a law by the Arkansas legislature permitting physicians to prescribe drugs by lower-cost generic rather than brand names.

An ACORN unit of older people at Hot Springs originated the campaign. The larger organization persuaded Gov. David H. Pryor to help push it through the legislature. Later, ACORN helped persuade the state pharmaceutical board to permit drug advertising.

ACORN gets much of the credit for scaling down a huge new coal burning electric generating plant south of Little Rock. The Arkansas Power and Light Company was required to cut the project in half and install pollution devices after ACORN and other group and individuals protested.

The organization is now trying to force the same power company to shift part of its collections from small households to favored industrial users that have always paid lower rates. Six Arkansas cities will vote on the ACORN proposition in November. Industrial and governmental interests have joined the power company in fighting it.

Lobbying, Publicity, Lawsuits

ACORN uses lobbying, publicity, lawsuits, public hearings and any other kind of persuasion it can find.

ACORN members and some of their political allies are now working for a slate of candidates for the Little Rock City Council.

The staff of 35—organizers, lawyers, researchers—earn lower salaries than many of the people they recruit. Beginning organizers are paid \$45 a week and senior ones, \$90.

An ACORN affiliate known as the Arkansas Institute for Social Justice has begun to train organizers for other groups around the country. In 1975, Mr. Rathke said, it trained 450 persons for 55 other organizations.

The organization's member families pay dues of \$16 a year. From various sources, including consulting work and small foundation grants, the group takes in and spends about \$250,000 a year, Mr. Rathke said.

Mr. Rathke is anxious that the organization not grow too fast. He believes that has killed other mass organizations. The expansion to Memphis, where ACORN began working last summer, will be the last one for several months.