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ACORN's 'Little People' Flex Political Muscles

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Their name is ACORN. On first impulse, one thinks they might be environmentalist types concerned with the welfare of squirrels.

As many people are finding out, though, ACORN is not an organization to be taken lightly. It's a citizen's group that has begun to flex its muscles.

Two years ago, there were no ACORNs in Pennsylvania, other than the ones that grew on trees. Now there are about 4,500, and their influence is being felt throughout the state, even as far outside as Washington, D.C.

Washington is where Jimmy Carter and Teddy Kennedy are busy planning campaign strategies and lining up supporters in their fight for the Democratic presidential nomination. They know all about ACORN there. They know it as the group that's trying to establish a voice at this summer's Democratic convention in New York.

Two weeks ago, when the candidates had to submit their slate of potential Pennsylvania delegates, ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), dumped in 2,500 Carter and Kennedy applicants here and in Philadelphia. The move confused the proceedings to such a degree that virtually everyone seeking to be a delegate was approved as a nominee.

It was a strategy, part of a nationwide blitz,

aimed at gaining recognition, and it paid off when Carter's forces later agreed to run six ACORN delegate candidates in the 14th Congressional District here and the Kennedy forces agreed to accept 10 out of the 500 names ACORN submitted.

The numbers are even greater in Philadelphia, where ACORN will have 40 candidates running for Kennedy and 24 for Carter.

Although ACORN supporters managed to win places on the ballot along with regular Democrats, there is no guarantee that any of them will end up at the convention.

An additional commitment from Kennedy's camp was a pledge of support at the Democratic convention for a commission aimed at seeking "full representation" for low- and middle-income activists.

It all adds up to a dramatic surge into the spotlight for the organization of self-defined "little people," men and women of low- and middle-class neighborhoods who are seeking a stronger voice in the political process.

The group, founded in 1970 in Little Rock Ark., has expanded into 19 states and has more than 27,000 families as members. The membership is roughly 55 percent black, 40 percent white and 5 percent Chicano. Recruiting door to door, ACORN is financed by its membership dues, plus church and government funding.

ACORN didn't get started in Pittsburgh until last summer, but in less than a year it has picked up more than 500 members here. Neigh-

borhood units have been established in Homewood-Brushton, the Hill District, Hazelwood, the Northside and the Southside, where the group has its headquarters. The cost of membership is \$16 a family.

Though the group has begun to branch out nationally, Gerry Griffin, one of ACORN's organizers here, says the majority of the effort is still at the neighborhood level. For example, there has been an appearance before City Council to protest the hike in the city wage tax. And planned in the future is a protest against the Port Authority's proposed fare increase.

"I know we're upsetting a lot of apple carts," says Pat Bujarski of the Southside, an ardent ACORN supporter. "But we're doing this because we care. We care about our city, about our state. We care about the United States. We want the people to have a say in government."

"We're trying to restore faith. If we can make the people know and care, our job is worth every minute we put into it."

Another vocal member here is Joe Wallace, a retired city policeman. After five years of retirement, he's trying to find work again because he says he can't live on his pension.

"When this organization approached me," he says, "I joined because I knew I couldn't depend on the Democrats and the Republicans to do anything decent. I believe in the organization. There's a real spirit. If you're organized, you can get results."

Association of Community Organizations For Reform Now
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