MAAP FIELD REPORTS: Bronx, New York

sion slapped many South Bronx families in the face, since most live in single-family households, in extended families or in gay families.

Furthermore, it confirmed the ignorance of the board toward meeting the needs of South Bronx children. Having a clear sense of what they were up against, the interns began working in the campaign. As POEP had only recently formed, they spent their time not only publicizing the speakout but building lasting memberships within the fledgling organization.

To accomplish this, they knocked on hundreds of doors and met with parents after school, asking them how they felt about the schools and inviting them to plan the speakout. Furthermore, the interns used this time to identify and recruit potential leaders for the organization. Such candidates were invited to a meeting on June 30th to plan the agenda for the speakout.

Hand-Delivered Invitations

Afterwards, the parents marched up to the district office and hand-delivered invitations to each board member. By so doing, the parents, most of whom were first-time organizers, gained a shot of confidence that boosted their ability to take charge of the organization. This also proved to be an important learning experience for the interns, providing them with the insight into how organizers foster and develop leadership.

The interns also learned how important flexibility is to organizing. This could be seen through the different means that they had to adopt in reaching out to parents. At first, the interns focused on holding community meetings with each of the schools. However, when they discovered that many neighborhoods lacked a suitable meeting place, their emphasis shifted to holding smaller meetings in parent's homes.

This approach, however, suffered the drawback of being a rather slow way to reach large numbers of people. As the meeting planned for the 28th drew nearer, POEP decided to concentrate on publicizing the speakout to get as big a turnout as possible. This tactic proved the most worthwhile in attracting parents, as attendance at the speakout surpassed all expectations.

On the morning of July 28, over 100 parents flooded the meeting, accompanied by reporters and camera crews. The parents were ready, only to be shocked when not a single board member showed up, even the ones that had committed.

This humiliating act served only to catalyze the parents' anger over the board's lack of respect for them and their children. Putting anger into action, nearly fifty parents with children in tow hailed a fleet of taxi cabs and private cars and dashed over the school board office and took it over. Chanting "the parents, united, will never be defeated," they demanded that Max Messer, the superintendent of District 8, come out and meet with them.

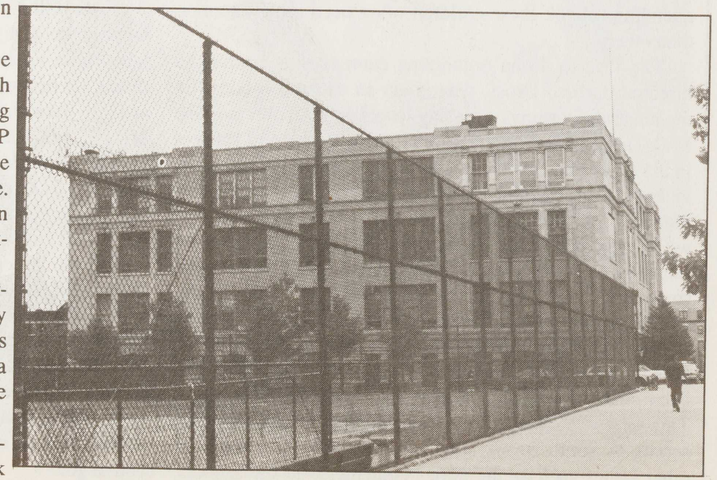
Treacherous Tactics

Messer, who was not in the building, tried to negotiate with the parents over the phone. Attempting to divide the parents, he offered to meet with them not as a whole, but with five representatives. Unfortunately for him, this treacherous tactic was thwarted by the parents' solidarity. Unwilling to bend either to him or to the hordes of security guards and police officers gathered in the hall outside, they held their ground.

They insisted that Messer meet with them on August 5, departing the building only after leaving the startled superintendent with an invitation emblazoned with all their signatures, and threatening to be back with even more parents at the district offices if he did not show up.

The interns emerged from the campaign with a solid organizing experience under their belts, and proud of their accomplishments. This pride came not simply out of the fact that they had organized a successful speakout.

Additionally, it came from the realization that they had — in the process of learning how to organize — helped build an organization, supported by the collective power of families of the South Bronx. Most importantly, their pride came from the realization that this power will be a force to be reckoned with in the South Bronx, and that the parents will eventually find a way to reform their schools.



P.S. 62 has the typically grim exterior of most Bronx public schools.

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Maricopa County Organizing Project

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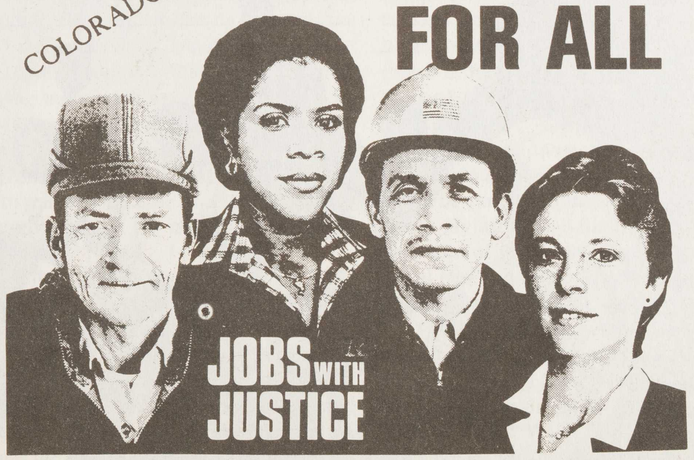
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