

ACORN's Philosophy

What is ACORN? Let's examine a number of the key concepts out of which ACORN has developed, and which give shape and coherence to the actual structure and activity of the organization.

In the first place, it has to be understood that ACORN deals with power, and not simply with winning issues, be they consumer issues or environmental issues or economic issues, or whatever; winning those issues is what ACORN does on a day to day basis.

Behind the organization's concern with these issues is a basic understanding which says that all these issues are mere manifestations of a much more fundamental issue: the distribution of power in this country.

When ACORN attacks a public utility for raising rates, the attack is not based on an analysis which holds that ACORN members, and other low to moderate income Arkansans (or Texans or South Dakotans) are, as consumers, getting nailed by high electric rates. Undoubtedly, they are getting nailed that way, but even more important is the fact that they are getting boxed because in reality rather than rhetoric a bunch of corporate directors and New York bankers have the power to unilaterally make decisions that affect the lives of ACORN members.

Similarly, when ACORN attacks a county budget officials who refuses to release the county budget until the day it is supposed to be approved, ACORN members are less concerned about the impact of the budget figures on the various services the county is responsible for than they are about the more fundamental question of who should have the power to determine how those public funds are spent. You can win stop-lights from here to eternity, which is what many community organizations around the country have excelled at, but unless your organization addresses the question of who has the power to control what happens in a neighborhood, a city, a county, or a state -- and who *should* have the power to control what happens in these areas -- then all your organization will achieve is a proliferation of stop-lights in low to moderate income neighborhoods. Obviously, ACORN's goal is much more.

Which leads directly to the second key concept which ACORN pioneered: The idea of a 'Majority Constituency'. If what ACORN is addressing is the distribution of power in this country, then it is imperative that ACORN see as its constituency all the people in this country who are shut out of that power. As a rough working guide ACORN has traditionally defined this constituency as consisting of those of low to moderate income. By any standards you hit upon, that constituency contains within it a majority of the people of this country. It is that majority that is going to have to be organized if there is any hope for changing -- for reversing -- the prevailing distribution of power.

A bit of ACORN history should make this point clearer. ACORN's chief organizer, Wade Rathke, came to Arkansas after being head organizer of Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization. WRO, especially in Massachusetts, welded its constituency of welfare mothers into a highly effective pressure group which brought about countless positive changes in the welfare bureaucracy and in this country's welfare laws, as well as giving the welfare mothers themselves a sense of pride and accomplishment that had been systematically shipped out of them by the institutions they dealt with

day to day. But MWRO-- and other poor people's and minority based organizations of the late 60's-- never had the potential for achieving any real power. For one thing, they were, by definition, minority based. Given America's political system, that meant they would never achieve any wide-ranging political power. But even more important, center and right wing politicians, the welfare bureaucracies, and the media succeeded in convincing the broad working class majority of the country that what the minority groups wanted was a piece of *their* pie. And given the tax structure that was going to have to support increased welfare and poor people's benefits, it wasn't too hard to do the convincing. The necessary allies of the welfare and minority groups, then, became their enemies, and the majority coalition needed for progressive social change in this country found itself thoroughly divided, and ultimately defeated even before it had a chance to be born.

Rathke came to Arkansas in 1970 convinced of the necessity of avoiding that destructive division, and convinced that power could only be achieved through organizing that majority constituency. Flowing from that decision to organize the majority is a third key ACORN concept: ACORN is a multi-issued organization. Being multi-issued doesn't mean that ACORN fills a grab bag full of issues and goes door to door selling potential members on whatever issue turns them on. What it does mean, though, is that ACORN has the ability, and according to its members, the obligation, to deal with the manifestations of the maldistribution of power in whatever form they take. To ignore certain of the manifestations is to ignore segments of the majority-- and that's no way to build a majority constituency. Neighborhood issues like stop lights and Community Development money allocations, city-wide and county-wide issues like the distribution of city services, the structure of local government, the administration of taxes, the performance of multi-county planning districts and rural electric cooperatives, statewide issues that deal with the powerful political and economic institutions that exercise control in every part of the state, and now multi-state and regional issues -- all of these issues reduce down to the basic fact that low and moderate income people are unable to control the institutions that affect their lives, and therefore all of these issues (not just those that conform to a certain label, like 'consumer' issues, or 'environmental' issues) must be dealt with by the organization. Limiting your issues means limiting your constituency, and there's no surer formula for powerlessness than to concentrate only on the gripes of one small segment of the population.

All three of the above concepts lead inexorably to the fourth: An involvement in electoral politics. In a political democracy, organizing a multi-issued low to moderate income majority constituency in order to achieve power means that you have to get to get involved in the political process. It makes no sense to spend an afternoon confronting an elected official who is not doing the job he is supposed to be doing and then ignore the same official -- or his job -- come November. On a more fundamental level, ACORN members understand that it is possible to begin exercising control over economic institutions -- over utility companies, for example, or over banks -- by grabbing hold of the reins of political power. The state might be dominated, or even controlled, by powerful economic institutions, but if the low to moderate income majority