

Marta Mossburg: Why Democrats lost the health care debate

**By: Marta Mossburg
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Where were the crowds Tuesday evening? Where were the fans camping overnight to shake the hand of their rock star?

That's when Wade Rathke, founder of Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, came to West Baltimore to promote his book, "Citizen Wealth: Winning the Campaign to Save Working Families." President Obama was a leadership trainer for ACORN, which champions "living wage" laws and unionizing Wal-Mart employees. Prosecutors around the country recently charged the group and its employees with wide-scale voter fraud in the 2008 election.

When even the Bono of the community organizing world can only draw 30 people to the basement of SEIU 1199, something is wrong.

And something was wrong. Perhaps that's why Rathke, clad in a downtrodden chic look - weathered brown cowboy boots, jeans, khaki jacket with leather elbow patches - kept his remarks short and rhetoric subdued. I expected a Jesse Jacksonesque call to arms. What emerged was more like Jimmy Carter's "malaise" speech.

Rathke lamented the infighting within different unions and the inaction of Democrats in Congress on behalf of low-income Americans. "We're not going to get what many of us thought was possible a year ago," he said.

And even if organizers could unionize 100,000 or 150,000 Wal-Mart workers, no plan exists for how the organizations could handle the influx of new members, he said.

One bright spot is overseas, Rathke said, where unions are signing thousands of garbage pickers in India and Argentine cartoneros, the ultrapoor in Buenos Aires who recycle cardboard and other trash.

He said these informal workers are the fastest growing group of workers in the world. While that may be true, if the only place where U.S. unions are relevant is outside the United States, someone should be questioning the sustainability of their model.

Some in the group offered common explanations for union troubles. Bob Moore, a community organizer for more than 40 years, said local groups had no chance against well-funded opponents on the right. "There is nothing behind us," he said.

But Les Bayless, the retired treasurer of Service Employees International Union 1199, blamed poor leadership within the union community for its troubles. "We need different leaders," he said. Of the health care protesters, he said, "I think they are out there because of TARP [the \$787 billion Troubled Assets Relief Program passed by Congress]. TARP p*** me off, too. We let them own that issue."

The group collectively lamented that the Right discovered Saul Alinsky's "Rules for Radicals." "It's kind of scary! They have learned all of the tricks," said Sue Esty, the assistant director of American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees Maryland.

But maybe it isn't the Right learning the rules. Maybe it's the community organizers losing the anger so necessary to keep the fight alive. Angry people drive beat-up hatchbacks and eat ramen noodles.

They don't show up to greet their leaders in a Volvo, Lexus, Cadillac or Chrysler 300, like some of the cars parked outside SEIU 1199, and eat grapes and cheese like at this meeting.

And they have a passion to get their message out. Rathke said part of his reason for writing "Citizen Wealth" was to engage people in today's world. He wants people to ask themselves "Are we doing things we always did? Or are we doing things that actually work?"

But even he seemed disinterested in figuring out what ignites Americans' passions. Asked about MoveOn.org, the liberal equivalent in power to the Christian Coalition in the 1990s, Rathke said "that's more Internety" than what community organizers do, but he admired the group's fundraising prowess.

MoveOn.org seems like the epitome of what community organizers should be in the Internet age. The group is widely credited with helping to solidify Democratic control of Congress and is known for quickly mobilizing its left-leaning troops against anything proposed by the previous administration. It is currently organizing health care "vigils" around the country to promote a government-run health care system.

If Rathke and his supporters want to remain relevant, they can't go it alone. And they must come up with a new agenda that stirs the hearts and minds of workers. When they can buy a luxury car, live in the suburbs and retire on a pension, it's hard to tell their troops that they are oppressed, much less stir them to protest.

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