

## *Roots and Branches of Community Organization*

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### *Preamble*

It is exciting to visit Japan once again after a seven-year hiatus because I wanted to learn so much. Having come here after Hurricane Katrina with other organizers from New Orleans to Kobe so we could learn to hope again after witnessing the progress of the rebuilding there and to marvel at the size of the super-levees and flood gates protecting Tokyo, I wanted to learn new lessons from Japan on how community-based organizations had reacted to the tsunami in 2011. I wanted to visit colleagues who recently were in the United States to better understand how we could help advance community organization in Japan. Four years ago another Japanese delegation had visited about living wage campaigns in the United States and Japan: what was happening now with living wage campaigns? I had written and edited a book last year called *Global Grassroots: International Perspectives on Organizing*, and I wanted to see what new stories were being told in this vein. Now, I'm almost embarrassed and blushing, but instead of being the student and researcher, I'm asked to be a teacher and something of a historian about community organizing.

### *Background*

For the last more than 40 years I have been a community and labor organizer, initially in both the United States and over the last decade internationally. As an organizer I have organized welfare (social assistance) recipients and unemployed workers to secure their rights, unions of informal and formal workers, public and private employees, both as independent and autonomous organizations and as part of the AFL-CIO labor federation and the largest United States based union, the Service Employees' International Union with almost 2 million members, tenants unions and community organizations of low-and-moderate income families in cities, suburbs, and rural areas, and in the largest mega-slums in the world in Asian, Africa, and Latin America. The stories I could tell, and the scars I could show!

The organizing effort though that defines much of my work was founding the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) in Little Rock, Arkansas in the southern part of the United States on June 18, 1970, and serving as Chief Organizer for ACORN from that point for 38 years until June 2008. This organization started from nothing in low income white and black housing projects in Pulaski County, Arkansas to grow to a point 38 years later when I left the organization of having 500,000 members organized in 38 of the 50 United

States with offices in more than 100 cities and a family of organizations which included more than 600 local community organizations, housing development and counseling, several labor unions, two radio stations, and a host of other activities with a staff of over 1000 workers and a budget that was knocking on the door of \$100 million per year. ACORN was without question the largest community organization in the country and the largest membership organization of lower income people.

Since I've left ACORN, I now still work with various campaigns and organizing projects in United States cities, but as Chief Organizer of ACORN International work with directly for this federation of affiliated ACORN organizations in twelve (12) countries around the world in Latin America (Mexico, Peru, Honduras, Argentina, Dominican Republic), Africa (Kenya and Liberia), Europe (Italy and Czech Republic), Asia (India), and North America (Canada and the USA) as well as partners in Korea and Indonesia and new projects developing in Ecuador, Scotland, and Guinea. This is a different organization in some ways and the same in others, but we will discuss this along the way. ACORN built an organizing model over its 40 years. ACORN International is still working out some of the same and some different problems around the world over the last decade, so every day is a different kind of challenge.

### *The Roots of Community Organizing*

History is important, but it cannot predict the future or guarantee results. In that sense the context is everything in thinking about various perspectives on the history of community organization. Like the old story of the blind man and the elephant, we are all touching the same thing from different places, so we may not clearly recognize the whole even though we may feel very certain of our own point of "view," blind though we are. Accordingly, I can speak about the pedigree of community organizing in the United States where much of my life's work has focused, but I also recognize that there are many branches from these and very different roots that have grown in other countries around the world. There are also many manifestations of what I would call community organizations around the world, which have grown from very different soil as strong distinct hybrids that might not recognize or be recognizable in the United States. We will try to get a closer look at both the forest of community organizing and the many trees that are now growing there.

When many people think of the roots of community organization in the United States the story begins and ends with Saul Alinsky and his work, primarily in Chicago but also elsewhere in urban America, and without doubt Alinsky dominated the work in the streets in the 1960's particularly and though his seminal books, *Rules for Radicals* and *Reveille for Radicals*, and constant speaking appearances on campuses, he was the premier evangelist for the potential of community organizing and its most effective proselytizer. His organizing gospel still has wide impact on community organizing.

Alinsky, like all organizers, also stood on shoulders and his work and organizing model was clearly impacted by the influences that shaped his thinking many of which were particularly pronounced in Chicago. Jane Hull and her settlement house movement centered at the Hull House in poor and immigrant neighborhoods of the city and focused largely on remedial service delivery had been the model for intervention with the urban poor supported by the progressives and the “goo-goo” or good government forces of the time. Another competing “model” had been the urban political machine which herded votes but as part of the exchange also delivered some level of services and a rough handed acculturation. Chicago was also a significant union-town at the time, especially in the immigrant communities where Alinsky was working.

These three influences directly impacted the early organizing model developed by Alinsky at that time. From the federated structure of the labor movement, he drew the notion of an “organization of organizations,” that would bring representatives together in a “congress” to determine issues and show the potential strength of the union. From the settlement houses and community welfare centers that were springing up around the United States, he wanted to conceive of an organization that rejected the *noblesse oblige* of the well-to-do, and instead allowed people themselves to speak and build power rather than depend on their advocacy alone. This was a fundamental recognition. At the same time as an acute observer of the Chicago political scene and its sophisticated machinery, immigrant base, and service delivery that worked as a *quid pro quo* to deliver votes, Alinsky determined that he did not want the organizations he was creating to “compete” with these powerful electoral operations, so he tilted the organizations as far away from direct political activity as he could, defining “power” as coming from the numbers of the poor, rather than any sense of electoral advantage that could be mobilized.

Less clear were other axioms of the Alinsky model, though many seem to have been grafted from labor and his experiences with John Lewis and his charismatic, though autocratic, leadership of the United Mine Workers, and his seminal role in creating the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and resuscitating the institutional labor movement. Alinsky saw organizers as experts from the outside that came in, helped build the organization, and then disappeared, much in the way that the UMW and other unions dropped in organizers and then left local unions with locally elected officers and stewards to go forward. The bias towards “professionals” over “amateurs” in organizational work was also something that likely was uprooted directly from the institutional labor experience of that period in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. These were conservative tendencies in organizational development, but certainly reflected contemporary experience.

In some ways Alinsky’s greatest contribution may not have been as an organizer, but rather as a gifted promoter of organizing. Through his books which became required reading for a generation of activists and his speaking engagements at colleges and universities, and his constant travel, he was a proselytizer for organizing and his winking claim that anyone and everyone could be an organizer. As a beginning organizer with the National Welfare Rights

Organization (NWRO) in 1969 in Springfield, Massachusetts, I can remember driving to Williamstown, Massachusetts to hear him speak, and then the excitement of having him do a workshop for the Massachusetts WRO staff in Boston when I was head organizer of MWRO in 1970. The rippling of his impact is even felt in Asia from his trips to Manila and Seoul in 1971, where I was delighted to follow his footprints from his brief visit there, which inspired organizers for the urban poor for years to try to build organizations following his inspiration.

The other great organizers in Alinsky's orbit of those times all had an impact on the work whose shadow falls on organizing to this day. Nicholas Von Hoffman who was his lead organizer on many Alinsky projects in Chicago for 10 years was a major proponent, and famous in my view for having commented after one Chicago election after they had registered thousands of African-Americans, "was that all there was?" Fred Ross was the architect of the powerful Community Service Organization (CSO) in California affiliated with Alinsky, which organized tens of thousands of Mexican-Americans, successfully elected the first Mexican-American to the city council in Los Angeles, discovered, developed, and lost Cesar Chavez, who became the chief organizer and leader of the United Farm Workers Union (UFWU), and as importantly pioneered the use of "house meetings" as a community organizing method. Chavez for his part became the most influential proponent of the strength of membership dues in building organization and a master of the boycott tactic. Dr. Warren Hagstrom, a professor of social work, was another key figure during this period, and a great proponent and student of the strengths and styles of leadership development.

### Following Alinsky

At the time of Saul Alinsky's death in the early 1970's, he was declaring that he was learning lessons from his early organizing of the urban poor and was looking to organize the middle class instead. He established a Chicago-based group, largely led by a former student activist, Paul Booth, which was first called Citizens Against Pollution. Alinsky was trying to find footing and resonance in a new constituency, partially in reaction to the continued controversy of his entry into largely Hispanic or African-American communities. In Kansas City for example the project polarized around him so quickly, it never really got off the ground.

With Alinsky's death in 1972 at the age of 63, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) reorganized under Ed Chambers, one of his lieutenants, and eventually moved to a more institutionally based organizing model rooted in churches largely with some labor involvement in certain cities. The best of these organizations was COPS in San Antonio, organized by Ernesto Cortez, but other well known groups focused on housing like the East Brooklyn Churches (EBC), directed by Michael Gecan for many years, BUILD in Baltimore, which organized some early work around protecting prevailing wages for unionized city workers, and others. The IAF is run by a directorate of sorts composed of senior organizers. Relationships to the local organizations are contractual, rather than democratic with each group autonomous. With Chambers retirement in recent years the IAF has in some ways split between separate fiefdoms

with Cortez in the west, Gecan in Chicago now, and Arnie Graf the other major organizer in the network in Baltimore with related groups.

The more inbred, separatist and schismatic IAF after Alinsky also divided into different branches with Tom Gaudette developing a “school” of disciples through the Mid-American Institute influencing groups connected with the National Peoples’ Action network, an ad-hoc alliance of groups largely led by the late Shel Trapp and a local Chicago-based neighborhood leader, Gail Cincotta. Greg Galuzzo and John Baumann were Chicago-based organizers under the general Alinsky influence, who were both Jesuit priests at the time, and relocated to Seattle and Oakland, California and founded the Pacific Institute of Community Organization (PICO). Galuzzo split off to return to Chicago to leave the priesthood and lead the Gamaliel Foundation, while Baumann for years ran PICO as a network of organizations from the original Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) stronghold. Along with John Calkins and the smaller Miami and Ohio-based network, all of these “schools” of organizing evolved in the 1990’s and first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to focus on a similar model of church-based organizing to deliver support and constituency for their organizational development.

#### *ACORN Pioneered in a Different Direction*

The other major tendency in community organization over the last 40 years was ACORN, the Association for Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). I founded ACORN in Little Rock, Arkansas on June 18, 1970 at 21 years old after one-week off driving from Boston, Massachusetts where I had been head organizer of Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO), the largest of the state affiliates of NWRO directed by Dr. George Wiley, a former civil rights veteran and chemistry professor, and a board of welfare recipients drawn from each state. Wiley had sold some New York funders on a “southern strategy” to organize in Louisiana and Arkansas in the Congressional powerhouses that then controlled welfare funding, Senator Russell Long (LA) and Congressman Wilbur Mills (AR), but lacked people to drive the program. At the end of the day I agreed to begin an organization connected to NWRO, if I was allowed to build this thing I called ACORN, which originally stood for Arkansas, rather than the Association.

In the beginning a lot of the elements of ACORN were in reaction to lessons learned in welfare rights organizing and the existing Alinsky-model of organizing as the 1970’s dawned. ACORN from the beginning was designed to be multi-issue (not just tenants or welfare or neighborhood), statewide (not just neighborhood or city-based as was the norm at the time), multi-racial (uniquely in Southern states combining both blacks and whites in the same organization), majority constituency (defining its base as low-and-moderate income families composing 70% of the Arkansas population, once again rather than just public housing or simply welfare or only in specific neighborhoods), direct action (continuing in the tradition of civil rights and other movements), and of course the organization was about building power for its members.

Within months it became clear that if ACORN was going to survive and thrive in Arkansas, there needed to be an emphasis on internal financing. ACORN had studied different lessons. The Non-Partisan League in the Dakota and its great organizer, Arthur C. Townley, argued that the secret to the success of that organization in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were “\$5 dues and a Ford Model-T,” which allowed the organization to expand and acquire the mobility to become a multi-state, regional powerhouse. Talking to H. L. Mitchell, the lead organizer and one of the founders of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union in Arkansas, Tennessee, and other middle-South states, he clearly stated that the failure of the union in its efforts to build power for sharecroppers had been its failure to stabilize its membership dues system. Reading an interview with Cesar Chavez, no longer with CSO, but now leading the United Farm Workers Union (UFW), his argument for the importance of dues regardless of the income or circumstances of the members was compelling.

My experience with welfare rights was also informative. Dues were only \$1 per year, yet in Springfield, Massachusetts, where I first started organizing, when we won furniture vouchers and household supplies’ checks for recipients; members were collecting thousands of dollars, and would have been eager to pay much higher dues or a monthly basis. Therefore, ACORN began with a dues program of \$1 per month, \$12 per year or \$10, if paid at one time in 1970. Over the years the dues increased to \$10 per month, \$120 per year, and were paid largely through direct deposit from bank accounts, a system unimaginable in 1970, but routine forty years later. ACORN would be a membership organization, like a union, which made it very different from other community organizations.

Because ACORN was a membership organization rather than a coalition of other groups, the recruitment was also different, and relied on two fundamental programs. One was “organizing committees” of neighbors who were pulled together in house meetings on a regular basis to conduct the organizing process. All of this was carefully assembled through systematic doorknocking, which became the organization’s calling card and distinguishing feature for many. The door-to-door contact and recruitment process built organizational understanding, recognition, loyalty, and direct membership. As this technique was refined, clearly it also had powerful applications in labor organizing as an alternative method of contact and in political organizing, which was eventually recognized as the most effective means of creating civic engagement and get-out-the-vote efforts. ACORN organizers, leaders, and members were masters of the doorknocking technique!

It also became clear within the first couple of years that ACORN also understood power differently than other community organizations. Rather than simply defining power as numerical superiority that could create influence with pressure, ACORN members defined power as not just that but also in a more explicit political form. ACORN was nonpartisan, but was not apolitical. By 1972 ACORN was endorsing candidates for office and in fact becoming the deciding factor in candidates being elected for the first time from outside of the rich, 5<sup>th</sup> ward of Little Rock, when they powered Doug Stephens to election that year. By 1973 ACORN in fact quietly ran

hundreds of its own members as justices of the peace in the Pulaski County Quorum Court, the county legislative and tax setting body where Little Rock and North Little Rock were located, and electing almost 250 members took majority control of that body making front page headlines from Washington, DC to Little Rock and beyond. This was a case of lower income families actually seizing political power, not the Alinsky model where the organizations eschewed any direct involvement in politics.

*ACORN's Structure, Development as a Constituency Organization, and Coordinated Autonomy*

ACORN was able to operate this way partially because of its unique structure. The organization was not a federation like the AFL-CIO or Alinsky-style groups composed of autonomous organizations, but one unified non-profit corporation. The board whether in Arkansas or later on a national basis was elected from members with local ACORN affiliated groups automatically getting a seat, rather than coming from various organizations. Organizers worked directly for elected leaders, rather than through contracts between organizations and central networks or board controlled by organizers. Perhaps more importantly, ACORN was structured so that any democratically made membership or leadership decision could be implemented without there every being a situation where an organizer would have to say that the organization was unable to do something that the membership had decided to o. Whereas most other community organizations were structured under United States regulations as tax exempt organizations legally not allowed to be involved in politics in order to protect their tax status, ACORN was a plain-vanilla, nonprofit with no special tax status, so there were no restrictions of any kind on its activity. Over the 40 years this structure also provided huge advantages compared to other community organizing networks because as one unified operation, ACORN had the internal discipline to act in a concerted fashion on campaigns and objectives, rather than being a product of organizations choosing to opt in or opt out of every decision and campaign in order to protect their autonomy.

It also became clearer in the campaigns, politics, and issue selection of the organization what it meant for ACORN to be a constituency-based organization of low-and-moderate income families, as opposed to simply a community organization. ACORN organized a network of community organizations, but didn't hesitate in its early years to also organize separate affiliated organizations for Vietnam Veterans, as they tried to reintegrate into the United States, and an Unemployed Workers Organizing Committee, as the recession broadened. When a rate lowering utility initiative was won in Little Rock against huge political expenditures, ACORN moved to establish noncommercial radio stations in Little Rock, Dallas, and Tampa so that low income families would be able to have a voice. After helping win passage of the National Homesteading Act after its members squatted in Philadelphia and other cities around the country, and then working to pass the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) which stopped redlining in housing loans and discrimination led to establishing the ACORN Housing Corporation and housing counseling and development programs that led to millions of families getting housing. By 1980 the original efforts around unemployed workers had broadened into a jobs campaign in cities

around the country, and saw ACORN finally establishing the United Labor Unions with separate locals in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and New Orleans to organize low wage workers directly.

The real engine behind the growth and expansion of the organization had been a recognition in the 1970's that the needs of the urban poor in the cities could not be met directly from the federal government to the cities, which had been the trend in the 1960's, but had to involve building national power and impact. Within ten years of its founding ACORN had initiated and achieved what became famously known as the 20/80 plan: organizing in 20 states by 1980 in order to coincide with the national elections in the United States in that year. The organization within years of its founding had framed its growth around winning special recognition and representation for low-and-moderate income families by both established political parties in the United States and was entering the primary process and the quest for Presidential delegates in order to advance its claim that there needed to be an affirmative action program for lower income families to achieve political participation in the same ways that there had been for minorities and women.

ACORN understood as a constituency organization using community organizing, labor organizing, media organizing, and other tools that its broad base of low-and-moderate income families could not be activated only in their homes and communities, but had larger communities or social networks and other hours of the day where they worked, listened to the radio, moved to new houses and other neighborhoods. Nothing and no one stayed the same, and for an organization to grow, the organization had to be able to find and hold their membership through their evolutions, not simply our own structural needs, institutional priorities, and internal convenience.

Having both a unitary formation as well as an organic structure that naturally consolidated growth and diverse operational entities allowed the organization to have a rare level of operational flexibility for a social movement or community organization. Too often as I have argued many times elsewhere, the "beginnings prejudice the ends" in looking at organizational structure, by which I mean it is very difficult for an organization that begins organizing only tenants or welfare recipients to change directions and easily re-brand itself as a broader, more encompassing organization. Having a more easily adaptable structure that allowed ease of entry and representation for diverse organizational entities and enterprises holds some challenges certainly, but maintains the flexibility to allow change and growth over time.

None of this is to argue that there were never internal cultural tensions between direct organizing and advocacy for example and more standardized service delivery *vis a vis* housing or tax services for example, but in a more fluid and amalgamating structure, ACORN was always able to guarantee the dominance of the direct constituency organizing of community and labor groups. The ideological emphasis on membership and their elected leadership also prevented the organization from becoming dominated by service and development systems or the issues of



“professionalization” versus the values of amateur, volunteer, constituency leadership. One of the structural differences for example between ACORN as a membership-based organization and labor unions on the other hand is that elected leaders or members could not join the organizational staff without resigning as leaders and members in order to protect the structural integrity of membership control. There are no perfect organizational systems that involve people, but within ACORN the culture and ideology was clearly expressed and implemented.

Another key organizational principle for ACORN was the concept of “coordinated autonomy.” What this meant is that even though all of the various organizational entities were part of one integrated formation, they each individually had the ability to act with relative independence within their own field of operations, whether local groups in a neighborhood within a city or a separate organizational function like housing, labor, or media. In this sense they all could act with some level of relative autonomy. If the issue were outside of their geographical or operational boundaries, involving other ACORN affiliates within their city or state or in the way a state dealt with a national issue, then coordination was required and leadership or operational authority at that level of the organization. In practical terms one local group could not suddenly decide endorse a favorite-son candidate for Mayor of Dallas or Los Angeles or Miami, but had to work through the structure of the citywide governance body to come to agreement. In the case of political endorsements supermajorities of 75% were required in order to make sure that the level of consensus was sufficiently high that any political decision whether for city council or President of the United States would not divide the organization. For example it took the national ACORN board, working through the ACORN Political Action Committee, three different ballots over a several month period before the 75% was achieved to endorse Barack Obama given the sentimental support for former Senator John Edwards and his stands on poverty and the strong New York support for their Senator Hilary Clinton based on collaborations with her in that state.

### *Marrying Community Organizing and Labor Organizing*

Such flexibility also allowed both growth and, as importantly, cross fertilization of skills, experience, cultures, and methodologies, which could then also advance fundamental ACORN development and capacity. Nowhere is that more clear than in the grafting of ACORN’s community organizing methodology and development and building of labor unions.

Coming out the organizing around jobs in the recession of 1978 in the United States under President Jimmy Carter, ACORN members increasingly raised issues at monthly meetings and anytime they gathered about problems they faced at work and their lack of organization. Initially, the standard operating procedure for organizers was to refer such members to whichever AFL-CIO union seemed to have organizational jurisdiction for such workers. Three strange things started to happen. First, members would return month after month saying that they were not hearing back from any union. Gradually we realized what became more obvious in later years that most unions simply did not have organizing departments or anyone committed

to increasing membership. Secondly, we started finding that many unions had never heard of the kind of workers we were finding in our neighborhoods in large numbers, like home healthcare aides, housekeepers, chore helpers or whatever they might be called in Boston, Chicago or elsewhere. Parenthetically, it turned out that our experience aligned with a generalized retreat from organizing. And, finally, it became obvious that huge numbers of workers in the service sector like fast food workers, hotel workers, and others, simply had outpaced their unions and were not being seriously organized in any meaningful way even as the service sector exploded with job growth, pushing down union membership and therefore organizational density in these jurisdictions to historic lows.

Walking through the back door of this problem, ACORN felt little choice, as a membership organization, to finally respond and launch the United Labor Unions in 1980 with locals in Boston (homecare), Philadelphia (small shops), Detroit (fast food), Chicago (homecare), and New Orleans (hotels and hospitality), emphasizing the different unorganized sectors where members had expressed interest. In the early 1980's we found some success at organizing in these new jurisdictions, winning strikes or elections in Boston and Chicago for homecare workers and the first successful election for hotel workers in New Orleans in decades at the Hyatt there, but the fact that we were fledgling and independent created challenges in collective bargaining. ACORN's members had the resources to get the unions started, but going into the mid-1980's ACORN had its own financial issues, making it more difficult to resource adequately the labor union initiatives in these cities, making an affiliation offer from the fast growing Service Employees International Union (SEIU, AFL-CIO) very attractive. In 1984 SEIU separately chartered three of the ULU locals as SEIU 100 (New Orleans), SEIU 880 (Chicago), and SEIU 1472 (Boston) and merged the other two projects into existing SEIU locals in Detroit and Philadelphia. With the agreement came multi-year subsidies to encourage organizing and exemptions from paying per capita to the larger union as well. Local 100 got up to 7000 members at its high water mark within SEIU (Local 100 returned to ULU after 25 years in 2009) and Local 880 managed to become one of the largest of the SEIU locals with over 60,000 members in Illinois homecare and child daycare over several decades.

Over the years the partnership between ACORN and institutional labor through our own locals that were part of SEIU at different times, as well as relationships built with other unions contributed significantly to some of the only areas of growth in that same 30-year contemporary period of institutional labor's decline. The work we pioneered (along with Local 1199 and 32BJ in New York City) in homecare added more than 500,000 new members to various unions, though predominantly SEIU and AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees). When ACORN embarked on a similar set of organizing drives among home daycare workers after the cutbacks in welfare services created an huge amount of growth in this sector, we partnered with AFT (American Federation of Teachers) to organize 35,000 of these workers in the New York City area, CWA (Communications Workers of America) to add 5000 members in New Jersey to that union, and of course with SEIU where our work added tens

of thousands in California, Washington, Maryland, Iowa, and Illinois. Organizing drives managed and staffed by ACORN through its subsidiary the ACORN Community Labor Organizing Center (ACLOC) involved contracts of over \$8 million dollars from SEIU along in the middle years of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Many of these organizing initiatives developed from ACORN's pioneering work around what I called "majority unionism" that was drawn from ACORN's own belief that in order to build power for our constituency organizational formations had to be designed to organize a "majority constituency" rather than a smaller, marginal group. As union membership density plummeted since the mid-1960's to the level that only a bit less than 8% of private sector workers in the United States are now union members and only a bit more than 12% when including public sector workers, who are now under severe political attack, my argument was simple. Unless the paradigm changed so that workers could make the choice about joining and forming labor unions and worker associations, rather than following the highly restrictive, dilatory, and legalistic procedures of the national labor laws, which allowed employers a huge role in determining whether or not unions could be formed in workplaces, institutional labor's organizing model was destined to continue to fail. My argument, based on ACORN's community organizing and labor organizing model, was that we had to first build the union, fight for power for workers, and later deal with employers on the issues of stable labor relations, as demanded by neo-liberalism throughout the world.

#### *ACORN and Major Labor Organizing Partnerships*

Besides the direct membership growth driven by the ACORN organizing model, there were a number of seminal organizing projects that reflected these strategies. With the election of John Sweeney, formerly the International President of SEIU, to the presidency of the AFL-CIO, the opportunity to extend the partnership along these lines increased. There was an interest in "geographical" organizing which was another way of talking about apply community organizing methodology, especially the role of doorknocking, an ACORN specialty, to building unions. One of the primary initiatives approved by the AFL-CIO in the early years of Sweeney's administration was just such a project in New Orleans, called HOTROC, the Hotel, Hospitality and Restaurants Organizing Committee, which under my direction combined the forces and resources of not only ACORN, but also the AFL-CIO, SEIU, the Operating Engineers Union (IUOE), and HERE, the Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees union in a joint project seeking to leverage public and political support to pressure employers to agree to "labor peace" protocols making organizing, and particularly elections, fairer for workers. Similar projects focused on maritime workers in the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana as well and a campaign to help win a collective bargaining agreement at a large New Orleans-based shipyard. By the time the project closed under the weight of tourism decreases and cutbacks in hotel construction after the 9/11 tragedy, elections had been won for hundreds of workers at the New Orleans Convention Center and a agreement for union representation had been assured at the Loews Hotel, adding a new union hotel to the city. Other efforts in this period directed by our Local 100 and ACORN saw a

victory on an area wide living wage increase and the successful unionization of thousands of workers with the City of New Orleans on a labor peace agreement negotiated with Mayor Marc Morial during this period. It was helpful during this period that three consecutive organizing directors of the AFL-CIO all had come from the ACORN and ULU experience: Mark Splain, Kirk Adams, and Stewart Acuff.

A more significant test case of my “majority unionism” strategy was implemented in 2004 around an organizing strategy I directed at the giant Walmart operations. Walmart is the largest private sector employer in the United States with 1,200,000 workers and one of the largest in the world with over 2,000,000 workers. In the United States the company is completely non-union and has stood as a symbol of union-avoidance strategies for decades as it has emerged as a powerhouse of retail shopping. After a number of failed organizing efforts using traditional methods and filing for elections store-by-store under the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), labor leaders in the United States, under the prodding of Andy Stern, then President of SEIU, finally reckoned with the urgency of a new strategy, and challenged me to try the “majority union” strategy that I had advocated. This joint campaign was a partnership of ACORN, SEIU, the United Food & Commercial Workers’ Union (UFCW), and the AFL-CIO.

Geographically, we located the campaign in central Florida, specifically in the corridor between Tampa-St. Petersburg and Orlando, where Walmart was expanding rapidly and at that time was deriving 4% of its global revenues. The campaign was built on three pillars.

- The first was designed to put pressure on the company by stopping its expansion. We organized WARN, the Walmart Association for Reform Now, a coalition of diverse groups which we organized on a community wide basis to look at the impacts of superstore expansion in communities. Over the years of this program we successfully blocked 32 consecutive Walmart proposals for expansion in central Florida using everything from police concerns about traffic congestion and crime in Orlando to “not-in-my-backyard” opponents in upper income areas to environmental and zoning concerns around St. Petersburg to successful passage of a special retail workers minimum wage in Sarasota.
- Secondly, we organized the store employees into the Walmart Workers Association, which recruited workers directly on their need for a union that would engage the company directly on their issues but would not file for an election and would not seek to collectively bargain with the company. We recruited the workers by robo-calling voter files for families making less than \$50,000 per year and asking if they knew of workers with Walmart, because there was an organization for them. These workers were then home-visited and our effective sign-up rate was better than 50% membership of completed visits, which is outstanding in any labor-based organizing drive. In a period of nine (9) months we signed up almost 1000 dues-paying members and built organizations in 34 stores in central Florida with elected stewards and strength that ranged from

negligible to 30% of the store, proving conclusively that Walmart workers not only wanted a union, but were not afraid to join and stand up on the job.

- Thirdly, we initiated a campaign in India, which the company had targeted as their chief expansion area for growth globally, called the India FDI Watch Campaign, that sought to assure that there would be no modifications in foreign direct investment (FDI) for multi-brand retail including Walmart, Tesco, Carrefour, Metro, and others without protections for the communities, workers, and others. This campaign successfully built a coalition of unions, traders, hawkers, street vendors, birani stores and community organizations which continues to thwart the company's expansion in India to this day, more than eight years later.

The store-based workers' organizing drive was abruptly terminated because of internal strife between the participating unions. SEIU and UFCW were key participants in forming a competitive labor federation called Change to Win which left the AFL-CIO, and problems between them over jurisdiction, all combined to strand the project despite its success. Only recently has the UFCW initiated a new effort based on something similar to this model, though it remains to be seen if they have the long term commitment to assure its success. WARN and AWA did not survive these transitions, though ACORN International continues to support the India FDI Watch Campaign and ACORN India's efforts in this area on an on-going basis.

### Living Wage Campaigns

Besides the success of these direct organizing partnerships with ACORN, the single most productive campaign led by ACORN and directly engaging labor involved the more than 100 "living wage" campaigns throughout the USA, and now also through ACORN International in Canada and other countries. Living wage campaigns are largely three types:

- **Prevailing Wage:** Similar to the efforts of building trades and construction workers, some living wage campaigns seek to establish a floor on wages for contract workers for governmental entities. Sometimes the campaigns have offered incentives for benefit payment to subcontracted workers in exchange for a lower "prevailing wage." The wage similar to government surveys would set minimums based on area standards for various job classifications.
- **Wage Equalization:** Some of these efforts were largely initiated by unions and supported by community organizations and sought to create governmental restrictions against contracting for anything less than the rate often paid to unionized workers. Management was forced to compete rather than workers being pushed to the bottom. The impact of these efforts when successful was to prevent the jobs from being contracted so that they were maintained in the public sector and under union jurisdiction.

- **Area Wage Increases:** ACORN's largest impact involved raising the minimum wage for workers in entire cities and states, primarily through initiated referenda procedures. Clearly, the organizational mechanics of petitioning for valid signatures, winning a place on ballot, running an election campaign, winning (or losing) the election, and then surviving the court challenges and battles involved a lot of organizational resources, planning, and execution, but the results when successful transferred billions of dollars of increased wages every year to millions of lower waged workers in states, largely in Midwest, South and Western parts of the United States and in cities in California, New Mexico, Louisiana (until the New Orleans victory was overturned by Louisiana Supreme Court), and Florida (Sarasota in the Walmart campaign).

For obvious reasons many of these campaigns enhanced the partnerships with labor unions by improving their profile with unorganized workers and their existing membership, and in cases like Houston, Chicago, and New Orleans where ACORN-related locals like Local 100 and Local 880 organized, actually increased membership and union density.

#### *ACORN International Expands Global Community Organizing*

The roots of ACORN International, not unlike that of the United Labor Unions, came from existing ACORN members and families and began with the election in the summer of 2001 of Alejandro Toledo as President of Peru replacing the Fujimora regime there. ACORN had pockets of Peruvian members and staff in New Jersey and California, many of whom had fled Peru for political reasons during the Fujimora dictatorship. By the fall we had an invitation to visit Lima to see if there was any way that we could help "rebuild civil society" in that country. A week filled with visits including late night sessions in the Palacio and tours of some of the largest slums in the world ended with a meeting with the Comodores Populares who ran 1500 food kitchens in low-income areas for 150,000 people daily and wanted help expanding to health and other issues. We forged a training and assistance partnership with the Comodores and with FENTAP a small union of water workers that were trying to both rebuild their membership and stop the privatization of water in various Peruvian cities.

By 2002 the initial partnerships matured into direct organizing of ACORN Peru by ACORN International in San Juan Lauragancho. Peru was followed quickly with offices opened on the United States borders in Toronto which became the first project of ACORN Canada and Tijuana, which became the first organizing project implemented by ACORN Mexico, followed several years later by work in Mexico City's Neza mega-slum. Huge numbers of ACORN members in the United States had ties to Mexico through migration, families, and frequent returns. ACORN leaders in New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Jersey from the Dominican Republic cities of Santiago, Santo Domingo, and Samana led the push to organize in that country. Elsewhere in Latin America we established an early operation in Buenos Aires in several lower income communities along the river and more recently have concentrated our work

in the giant La Matanza mega-slum. The coup in Honduras led to invitations for us to work in the capital of Tegucigalpa and the major industrial city of San Pedro Sula, where our work has been concentrated on water and public service issues in lower income communities throughout the area, as well as developing partnerships with coffee producer cooperatives in the mountains outside of the capital and close to the border of El Salvador. Most recently a very exciting, newly negotiated national partnership to build a national social movement and community-based organization in Ecuador in conjunction with the emerging progressive political formation, Ruptura<sup>25</sup>, points to major initiatives to create ACORN International organizations in Quito, Guayaquil, and Cuenca among other cities. The Ecuadorian effort could move our Latin American organizations to a substantially different level, if these plans are fully implemented in 2013.

The India FDI Watch Campaign created the relationships with partners throughout the country that led to building organizations in many communities and unions of informal workers among waste pickers, domestics, rickshaw drivers and others in the Dharavi slum in Mumbai made famous in the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, as well as in Bangalore and Delhi, where we now additionally also manage four community shelters for migrant workers. Elsewhere in Asia ACORN International manages partnerships with Asian Bridge in Korea and the Urban Poor Consortium (UPC) in Indonesia, but does not organize directly.

In Africa ACORN has organized in the giant Korogocho slum in Nairobi for the last several years largely around educational access, water, and housing issues. Other work in Liberia and Guinea has interesting implications, but has not fully formed yet.

Europe had not been an ACORN priority but initiatives developed in Prague and elsewhere in the Czech Republic in 2011 have developed an ACORN presence and several fledgling organizations. ACORN Italy also launched at about the same time focused on a campaign to win long-term rent relief for tenant families organized to bring their landlords out of the black market thanks to a new Parliamentary statute that went into effect in June. ACORN's campaign supports tenants through the process and leads to reductions in rent of 85-90% over the 8-year term of an Italian lease saving tens of thousands of euros for tenants through this "bounty" program designed to bring property onto the Italian tax rolls. In a matter of months ACORN Italy had already won several million euros worth of reductions, and based on a specially designed dues system the organization has achieved self-sufficiency within a year of its organization. Most of the work has centered in Rome where the organizing apparatus is directed along with a new effort offering legal services for members, but the seeds of the campaign have been planted in all of the major cities of Italy. The surge of civic movements in Sicily and our involvement in successful citizen elections in Paterno, outside of Catania, has also promoted extensive discussion of an ACORN Sicily's development. The Edinburgh Private Tenants Association is currently developing a plan with ACORN to build a Scotland ACORN based among tenants in Glasgow and Edinburgh. The initial campaign is focusing on creating a lower cost buyers' cooperative to be supported by the cities that would save residents 10 to 20% on

their heating and other gas bills. We're excited about what this campaign might mean in developing ACORN in this area.

The largest affiliate of ACORN International remains ACORN Canada with thriving operations and a 30,000 national membership in Toronto, Ottawa, and Vancouver-New Westminster, as well as a satellite office in Hamilton, Ontario. Victories around tenant protections in Toronto have been significant as well as the passage of the nation's first living wage ordinance in New Westminster, a working class suburb of Vancouver. On the other hand work in the United States has been campaign and project-based: affiliates and water-sewer related campaigns in Austin, Texas and the Central Coast of California; a campaign to save the last 500 units of public housing in Foote Homes in the Vance Avenue area of Memphis; work to revive the non-commercial radio station we had built in Little Rock; and, a foreclosure prevention campaign through Advocates & Actions in Phoenix, Arizona. I left ACORN in the United States in mid-2008, but with the withering attack and eventual demise of ACORN in late 2010, there has been a huge vacuum on the national level as well as in many communities where ACORN and its membership had been vital and important in advancing lower income interests and ensuring democratic norms. ACORN International's footprint in the USA is smaller, and its future direction currently is uncertain though likely to be more focused on issue-based campaigns that connect with the organizations 15 or so country-based affiliates in areas like water, public services, living wages, and housing programs.

#### *ACORN International's Global Campaigns*

The major ACORN International campaign in recent years has been the Remittance Justice Campaign. Remittances are the money transfers migrant workers and immigrant families made to their families and communities in their home countries, often on a regular basis. Existing in the gray area of transnational finance where there is non-existent international regulation and weak country by country oversight, remittances have suffered from a predatory pricing structure ripping off these families, even as transactional costs have fallen to minimal levels due to computerization and the expanse of global business. The World Bank and the G-8 countries have finally called for a 5% ceiling on costs to be achieved by 2014, but the implementation is all premised on the prices falling due to competition, so this goal setting has been toothless. ACORN International studies establish that the average costs range over 20%, though the World Bank contends the costs are more like 10%. If *in arguendo* we agreed at 10% a capping at 5% would push close to \$20 billion more into this direct person-to-person development financing and support, which would make a huge difference to developing countries and their communities. ACORN Canada has succeeded in having a bill introduced in the Ontario Parliament which would install a 5% cap. The Consumer Finance Protection Bureau has a broader disclosure program taking effect in 2014. ACORN Honduras believes a bill will be introduced in coming months. ACORN Mexico worked with a student at the Clinton School for Public Service in Little Rock to produce a well-reported study in *La Reforma* about the impact of remittances in Neza, but it is unclear what may develop there. In short there is



progress, but given the amount of money involved, there is no reason to believe that these predatory practices will end soon. Several attempts to negotiate directly with the largest MTO, Western Union, have gone poorly and no more sessions are scheduled at this time. Both Money Mart and Western Union have combined to jointly hire lobbyists to oppose the ACORN inspired bill in Ontario.

Other ACORN International reports have taken hard looks at the effectiveness of fairtrade and microfinance and their claims at reducing poverty, and found that the results were marginal and unconvincing, but neither of these efforts has developed into international campaigns. These are not areas of membership interest, but more directed at moving donor monies in more effective directions or positioning the organizations to speak on broader platforms for our members. An international campaign connecting our members would seem to focus on access and cost of water and sewerage which have different impact between the developing and developed world, but share an importance. Another around housing needs would also have traction as well as one that linked tenant concerns ranging from Italy to Scotland to the USA and Canada would be important to develop.

#### *ACORN International's Federated Structure and Obsession with Self-Sufficiency*

A key difference in ACORN International compared to ACORN is structural. ACORN was one nonprofit corporation, operating throughout the United States. ACORN International is a federation with each of its country affiliates either registered or involved in a lengthy process of registration with the laws and regulations of their individual countries. Though sharing a joint philosophy and methodology in many areas, finances are separate on the local level. ACORN International is incorporated as nonprofit, 501c3 tax exempt corporation in the United States and each affiliate is entitled to a seat on the international board. A meeting of board and staff is held annually in different countries and attendance is based on those who can afford to send delegates directly or in the alternative direct reports and action achieved through Skype calls at these meetings, held in recent years in Santiago (Dominican Republic), Lima, Tegucigalpa, and, last year in Mexico City with next year's in San Pedro Sula or Ecuador.

As a federation, there can be significant organizational differences between some of the partnership affiliations, directly supported organizations (largely in Latin America, India, and Africa), and self-supporting organizations (Italy, Czech Republic, Scotland, Ecuador). One foundational principle that has become even more pronounced in ACORN International than it was in ACORN, but which draws from the lessons learned from the political and financial attack on the organization that dried up those sources of its financial support that were not internal has been an emphasis on self-sufficiency. Membership dues remain the primary source of support, but even with an equalized dues structure, \$10 or \$15 dollars a month translated into local currencies in soles and rupees is not adequate to fund significant organizational growth and activity. Furthermore ACORN International has to independently develop resources in order to

be able to provide the support subsidies to supplement these resources in developing projects in organizing in the mega-slums.

### *ACORN International Internal Sustainability Projects*

As a step in this direction Fair Grinds Coffeehouse, the only exclusively fairtrade coffeehouse in New Orleans, was acquired for debt and began operating as a nonprofit structured as a low-profit limited liability corporation, ACORN Global Enterprises (L3C), on October 15, 2011. Since that time ACORN Global Enterprises through Fair Grinds has donated on a monthly basis 30% to 40% of the developing office support subsidies to ACORN International. Efforts to lower costs and increase contributions, consistent with the mission of the organization, through direct trade with partner producer cooperatives, increased fairtrade coffee supplies at the Port of New Orleans and similar initiatives have not yet enhanced operations, though may in coming years. More immediately, ACORN Global Enterprises is taking on more debt to improve profitability at the original location and to expand by January 2013 to a second location on a long-term lease basis closer to the university communities in uptown New Orleans that might more enthusiastically support fairtrade coffee and the mission of Fair Grinds and ACORN Global Enterprises. The hope is that the second location might be able to move the internally generated resource closer to 50% before in 2013.

Perhaps even more exciting are current discussions with a major nonprofit service provider of mental health, veterans, elderly, and housing services about a partnership in a New Orleans development along the Mississippi River on Tchoupitoulas Avenue, where we would open a coffeehouse operation combined with other income producing options in a very large warehouse space, including the ability to access, acquire, and manage a coffee roasting facility and a bakery. The roasting facility would lower our costs significantly and further our goals of direct trade with Latin American producer cooperatives for our New Orleans operations and for their internal and national market for coffee. Similarly, the ability to operate a bakery on the property would also lower our food production costs and theirs, supporting all three Fair Grinds locations better and moving us closer to 100% self-sufficiency for our operational support. Other features of this location might include a small bookstore, craft or specialized beer in the evenings, and direct meals along with our signature community space access and community support. These partnership discussions are at early stages but very encouraging and could lead to staged developments between spring and fall of 2013.

An additional opportunity for self-support might lie in the ability to operate a bio-diesel operation in this partnership. In 2011 ACORN International acquired a mobile bio-diesel unit through a combination of donation and debt with the capacity to generate 20,000 gallons of diesel fuel per month. Market and space challenges have prevented full operations over the last year, but a deep partnership and potential space availability might allow this project to succeed and generate the revenues we had projected earlier. In a similar vein the success with Fair Grinds and our discussions with some of the cooperatives have led our operations in

Tegucigalpa, Lima, and Mexico City to try to develop relationships that build ACORN *cafe* operations in kiosks or stationery locations to create needed resource and expansion support for these operations.

### *Parting Thoughts on Future Progress*

In looking at the next stages of organizational development, it seems clear that unless community organizations, like ACORN International and its affiliates, can create sufficient resources and succeed in building these resources to the level and scale that would allow the organizations to reach the breadth and influence that ACORN in the United States was building at its peak, then the goal of building real power and achieving solutions that meaningfully address the income and issue needs of low-and-moderate income families around the country is a hollow one. The emerging institutional vacuum for social change created by weakening labor unions, media outlets, donor communities, and progressive religious institutions, and will also cripple the hopes of creating transformational constituency organizations, including those like ACORN build by merging community and labor methodologies successfully.

Without the ability to build autonomous organizations directed by the decision of low-and-moderate income members in their own interest, we are constructing organizational charades play acting on the side stages of politics and commerce. A lack of financial self-determination makes a mockery of organizational autonomy and independence, and as we have all painfully learned, even the strongest and largest of community organizations like ACORN can be brought to heel and eviscerated. Events of recent years have taught the ability to move people is only one part of the equation, and an irrelevant component, if it is not also matched by the ability to not only move money and other resources, but in fact to control and develop these resources. ACORN International is committed, despite the difficulty of this road, to create this next iteration of organizational development along these lines, more consistent with its founding philosophy and practice, and over forty years of work.