CHAPTER 13

The Role of Local Organizing

House-to-House with Boots on the Ground

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A Generator Kicks in on Jourdan Avenue on New Year's Eve

At midnight on New Year's Eve, four families stood in front of their houses on Jourdan Avenue in the deepest part of the now infamous Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans. The fog was everywhere as it collected from the Mississippi River only blocks away and from the Industrial Canal a mere few feet away from what was left of a limping and failed levee. With them were ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) organizers and leaders who had worked to see this night come after four months of fighting all comers since the storms. After Katrina, the entire area had increasingly been written off, seeming to go down for the count time after time, yet now it was spiritedly bouncing back.

The weather was not cold, but it was wet and damp. Near midnight, when elsewhere in the city fireworks traditionally lit up the sky, the families nodded silently as ACORN Services turned the crank on a generator at the back of a panel truck with "ACORN Mobile Action Center" painted on its side. Suddenly there were lights—and life—everywhere in four Jourdan Avenue houses. These were the first houses revived in an area inexplicably barred from entry by armed National Guardsmen and New Orleans Police barricades. This section of the Lower 9th Ward had been near one of the

several breaks in the Industrial Canal, and water had poured through in sudden and lethal waves, obliterating houses, families, and everything else in its way.

The factors that brought these first families back home on New Year's Eve speaks to the critical fight being waged by grassroots organizations trying to bring New Orleans back. It speaks to the critical role that must be played by local organizers in the reconstruction and the fight to obtain a future for communities where low- and moderate-income families, especially African-American ones, live and work.

Running from the Storm

ACORN has operated its national headquarters from New Orleans since 1978 after opening its New Orleans office in 1975. In its 30 years, New Orleans ACORN built an organization of 9,000 dues-paying families rooted in virtually every part of the city. New Orleans ACORN had played a strong role at every level of local social, economic, and political life for years, leading efforts to raise the minimum wage, winning lead abatement, reviving abandoned houses, increasing home ownership, and engaging neighborhood improvements and participation at every level.

Suddenly, at the ebb of the storm, ACORN found itself unmoored from its members, its offices, its staff, and every landmark along the way. A disproportionate number of the over 480,000 residents who now became part of the great New Orleans diaspora were the low- and moderate-income ACORN families and their neighbors in communities throughout the city.

This was a city with a long history of hurricanes, with names like past generations of Hollywood starlets—Betsy and Camille particularly—names not common now, but on every tongue around 40 years ago. People were veterans. They didn't cut and run when the storm hit. Most people did end up leaving, though others were caught, not so much in the storm, but in the unexpected floods as the levees collapsed. So for hundreds of thousands of people, most dramatically in the Superdome and Convention Center, but most prosaically everywhere else, there was suddenly a "city in exile." People had just the clothes on their back for a couple of days on the road, and were now trapped outside of the storm line, unable to return for some indeterminate amount of time, glued to television news, Google maps, and newspapers, trying to divine the amount of water that might be in their bedrooms.

People and Property

Local organizing starts on the block and moves from house to house as families come together in the neighborhood or unit to unit in buildings and housing projects. People come and go due to a whole variety of reasons—work, welfare, whatever—but the address is there, and the family leaving will be replaced by another one, not so unlike the one before, moving in behind them. Years of organizing produces lists on turn-out, meetings, issues, phone calls, fundraisers, dues payers, and sundry other categories. A database pushes them all together in categories that allow leaders to survey, committees to call and assemble, and organizers to constantly massage and visit.

Then, overnight, it was washed away. And, just as suddenly, community organizers for whom it is *all about people* were also caught in the paradox of having depended, perhaps too much, on property, with populations defined as much by physical space as by personal contact. The addresses may still exist or they may have washed away. Phones no longer operated, rendering hundreds of call and walk lists immediately useless. Cell phone towers were down and would be so for months. Lower-income people rarely had e-mail addresses before the storm. Almost any tool used in the past to connect people with each other suddenly became useless. For ACORN, as one example, the real answer to the riddle of how one finds 9,000 families is that you cannot. Amazingly, however, the several thousand members who were paying their dues by bank draft in New Orleans have been totally steadfast, without one cancellation!

This problem affected every level of public life. Elections were delayed due to the inability to locate the citizens in the diaspora. Red Cross lists have been either spotty or nonexistent. FEMA has refused to release names and addresses to any private or public authorities because of privacy rights guarantees, and one doubts that they have any information other than the address of residents to which they sent checks.

The collapse of many social networks in the absence of communication and the ways in which people were still able to reach out to others is one of the most interesting—and unexamined—phenomena rising from Katrina, and is likely to still play a huge role in whether or not the city can come back from this tragedy. Yet the mobilization to rebuild social and community networks is huge. A Chevron retiree meeting had double the normal attendance at its first meeting three months after the storms. A community garden club trying to meet for the first time in a Gentilly neighborhood had a record crowd and drew attendance from as far away Lafayette and Baton Rouge. In December 2005, new member sign-ups in New Orleans

led ACORN nationally and surged, responding to ACORN's leadership on the ground and their struggles to reclaim their neighborhoods.

Faith-based organizations faced perhaps more difficult challenges. Without direct memberships, except through religious institutions *per se*, their gatekeeper was the priest, nun, or pastor of the physical institution. When these institutions were washed away, frequently the clerics were gone with them. The Methodists had 60 pastors in New Orleans who were left churchless. Reverend Fred Luther, pastor of the 7,000-member Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, the largest African-American congregation in the local Southern Baptist denomination, had to preach from Birmingham and throughout the South, and the doors were shuttered until after Thanksgiving 2005, when the first clean up efforts began. In New York City, I ran into a Muslim imam whose mosque was located several blocks from our office. He said he would be stuck there for quite a long time.

The crisis faced by faith-based community organizations like People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO) and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), both of which had affiliates in the New Orleans area, was acute. Their support and their base were institutional. When the congregations washed away, the institutions no longer existed, and neither did the base under them. PICO in particular joined with ACORN during the crisis and worked on several important events. PICO also managed to assemble several meetings of its pastoral base in Washington, where it witnessed and lobbied effectively. The IAF reached out in a rare collaborative gesture, offering to follow ACORN's lead on issues around housing and mortgage financing. In an act of solidarity, the Gameliel Foundation, which does not organize specifically in the New Orleans area, was generous in its financial support for ACORN's Hurricane Recovery and Rebuilding Fund. The challenge faced by all community organizing efforts is captured in the irony that in a time when people most need a voice and are called on to act, the obstacles faced by the scattering of so many people diluted the voices when they most needed to be heard.

Other local community based institutions fared no better. Unions were decimated. The strongest, United Teachers of New Orleans, faces termination of 7,500 public school workers' jobs. Construction and trade locals are merging with their Baton Rouge counterparts, since they either cannot fill job calls because their members are scattered or face the loss of their traditional contractors and therefore work. Local 100 of the Service Employees has faced layoffs of City workers, garbage workers, transportation workers, and janitorial workers. The non-profit sector was devastated. The Zoo, Aquarium, United Way, and Catholic Charities, all of which had been forces in the community, find themselves in deep restructuring and

experiencing massive layoffs. Ironically, as the demand for services has increased, the suppliers of social services have collapsed.

What worked? Nothing well! But some things have taught us lessons for the future.

New Orleans ACORN was able to set up the technology to send out text messages to otherwise inoperable cell numbers and received 200 replies from all around the country. Text messaging works even when normal cell service collapses. Who knew? Immediately moving a message board on the ACORN website (www.acorn.org) allowed people to reach out to each other. The website also became a rallying spot, attracting offers of help and support.

Given the collapse of local institutions and infrastructure, the value of national organizations, networks, and relationships in supporting local work acquired tremendous importance. In ACORN's case, having offices throughout the region suddenly took on new meaning, because it meant that there were offices, leaders, and organizers in what had suddenly become the evacuation route of the diaspora—not only in Louisiana, but also in Little Rock, Dallas, San Antonio, Atlanta, Birmingham, and Houston. As buses pulled into the Astrodome in Houston for example, ACORN members waving ACORN flags and wearing ACORN t-shirts were able to quickly identify members from New Orleans caught in the crises. Parachuting a dozen housing counselors into Houston from the ACORN Housing Corporation meant that we could handle the myriad issues around mortgages, credit, and daily concerns that people now suddenly found themselves confronting. Similarly, Scott Reed of PICO told us that he and many of their national network staff had been dispatched to Louisiana to support their affiliates in the aftermath of the storm. The IAF worked hard to leverage its historic presence in Texas cities to connect to evacuee efforts, particularly in Houston.

The backbone and heart of a membership organization like ACORN was demonstrated as thousands of members from every office called, volunteering to take in brother and sister members if they somehow showed up in this or that city, whether San Francisco, Vancouver, New York, or points in between. The generosity of the requests was overwhelming and heartwarming. The membership immediately understood it was about people, not property, and responded accordingly. As hard as it was to locate New Orleans ACORN members around the country, it was easy to find ACORN members in all of our cities who had opened their homes. At an organizing committee meeting in Houston shortly after the storms, 12 of 15 people present reported that they had Katrina survivors living with them at the time. New Orleans people have been located by simply going door-to-door in some lower- and moderate-income neighborhoods in Houston, Dallas, Atlanta,

and Little Rock. Big issues and policies all boiled down quickly to person-to-person human needs and responses. Not a lesson exactly, but a reminder that is invaluable.

Surprisingly, the day-to-day requests created a tension not easily resolved between the "home" team and the "away" team. New Orleans ACORN wanted to see families allowed a voice and a way to come home, which was readily supported. At the same time, sitting in a shelter, members wanted to get out of a public facility immediately, regardless of the location. Balancing the New Orleans demand of the *right of return*, while at the same time demanding adequate care now in the "host location" continues to be a policy paradox and pressure point between well-meaning, yet contentious, interests.

The City of Houston, under Mayor Bill White, stood as an interesting organizing contrast to Mayor Kip Holden of East Baton Rouge Parish. Hardly a week had passed since Katrina made landfall when Mayor White stood in front of a crowd of New Orleans evacuees and supporters from Houston ACORN at a September 9th Town Hall Meeting—prepared with specific proposals and resources to address the immediate demands he knew he would hear about, including housing and food cards for host families. Throughout the crisis, White seemed to bend over backward to accommodate every demand and *keep* the Katrina survivors in his city. In daily 8:00 AM meetings that included ACORN, business leaders, and other civic authorities, White would crack the whip to move goods and services to evacuees, with speed and efficiency being the first premium, ahead of equity. Without waiting for FEMA, the City of Houston stood behind one-year rental commitments to fill the city's backlog of vacancies through the apartment association, where 9,000 units had stood open before the hurricanes. Hundreds of our members have told us how hard it is to come home until they have "spent" the year of rent provided by the City.

On the other hand, Baton Rouge, which had even more refugees than Houston, seemed virtually to resent the intrusion, the traffic, and everything but the sudden income from so many additional residents. There was no outreach or welcome or real assistance. The location of the first FEMA trailer park on the outskirts of East Baton Rouge Parish in Baker, far from jobs and transportation services, was emblematic of the problems there. Inevitably, putting people at the center of these plans depends on the strength and capacity of local organizing—and, it turns out, local government as well. The weakness of our New Orleans city government was crippling, but we learned interesting lessons from our neighbors.

Doing What Had to be Done

As the community imploded, there was virtually no area of its operation that did not collapse and require citizen action and intervention. The infrastructure's demise was transparent, like looking at a skeletal x-ray. Quickly, for example, there were no schools, and therefore no children. Then there were no charter schools because children were the ultimate source of money; and then, before one knew it, one could telescope the future for five years because the charters could not be re-evaluated until the end of such a period, when once again people would be able to vote. Over and over again in New Orleans, we see institutions stripped bare. The organizing response was different in every case. Here are some examples from the ACORN experience:

- *Mortgage and Credit Issues:* ACORN and the ACORN Housing Corporation (AHC) began making calls immediately after the storm surge to prime and subprime mortgage-holders in order to first secure a 90-day forbearance period and then an additional extension into 2006. Most large companies quickly agreed, even on the subprime side, led by Ameriquest. Scofflaws like Ocwen Mortgage and Homecoming Mortgage that attempted to skirt the agreements or add on prepayment penalties were immediate targets and folded quickly. The problem was huge and real: Where people owed mortgages and had been outside of the flood plain, but were now underwater with levee failure, how would they satisfy the mortgage, maintain their credit, and start over? Where would mortgage-holders settle, while allowing a family's credit scores to be maintained at pre-Katrina levels, giving them the opportunity to either rebuild or start over? When 10 AHC housing and loan counselors arrived at the Houston Astrodome and Convention Center to assist the ten already on the ground, they were inundated with questions that will continue to be asked for months and years after the storm, which all swirl around these basic realities and uncertainties. Interestingly, HUD initially requested a multimillion-dollar proposal from AHC to provide a similar set of services throughout the evacuee footprint, but then quickly reneged, saying only that they were budgeted out and that FEMA would not support such services to evacuees. Within weeks of the storms, ACORN officials met with a top officer of one of the world's largest banks the day after they had written off more than $200 million in the Katrina footprint about the problem of land-banking and mortgage and loan problems in the recovery and rebuilding. He frankly replied that because they did not have

much of an investment in the area, he had not really given the problem any thought. It was sobering to find one of the world's unique disasters simply part of the mundane background noise of New York. These will be issues for years.

- *Organizing Survivors:* An ongoing organizing challenge has been to create organization and support for evacuees from city to city. There are few states that have not received evacuees, but the overwhelming concentrations are in Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Georgia, and elsewhere in the south. The IAF was active early on in Houston, seeking to mobilize support in that city around resources for the shelters. PICO and its Louisiana affiliates organized an early meeting in Baton Rouge of hundreds from its statewide church network to demand action from Governor Blanco. ACORN initially began by organizing "town hall" meetings in over 30 cities around the country, from California to New York, but largely in the Katrina evacuee trail. In Delaware, ACORN demanded a new emergency evacuation plan. In Portland, ACORN won opening of the shelters on a 24-hour basis. These town hall meetings focused on examining how the issues of race and class played out in these cities, compared to what people were seeing and experiencing in New Orleans. The meetings in Texas, Georgia, Arkansas, and Mississippi laid the groundwork for building the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association. In Houston, a meeting of over 300 evacuees launched the efforts there. In Baton Rouge, meetings were held with hundreds within days of the storm. The vast depopulation of New Orleans was met with a surge in other cities, and organizers and leaders, particularly those who understood the issues because of local relationships and national networks, responded quickly and aggressively.
- *Meeting Immediate Issues:* FEMA has been a moving target in many early campaigns. New Orleans in the early period was more of a "federal" city than Washington, DC. FEMA ran the show and paid the bills, from picking up garbage to street clearance to the individual checks that made it possible to both run and then stay away from the city. The National Guard provided the early security for the city and its vast and vacant acreage. A critical role has been played by lawyers, particularly Bill Quigley and his associates at the Loyola University Law Clinic, who filed, with ACORN and other groups as plaintiffs, to win early halts to tenant evictions and to bulldozing certain neighborhoods, and produced other procedural victories that were critical in winning the time to create the space for organizational work. Houston ACORN

led two large direct actions of frustrated evacuees at the regional FEMA headquarters to win support of faster housing assistance. Dallas and San Antonio ACORN similarly pushed for housing guarantees on the same basis created by the Houston initiative in advance of the FEMA stall. Actions by groups of all descriptions have pushed FEMA steadily on the issue of providing trailers for temporary housing in the neighborhoods. Initially, FEMA had proposed virtually permanent relocations in neighboring states and throughout the diaspora, but fairly quickly direct community action on one hand and the rapidly worn-out welcome from our neighbors led a slow movement back to locations as near to home as possible in neighborhood parks, lots, front yards, side alleys, and anywhere else a trailer might fit. The provision of vouchers and support for hotel rooms has been an interesting struggle. FEMA has announced several dates for evictions, and thus far had to retract its threats every single time. Actions by evacuees in all of the cities have produced results here. The problem with FEMA as a target is that by definition it is an emergency and temporary presence, no matter how powerful, and therefore operates from the premise that it can run from accountability with impunity.

- *Making a Plan for the Rebuilding:* It quickly became clear that residents of many of the devastated communities were desperate to begin rebuilding and return home, but lacked the information and tools to evaluate the nuts and bolts of how to achieve these goals. They were also standing in a gale-force wind whipped up by developers, the local newspaper, and others that were sending the message that it was foolhardy to return and that bulldozing whole neighborhoods was the real solution. The ACORN Community Forum on Rebuilding New Orleans, held at the LSU Conference Center on November 7–8, 2005, and co-sponsored by the LSU School of Art and Design, the Pratt Center in New York City, and the Cornell University Planning Department, brought together 50 top experts around the country in engineering, disaster planning, architecture, job creation, and urban planning, paired with 50 survivors from New Orleans. Thousands more participated via webcast (www.acorn/katrina.org) in 30 cities around the country where evacuees were living. The overwhelming professional opinion that emerged from the forum was that the heart of the problem was levee failure which resulted from poor design and construction, and that it could be repaired to meet security needs in all neighborhoods. The overwhelming opinion from residents is that they wanted a voice, they wanted the right to return, and they wanted

help in rebuilding their homes and lives in New Orleans. Partnerships for the future were constructed to make plans, particularly in four key areas that were the subject of the forum: New Orleans East, the 9th Ward, Gentilly, and Upper Carrollton-Hollygrove.

- *Campaigning on the Right to Return:* Within this mandate, the project beginning at the aftermath of the storms and likely to continue for many years in the future revolves around winning the right of return for residents. The overriding concern has been to secure a voice for residents in and outside of New Orleans about their issues and needs around returning. The first issue related to actions by FEMA officials in Texas and Louisiana and had to do with the pace and progress of relief efforts. The need for FEMA-provided trailers *in* the city has been central to allowing people to return to jobs that may still remain in the city, and access to homes that desperately need constant attention and repair. Preventing further deterioration of the housing stock has also been an overarching concern. One issue concerned the provision of "blue tarps" by FEMA for use as temporary cover for damaged roofs. Amazingly, it turned out that, at the same time that 50,000 tarps had been provided along the Gulf Coast, there were only 7,000 in New Orleans. Research done by ACORN found that FEMA subcontractors were not able to tarp roofs of slate or asbestos tile, both of which are ubiquitous in the older housing stock of New Orleans, leading ACORN to demand a change in standards. It became clear quickly that a program to support the "right to return" was essential. The ACORN Clean-Out and Demonstration Project sprang from this concern and the earlier community forum. If clusters of homes could be assembled in the four targeted areas that were among the hardest hit, and we could prove that houses could be cleaned out, saved, and prepared for rebuilding for residents at a reasonable price—which we set at $2,500 per property—then at the ground level we could offset the grandiose visions of destruction being promoted by so many businesses, developers, and conservative forces. The ACORN Project focused on a goal of 1,000 houses, and within weeks, soaring demand and constant lines in the Elysian Fields headquarters as the office reopened made us revise the program to 2,000 homes, assuming resources could be found. Volunteers were recruited both locally and from college campuses, including University of Connecticut, Sarah Lawrence, Cornell, Columbia, and now hundreds of young people from Tulane, Xavier, and other local institutions as they return to the city.

- *Taking the Fight on the Road:* One of the constant demands of citizens which has emerged at one community meeting after another inside and outside of the city has been to "speak truth to power." Within a month or so of the storms, a delegation of PICO ministers went to Washington, DC to meet with the Louisiana congressional delegation. Similarly, ACORN dispatched survivors from Baton Rouge, Houston, Dallas, and Little Rock to Washington and to one expert conference after another to express their emotions (including rage) and offer ideas for addressing the disaster. In February 2006, ACORN led a delegation of 400 survivors to Washington to hearings sponsored by Senator Mary Landrieu and a number of individual Congresspeople. This list does not include hundreds of other meetings, conferences, press calls, neighborhood tours, and all manner of activity where in many cases ACORN members are the only people on the ground and in the community who can speak to and represent life—and the struggle to live—in the city today. Local organizing in many ways has become the social fabric tying together a far-flung people, their homes, and their hopes for their community.

House to House

During the ACORN Community Forum on Rebuilding New Orleans, several things became crystal-clear. One was that the levees had failed, in one of the engineers' words, because "everything that could go wrong did go wrong." There were structural, design, and construction flaws in the levees. They had not been overtopped, they had been undermined. This was something that could be fixed to an acceptable level, and if that was achieved, then, with other adaptations, communities could be habitable again—all of the communities.

Despite the fact that a confluence of natural forces and human frailties combined to flood the city in the *aftermath* of the hurricane itself, these events offered opportunities for assorted special interests to attempt to achieve what they had sought *before* the storm, using the storm as rationalization for their advocacy. Developers, "new urbanists," the whiter, richer "Disneyland by the River" advocates, school "reformers," good government wonks, the hospitality interests, and the financial interests on Poydras Avenue could all push forward in the void created by the storm to advance ideas that had been disregarded and vetoed in the past. Slum clearance would have a place in public policy again. Near-town public housing projects like Lafitte and Iberville could finally be captured for mixed use, upper-income developments because of their proximity to the French

Quarter, as long advocated by developer Press Kabacoff. Schools could be seized in the name of the crisis. As James Reis, a prominent Uptown voice, indicated to the *Wall Street Journal,* this was the opportunity to create a whiter and richer city. Reis, to everyone's shock, became a member of Mayor Nagin's committee reviewing recovery, which has led this whitewashing effort under the leadership of mega-developer, Joe Canizaro. If this is reminiscent of anything, it is the same strategy used by President Bush in exploiting the tragedy of 9/11 to pursue a grudge match war in Iraq. This has become the policy of *non sequitur.* Such a program could also win by default, because no action, and no resources, meant that nothing would happen. Developers would be able to come in and buy up the properties from hapless owners and landlords for a pittance. Unless we could prove that people could and would rebuild these houses in these areas, that would be the future. To counter such policy initiatives created in boardrooms, behind government halls and ivy walls, could only be trumped on the ground, house by house.

Here the order of the chicken and the egg was clear. Any rebuilding first depended on stopping the deterioration from the flood-ravished homes from advancing further through inaction. No repairs on the roofs meant more water damage from the topside in New Orleans' heavy rainfalls. The city's humidity also meant that unless the houses were opened up, aired out, and treated now, mold would take over and make the repairs either prohibitive or small-scale biohazards for the returning residents. If families trying to come home to their properties could be married to some ability to stave off further damage, then rebuilding would be possible. It would take a grassroots effort, but the grassroots were in one place and the properties were in another.

ACORN had some advantages. The creation of the ACORN Institute's Hurricane Recovery and Rebuilding Fund meant that we had some immediate resources we could make available to prime the pump. Individuals had pitched in more than $300,000 on the Internet. Our partners in housing and lending programs and other ventures had contributed more than a million dollars. One key donor invested a critical million into the organizing program to contact the survivors. Other foundations, large and small, contributed additional resources to assist ACORN's headquarters to be reconstructed so that we would be back in full-scale operations quickly. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development and similar church-based programs pitched in to support offices in the impacted areas. The Tides Foundation made an appeal through their Shelter Fund to support the ACORN Clean-Out and Demonstration Project.

ACORN also had people to do the work, and do it well, quickly, and as cheaply as possible because of its network of contacts and experience in

housing development in New York, Phoenix, and Chicago. Most critically, ACORN also knew the people who wanted to come home. The investment in increased organizing capacity in Louisiana and Texas, as well as the growing ACORN survivors' network, meant that we were in touch with hundreds and thousands of families who were looking to come home and needed a hand to help make it there. The goal of cleaning out more than 1,000 houses by the end of March 2006 in four critical areas—9th Ward, New Orleans East, Upper Carrollton-Hollygrove, and Gentilly—seems well within reach if the resources become available. Each house clean-out costs $2,500. In the first month, 200 houses were done, and ACORN is scrambling to raise the millions and prove our point: Houses can be rebuilt, people want to come home, and the city can live again. Others are less happy, and the reasons are clear. City inspectors, police, and others stop the ACORN vehicles regularly now as small pockets begin to establish larger beachheads and then expand rapidly into small cores, proving that the neighbors and the neighborhoods can make it.

Fight for the Future!

In the muddle of "*non sequitur*" policy making, nothing has become more freighted with both conflict and importance than the question of a "shrinking footprint" for the city. Mayor Ray Nagin appointed a committee to advise him on a host of subjects not only about rebuilding but about other flashpoints for various elites in the city. The consultant hired by big-time developer Joe Canizaro, the Mayor's Committee Chair, was the Urban Land Institute, which he had previously chaired. What is at stake now has become more obvious with the revelation of the Urban Land Institute's report. The ULI recommendations to the Mayor's Come Home Committee have earned the controversy they have stirred for reasons both simple and complex. At the simplest level, they are arguing for a staged developmental process in which the highest ground is privileged over the rest of the city, and they are doing so with a *noblesse oblige* attitude, which amounts to a cavalier cynicism. In a poor and financially strapped city, their recommendations are transparent. There is *no* money for one stage of development, much less three. Their argument that properties should be purchased at pre-Katrina prices is purely gratuitous. All of that is mere subterfuge, fooling few, but allowing developers and elites camouflage for their agendas. Their recommendations become clearer as one examines their fundamental anti-democratic bias. The ULI does not want the citizens to vote on these plans, fearing the outcome will be less than perfect planning. Furthermore, they want to continue the program of post-Katrina authoritarianism, which has destroyed the public school system and created the largest

charter school system in the country. They want to have the finances of the city and its redevelopment taken out of the hands of public officials and put in an unaccountable body. The ULI and its gang really don't like New Orleans as they understand it, and see the city, its citizens, and its culture as much of a problem as the ravages of the storm. Members of the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association struck a responsive chord when they turned out to denounce the ULI plan at each stop of the national tour of hearings conducted by the Bring Back New Orleans Commission.

Months of fighting have proven that there is deep grassroots resistance to the developers, their bulldozers, and their tract house dreams. The endorsement by any elected official of such a blatant land grab would guarantee a quick exit from elected office. Instead, there is now a dangerous dare on the table—part bluff and part brass. Communities, and the home owners and renters living there, would have a year, maybe two or three, to see what kind of progress can be made in any area anywhere in the city to try and rebuild and come back. The developers and big shots would then determine by an unknown set of standards whether an area has demonstrated that it is coming back or not. Presumably, part of the measurement will be the simple one: Are people living there? Joe Canizaro argued earlier in the process that the communities that make it should be supported and the neighborhoods that don't should be bought out and essentially "cashed out" for the cost of their effort.

Looking forward from 2006, the fight seems clear, even if grossly unfair. If we can prove that our neighborhoods can be rebuilt where they are, and the way people want them, then we win, which means that we get to live in New Orleans, too. But whether we like the deal or not, we have no choice but to play, because the stakes are essentially "winner take all," and fortunately, every house counts, and it will be a house-to-house battle. We are now winning, even against the odds. But we are only winning in the neighborhood, not in the public debate. Finally, the more boots we can put on the ground, the better our chances of success.

Today, the fight is still rearguard. Every day our crews with ACORN Services and our organizers doing the clean-outs are also advising home owners of what they need to do in order to prove that their house was less than 50% damaged, and therefore eligible for repair—and insurance! Every day we are forced to measure the progress in inches while trying to travel miles. On the one hand, we are buoyed by the constant offers of help from architects, planners, lawyers, students, filmmakers, and others who want to help the citizens and save the city, while on the other, we still count the areas without electricity and gas in miles. We have ceased to believe that telephones are anything other than quaint rarities. We venture to the

West Bank or Metairie and look at all the activity of the city the way it was, as if we were foreigners now traveling in a strange land.

For the 5–10 houses now being saved by the project every day or the 1,000 or 2,000 we hope to handle in the Demonstration Project, we realize there are 100,000 that need the same work. Meanwhile, years will be spent begging, borrowing, and stealing the resources for these houses. If these houses are saved, then where does the money come from for the next steps: rebuilding the sealed and protected shell up to the point where a family can move back in again? There the deck is stacked once again, but the current round has to be won in order to get to that next high-stakes pot.

The actual recommendations to Mayor Ray Nagin cut the timeline for determination to a four-month planning process in 13 individual districts, some of which still have virtually no residents, to determine the plans for people to return. This part of the process appears to have no hope of success given the unrealistic mission and preposterous timeline. The committee additionally recommended that no building permits be issued during the period in order to try and stop continued development. The Mayor was quickly forced to abandon that recommendation, and the City Council unanimously passed a resolution continuing to demand that *all* areas of the city be rebuilt.

In some ways there is now a face-off between one elite faction drawing castles in the air against ground troops of determined residents in one neighborhood after another sticking to their ground and facing the future and forcing the planners' mirage to be reshaped in the light of the residents' homes and stubborn, determined vision. Grassroots efforts in Lakeview, a white, upper-middle-income redoubt, have forced the Mayor's hand as he tries to find a future. A similar gritty effort in New Orleans East organized around the Maria Goleta Parish, without a working church but with the strong support of the local chapter of All Congregations Together, the PICO affiliate, inspires the same hope, along with all of the other efforts in different communities.

Vote by Vote

There is only one equalizer, and here local organizing has the opportunity to finally level the playing field, though again the odds are long.

Elections, for local, state and federal offices, despite fierce voter anger, likely will not produce seismic differences in the players because the field is weak, underfunded, and confused. This is obviously not a normal situation.

Demographically, New Orleans was around two-thirds African-American, and new estimates are that the city may be less than one-third African-American. The actual outcome of the elections over the next several

years may rise and fall on the power of the absentee ballots case by evacuees in cities around the country, and their willingness to continue to see themselves as New Orleanians. Once again, this is where the other side of the ACORN coin toss lands heads-up, because it allows the fight to be waged on a different battleground outside of the usual boundaries of normal elections. If New Orleans voters can be found and mobilized for these elections, particularly in Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, and other large evacuee locations, then the political reality will not be just located on the high ground away from the flooding, but also on the low ground where New Orleans once thrived. Politicians would be forced to campaign on their abilities to bring people home, not their willingness to kowtow to developers, tourism moguls, and Uptown wannabes. Leveraging the ability to get to voters where there are no lists, mailing addresses, phone numbers, or even televisions, against the best package of programs, policies, and resources that will help a family and its community rebuild their homes and neighborhoods, could give ACORN and its allies a real opportunity to finally win back the city.

There is going to continue to be a constant tug of war between interests, both of class and race, over the future of the city. This impact will not be limited solely to New Orleans. Jefferson Parish will face the same post-Katrina election impact in two years. Governor Blanco will win or lose her 2007 re-election effort based on the long shadow of the storm. Senator Mary Landrieu would be difficult to re-elect if there is no longer a New Orleans with an overwhelmingly African-American and Democratic voting bloc. Everything changed, but at the same time, the demand to return, the demand for a voice, and the rising expectations of government will mean that there will be no easy way to predict elections or the shape of the electorate for quite some time. This may not be what the business elites and financial forces want, but it will be the reality in New Orleans, south Louisiana, and therefore much of the rest of the state for a long, long time.

When you are moving from house to house, family to family, neighborhood to neighborhood with boots on the ground, what finally makes the difference may not be the money, may not be the planners, may not be the FEMA maps, insurance dollars, but the strength of new and existing organizations that are moving forward daily to meet a special situation and circumstance. The people are moving with their gloves on to rebuild the city, but when it comes to protecting their homes and community, there is every reason to believe that in the coming years, the gloves are coming off.

Thank goodness!