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# The Methods of Building Leadership and Organization

*5 Ingredients in the Poor Organizing the  
Poor*

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## *Introduction*

- Identify strategic objectives and strategic forces (people) whose socio-economic position compels them as a group or class to fight for those objectives.
- Determine specific grouping of people and places to concentrated organizing activities "playing the piano" in terms of ensuring all 5 ingredients of organizing are established.
- Identify potential leaders and active people interested in fighting and organizing.
- Investigate, survey, and frame issues of struggle, figure and carry out the tactical actions possible and necessary to fight the issues. .
- Identify actual leaders and further improve the composition of the Team of organizers.
- Politically expand and consolidate unity and organization through continuous struggle and organizing activities.

A) Basic Solutions (Basic Goals or Missions) can only be accomplished through the successful fight for specific Objectives with specific Forces and Means of Struggle. This strategy must in turn be translated into concrete tactical objectives and concentration areas, issues, and means of struggle. The major steps involved in actual organizing activities require that all five ingredients be considered.

B) Based on our past experiences of organizing the fight of the homeless and poor, the above is roughly the order for the major steps to be taken. By taking the first two steps, through investigation and study, the organizers become equipped to carry out their essential duty. That is to utilize "the teachable moments" throughout the building of the movement to raise consciousness about the socio-economic and political roots, meanings, and interrelations of the problems, issues, and their solutions.

The most important and fundamental fact of life today is the electronic economic revolution. This great revolution is ripping apart and throwing into permanent crisis every aspect of society. Corporations today are compelled by competition to "downsize" by employing labor-replacing devices of electronic technology to cut production costs and maximize profits. Human labor is made increasingly unnecessary, and homeless. This development is creating the new poor.

As people are hurled permanently outside of the workforce, adequate paying jobs cease to be their source of economic survival. Under these conditions, forms of organization and struggle based on collective bargaining and negotiated peace settlements between the rich and poor become impossible. There can be no collective bargaining between the employer and the permanently unemployed. There can be no negotiated peace settlements between city hall and the downtown business interests on one hand, and the forgotten, impoverished communities on the other.

Clearly, the socio-economic position of the new poor demands new forms of organization and struggle based on taking what they need. These forms become increasingly political as they are compelled to violate unjust property laws that uphold the interests of the rich and powerful.

Currently, we can see those cast outside the money-based system already moving to take what they need to survive. One prominent example is the recent explosion of illegal squatting taking place in empty homes

across the United States. Another such example was the Los Angeles rebellion of 1992. Anyone living on welfare knows that at the end of the month you run out of basic necessities. The rebellion erupted on April 29th and tied up the distribution of food stamps and welfare stamps. Tens of thousands were placed in a still more desperate situation. Many illegally took what they needed — baby food, diapers, shoes, clothing, etc.

### ***Two Strategic Principles***

Our experience in grappling with this new economic and political situation has revealed two strategic, political principles from which five key organizing principles are derived. The two strategic principles are: 1) Poverty victims must be at the forefront of the struggle to end poverty; and 2) you only get what you're organized to take.

The first principle regarding the leadership of poverty victims as a social class basically answers the requirements of today and is consistent with history:

“The history of this country is replete with examples of social *problems* being brought to a successful conclusion only when led by those Americans most victimized by the problems. British colonialism was defeated under the leadership of those who were victimized by colonialism. American slavery was abolished with the heroic efforts of slaves and former slaves in the forefront of the struggle. The fight for women's suffrage was successful fully led by women. The same was true of the 1930's strikes for union rights and the

Poverty Now! decided to set up tent cities, as bases of operation, to begin to identify and educate a team of organizers, and to start up a network o' supportive organization who assisted in consolidating resources for tent cities, such as blankets, food and tent shelter. The effectiveness of the core in Operation Michigan Storm was directly related to their ability to successfully "play the piano" of 5 key ingredients thereby ensuring the political development and organization of the struggle.

### **SUGGESTED EXERCISE:**

“Building Blocks of Political Organizing’

#### **Procedures:**

1. Divide education group into sub-groups
2. Each sub-group represents a team or collective of organizers that are mobilizing and organizing people against poverty
3. Each sub-group receives an envelope with cards inside that represents the 'steps' or blocks in building a movement fighting to end poverty and homelessness.
4. Instruct the sub-groups to lay out the cards in the order of what would come first in organizing a movement...second...third...and so on.
5. Inform each sub-group that they will share their "order" with the entire group.

#### **Materials:**

Each of the following phrases are printed on each card,

- Define basic problem, develop overall vision of solution (goal).

have the monies to come and travel all over the city to meetings and stuff like that. The (governmental officials] understood that better than us. In the end we got houses, but lost our organization.”

Today, many of those thirty-five families have lost those houses. Those that remain continue to live in squalor and poverty.

### ***Five Key Ingredients***

How are we to carry out these principles? The lessons learned from the National Up & Out of Poverty Now! Coalition provide some basic answers to this question. We have paid dearly for these lessons with many defeats, jailings, and deaths in the streets. There *are* five main interdependent ingredients of organizing. They are:

1. **teams** - teams of indigenous organizers
2. **bases** - bases of operations
3. **networks** - mutual support networks
4. **voices** - lines of communication
5. **cores** - connected cores of leaders trained in political consciousness and strategy

There is no chronological order in the implementation of the five ingredients. Rather, when the five ingredients have been developed and played like the keys of a piano, we have had organizing successes. When one or more have been left out, the entire effort has been undermined. Below we will examine the five ingredients illustrating them through experiences of various organizations of the National Up and Out of Poverty Now! Coalition.

During the national organizing drive, the Homeless Union failed to establish proper lines of communication. Instead, it relied simply on the major media to do this for it. Initially, when homelessness was a relatively new phenomenon and the media was scrambling to cover it, this tactic was sufficient. Once this honeymoon period ended, the coverage either stopped or was skewed and the drive suffered. Newly born chapters were unable to communicate with each other, and therefore, unable to coordinate efforts. Thus, the organizing suffered. In addition, with less coverage, external support in the form of financial donations and volunteers began to cease.

Toward the end of the drive, the Homeless Union joined with the National Welfare Rights Union and the National Anti-Hunger Coalition and founded the National Survival Summit/Up &Out of Poverty Now! Coalition. It was during this period, that the People's Tribune, a national revolutionary press, began to bridge some of the gap of communication. It showed the great potential of a political press serving as a clearinghouse knitting together the scattered acts of street agitation into a national network of communication and political education.

We must fulfill that potential. We cannot rely on their media. We must create our own effective external and internal line of communication. These could *take* the form of poor people's newspapers, newsletters, other form of literature, videos and audio tapes, art, round tables of leaders, speaking tours, computer hook ups, fax networks, etc.

## CORES

Constructing throughout the five ingredients network of connected cores of leaders trained in political consciousness and strategy

### Purpose:

- Ensure the development of political consciousness
- Impart strategic considerations
- Tie together the five ingredients of organization and unity

Nationally connected cores of leaders understand the whole war to end poverty: their weapons, forces and strategy, and our weapons, forces and strategy. Thus they are able, through political education and training, to ensure that strategic considerations are being carried out in each arena of work. Organizing among the homeless is one battle in the war against poverty. Organizing welfare recipients is another battle. Organizing the hungry is yet another. There are many other. Cores of strategic leaders operating within each of these battlefields ensure a coordinated direction to end poverty.

Deciding upon tent cities during the Michigan welfare cuts was one such consideration. An analysis of the situation by the core leading up to the cuts revealed several things: 1) that the economic forces aligned behind the welfare cuts were far too powerful to stop, making it clear that the cuts will go through and 2) people on welfare will not be able to provide for themselves shortly. Based on this analysis, Michigan Up & Out of

1960's movement for civil rights. Those who benefit, if only so slightly, from the economic status quo cannot successfully vanguard social change no matter how good their intentions. Those in pain know when their pain is relieved." (National Up & Out of Poverty Now t Bill of Rights)

The second principle recognizes that the political empowerment necessary to bring about social change grows out of the development, consolidation, and expansion of unity and organization. Any immediate gains conceded during the struggle against poverty are superficial without organization to ensure their maintenance and to sustain the struggle to eliminate the conditions causing poverty in the first place. Diane Johnson, a National Welfare Rights Union Executive Board member, gives us insight on this principle:

"In the late 80's we had a situation where 35 families were living in a three apartment building complex (the Commodore Apartments in Philadelphia) that was unfit for human habitation. I started organizing with the other tenants and we pulled together a tenant council organization and we began to put demands upon the city of Philadelphia. We needed affordable, decent housing. Their answer was to give us affordable decent housing, but they also separated the 35 families...everybody did eventually get housing, but we were so scattered apart that we couldn't keep up communication. Transportation became a problem. Poor people don't

of labor, women, and students, etc. is necessary to break the isolation of the poor. In the last period, the relationship between the poor and the other segments of the population has been unequal. Today, as the economy worsens, polarizations are occurring in all of these segments. This is setting the basis for mutually beneficial relationships with that side of the polarities that are also under attack. This is the real path towards the unity of the entire class of the have nots. Consider the following example:

In 1985, the Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Union of the Homeless engaged in a campaign against below mini-mum wage abuses by local temporary employment agencies. Without the man power to maintain a constant picket, the campaign began to fade. However, District I of the United Electrical Workers recognized the importance of this issue to their members. The UT workers poured onto the picket lines helping to maintain a constant vigilant presence. Today, the Homeless Union and the UE workers are still maintaining their relationship.

## VOICES

Establishing internal and external lines of communication.

### Purpose:

- Create a communications infrastructure that allows leaders to share information, coordinate and plan efforts
- Break the isolation outside of the movement by informing other of our plights and our fight with the intention of garnering human and material resources

## TEAMS

Building teams of indigenous organizers mostly from the ranks of the poverty victims

### Purpose:

Identify issues around which people are prepared to organize

Mobilize human and material resources to build sustained organization around those issues

There are many problems that are not issues. Issues are problems that groups of people are prepared to act on. The team of organizers lives, works and agitates among these people to determine which problems are issues. For example, during the Union of the Homeless organizing drive in Chicago we were confronted by the influence of the petty-professional advocates of the local Coalition for the Homeless. They declared that lack of housing was the immediate issue to mobilize around. They pushed for homeless people to get behind their lobbying efforts for housing and shelter legislation. The Union of the Homeless organizing teams from the shelters stated that though housing was a problem, the specific issue that most agitated homeless people at that time was the indignity of waiting in line for five sheets of toilet paper.

The need for an adequately trained, local indigenous team of organizers was dearly shown during the founding of the New York City Homeless Union. New York City has the deepest, hardened corps of poverty pimps and political demagogues anywhere. This corps was deeply threatened by the development of an independent organization of the poor. When

over 1,200 homeless people were mobilized for the Union's founding convention, the corps knew they had to disrupt it. At one point they prematurely moved and were outmaneuvered by the experienced National organizing team.

After the convention, buses left 400 people stranded. The poverty pimps tried to undermine the leadership of the newly elected Union officers. They demagogically agitated on behalf of the stranded. With a crowd behind them, they confronted the newly elected officers with the transportation problem, assuming that they could not find a solution. Fortunately, experienced members of the National team responded with a militant solution to the problem. With banners in hand, the 400 marched to the subway station shouting slogans and illegally jumped the turnstiles. This paralyzed the police and they boarded the train and vanished victoriously into the night.

However, once the experienced national team left New York the poverty pimps once again moved. This time, the inadequately trained local team was unable to repel them. In a matter of months, the largest local of the Homeless Union was torn to pieces.

## **BASES**

Establishing bases of operation

Purpose:

- Serving as a center to meet some of the economic and cultural needs of the poor, enabling teams of organizers to carry out regular political education and mobilization of forces.

- Having a place where teams of organizers can gather to plan, educate, train, etc.
- Serving as a point of gravitation for poor people seeking out others in similar situations.

In response to the welfare cuts in Michigan, Up & Out of Poverty Now! launched Operation Michigan Storm setting up tent cities in four points throughout the state (including one in the state capitol). They gathered tents, blankets, and food for thousands. As people's checks were cut and were unable to provide these things for themselves, many gravitated to the tent cities. By partially meeting their immediate needs, organizers were kept in constant contact with the victims of these cuts and were able to organize more effectively than any other grouping in the state.

In trade union organizing the factory served as the fixed base of operation. With homeless and other poor people locked outside of the factory, the bases of operation established among them tend to be more varied in type, place and time of existence. Homeless run shelters, drop-in centers, tent cities, housing and jobs programs and training institutes are examples.

## **NETWORKS**

Setting up mutual support networks

Purpose:

- Break political isolation and gather human and material resources

Isolation equals vulnerability. Development of mutual support networks that include the religious community, legal supporters, cultural fighters, the movement