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Innovative Organizing Practices: ACORN's Campaign in Los Angeles Organizing Workfare Workers

Fred Brooks, PhD

ABSTRACT. The work requirements in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) set the stage for unprecedented expansion of workfare programs across the nation. Shortly after the PRWORA passed, the Los Angeles chapter of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) began a union-style organizing drive of the 25,000 General Relief (GR) recipients in Los Angeles County's workfare program. Over the past four years the de facto union, in coalition with over 75 allied community, labor, and clergy organizations, won numerous substantive progressive policy changes in the workfare program. In a case study format, this paper describes the following innovative organizing practices and how they contributed to the workfare policy changes: (a) combining labor and community organizing strategies, (b) combining conflict tactics with direct service, and (c) developing leadership from the General Relief constituency. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

Though the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) is couched as welfare reform, there is nothing new about using welfare policy to reinforce the work ethic. Since the dawn of capitalism over 600 years ago, Western governments have consistently discouraged welfare and encouraged work for the able-bodied poor (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1997). Requiring able-bodied welfare recipients to work for their benefits, now called workfare, has been a recurring theme in the various efforts to reform welfare in the USA over the past 30 years. The major facets of PRWORA–time limits, work requirements, and the end of entitlement status for cash assistance–seem new only because they are the most radical changes in U.S. welfare policy over the past 60 years (see Bane, 1997; Edelman, 1997; Hagen, 1998).

Some American states began requiring certain welfare recipients to work in exchange for their benefits in the 1940s (Mink, 1998). Since the 1960s, the federal government implemented three major versions of welfare reform prior to PRWORA. The Work Incentive (WIN) program passed in 1967 (Gueron, 1989) and was further reformed into WIN II in 1971 (Rose, 1995). In 1988 congress passed yet another version of welfare to work called the Job Opportunity and Basic Skills Act (JOBS). Although all three programs were heralded as dramatic change in the direction of work, the highest percent of the total AFDC caseload ever put to work under any of the programs was approximately 13% (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1997). By contrast, PRWORA required states to have 25% of the caseload employed in 1997, and 50% in work activities by 2002. Any state failing to meet the quota for recipients working would have their TANF block grant cut significantly. PRWORA set the stage for the largest expansion of workfare in modern history.

Shortly after PRWORA passed in 1996, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), a national grassroots citizens organization, decided to get ahead of the curve on the possible expansion of workfare by organizing workfare workers in Los Angeles and New York City, two cities that already had expansive workfare programs. In Los Angeles, able bodied recipients of General Relief (GR) have been required to work for their $221 monthly check since 1948 (Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, 2000a). Workfare has existed for decades in New York also, but was greatly expanded in 1994 as the centerpiece of Mayor Giuliani's welfare policy (Dulchin, 1999). ACORN's strategy was to build large, militant, de facto unions of workfare workers in Los Angeles and New York during

the first two years of PRWORA, so that by the time the escalating work quotas in PRWORA forced other states to implement workfare, ACORN's successes in New York and Los Angeles might at best, blunt the spread of workfare nationwide, or at least allow ACORN to organize workfare campaigns quickly and effectively in other cities where it has organizing operations. Accordingly, over the past five years ACORN has mobilized over 25,000 welfare recipients in Los Angeles and New York City to challenge various aspects of workfare.

This paper presents a case study of Los Angeles ACORN's four-year campaign organizing workfare workers and highlights several aspects of the campaign. First, ACORN blended both labor and community organizing strategies to build a permanent organization, called Workfare Workers Organizing Committee or WWOC/ACORN, that fought and won–through a combination of disruptive protests, coalition building, and negotiations–numerous substantive improvements in both workfare and welfare policies. Second, what was considered an intermediate victory–the Case Complaint System (CCS)–has evolved into a permanent, full-time operation, staffed by two former General Relief recipients. The CCS takes and resolves an average of 200 calls per month from GR or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) clients claiming problems with their cases. The Case Complaint System is an innovative conflict style community organization providing a direct social service to individual constituents. The third innovative practice is the democratic structure of WWOC/ACORN, which has contributed to profound social, psychological, and political transformation experienced by many WWOC members. Leadership development from the GR constituency has been so successful that today members who are now on staff do most of the building and maintaining of the organization. The democratic, membership-run structure of WWOC appears to be a primary vehicle for empowering this constituency both personally and politically. After briefly noting historical and other current organizing responses to workfare, this paper describes methods, background of the problem, the evolution of WWOC/ACORN, keys to success, current status, difficulties encountered and lessons learned from the organizing.

HISTORICAL AND OTHER RESPONSES TO WORKFARE

The largest attempt to organize welfare recipients in the USA since 1935 was the effort by the National Welfare Rights Organization

(NWRO) in the 1960s and early 1970s. Although federal workfare was introduced with the WIN legislation in 1967, there were so many exemptions available to recipients only a small minority of recipients were enrolled in the program (Rose, 1995). NWRO attempted (unsuccessfully) to block the adoption of federal work requirements in the WIN legislation. The political climate was very different in the 1960s and NWRO focused more on consumption issues like expanded benefits and a guaranteed annual income rather than employment-based issues like workfare (Reese & Newcombe, in press).

Although workfare has been part of particular states' welfare programs since the 1940s' (Mink, 1998), prior to PRWORA, workfare never affected a majority of welfare recipients nationwide. New York has had workfare for General Assistance recipients since 1971. Shortly thereafter workfare workers in New York City began organizing to challenge it. Once such organization was called the Public Works Program Organizing Committee (PWPOC). PWPOC viewed workfare " . . . as the beginning of a slave market–people without rights, people working without the hope of meaningful jobs or an adequate income" (Helling & Zerwick, 1982, p. 81-82). PWPOC was concerned about workfare workers displacing thousands of union-wage full-time jobs. PWPOC collaborated with District Council 37-American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (DC-37) to file a petition with the New York City Office of Collective Bargaining. It asked that DC-37 represent workfare employees at sites already covered by bargaining agreements. The suit was dismissed and later taken to New York State court (Helling & Zerwick, 1982), but PWPOC and DC-37 never prevailed in ending workfare in New York City.

In response to the 1995 expansion of workfare in New York, several community organizations, legal associations and (once again) DC-37 began organizing workfare workers in distinctly different ways (for a detailed overview see Krinsky, 1998a, 1998b). In mid-1996, WEP Workers Together! (WWT!)–a coalition of three low-income citizens organizations–started organizing workfare workers at job sites to attract and involve established labor unions and eventually lead the organizing effort. According to Krinsky (1998a, p. 287), WWT! characterized work site organizing to be "extremely difficult" and by mid-1997 the three organizations pursued their own relatively limited strategies. In June 1997, DC-37 started organizing workfare workers. Most likely due to fear of losing their access to the Giuliani administration, DC-37 never allocated more than minimal resources to the organizing drive and never clarified their objectives about organizing workfare workers.

Unrelated to workfare, DC-37 experienced its own internal troubles and abandoned its workfare organizing in 1998 (Krinsky, 1998a, 1998b).

In 1997 New York ACORN began organizing workfare workers. ACORN made workfare a high priority by assigning 17 field organizers to the effort (Krinsky, 1998b). ACORN met with the other groups that were organizing workfare workers to minimize inter-organizational conflict and workfare workers promptly signed over 16,000 union authorization cards. ACORN held an election supervised by a Blue Ribbon Commission (albeit unauthorized by the National Labor Relations Board) in which over 17,000 workfare workers voted to have ACORN represent them in negotiations with the city over workfare issues. ACORN's effort dwarfed the organizing activity sponsored by the anti-workfare organizations (Krinsky, 1998a). The Giuliani administration has been recalcitrant toward recognizing the de facto workfare union, so victories have been difficult. In spite of fierce opposition, New York ACORN/WWOC won a grievance procedure in addition to numerous improvements of working conditions at workfare sites. The efforts to organize workfare workers in New York is well documented in prior research (see Dulchin, 1999; Krinsky, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c; O'Connell, 1999), so this paper focuses on the organizing of workfare workers in Los Angeles.

METHOD

Data were collected from three different sources. First, Los Angeles ACORN campaign files were examined. The files contained research reports, campaign brochures, press releases, articles from newspapers, meeting agendae, correspondence to and from DPSS, internal memos, and letters to allies. For a more analytical and experiential point of view, interviews were conducted with two organizers who have worked on the campaign since the outset. Individual interviews were also conducted with three female members of WWOC, and six male members and leaders of WWOC were interviewed using a focus group methodology. Interview guides contained open-ended questions like "What issues did you have about workfare that led you to join WWOC?" and "What has WWOC won?" Interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and content analyzed. In the fall of 2000 the author also attended three WWOC events as a participant observer. The first event was a 30 person direct action targeting a Deputy Director of a local DPSS office on the issue of slow response time to case complaints phoned in by

WWOC/ACORN. The second event was a negotiating session between several senior DPSS administrators and key staff and leaders from WWOC and several allied organizations. Negotiations centered on eligibility criteria, time limits, and benefits in the relatively new General Relief Opportunities for Work (GROW) program within GR. The final event was a WWOC membership meeting designed to create a list of demands for the chief administrator of GR. The combination of participant observation, individual/group interviews and secondary analysis of WWOC files permitted triangulation of data. The Human Subjects Committee of the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board approved all research procedures prior to data collection. Earlier drafts of this paper were reviewed by two ACORN organizers as an accuracy check on events described in the paper.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Demographics of the GR Caseload

Los Angeles has had a County-administered General Relief program since 1938. General Relief is the bottom thread of the safety net, providing $221 dollars a month to indigent adults without dependents who are ineligible for federal or state cash assistance (Human Services Alliance of Los Angeles, 2000). Since 1948 GR recipients judged able-bodied have been required to work for their benefits. During the 90s the GR caseload ranged from 48,000 to 107,000. Typically, 40% of the caseload was judged able-bodied by the Watts Mobile Medical Unit and therefore required to work 40 hours per month in return for their $221 benefit (Human Services Alliance of Los Angeles, 2000). Due to the high turnover of the GR caseload the demographics can vary considerably every month, but normally the caseload was approximately 60% male, 40% female, 50% African American, 25% Hispanic, 20% White, and 5% Asian. The average age of recipients ranged from 40 to 48 years of age (Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, 2000b).

ACORN's Mandate

ACORN has a thirty-year history of organizing low and moderate income citizens into democratically run organizations that use confrontational tactics to win issues such as tenants rights, living wages, lifeline

utility rates, affordable housing, access to bank loans, and elimination of predatory lending, among other issues. ACORN's organizing model is well documented in the literature (see Delgado, 1986; Fisher, 1987; Staples, 1984; Stein, 1986; also see www.ACORN.org for current activities). Although the majority of ACORN's work has been organizing the working poor in low to moderate income neighborhoods, ACORN evolved in 1970 from the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). When President Clinton signed PRWORA in 1996 ACORN felt a mandate to "go back to the future" and once again organize major campaigns focusing on welfare issues (Rathke & Schur, 1999, p. 1). After analyzing PRWORA, ACORN organizers had several concerns. First, PRWORA was severe exploitation of a large and politically weak population of low-income citizens. Second, the work requirements in PRWORA would likely create a large pool of free labor that would displace thousands of full-time jobs (often unionized) at the lower end of the wage-labor market. Third (as previously described), PRWORA's time limits and work requirements might be a blueprint for large-scale workfare programs all across the nation (Rathke & Schur, 1999).

Beyond the mandate of the organization, interviews with workfare workers quickly revealed numerous problems from their point of view. These problems included:

- Workers felt a stigma was attached to workfare. They described feelings of degradation, exploitation, little respect, and no dignity emanating from their workfare role.
- Feelings of injustice associated with doing the same work side-by-side full-time workers, who were often making 2-3 times as much money compared to workfare workers.
- Although the language of the workfare statute claimed workfare was supposed to prepare GR recipients for real jobs, participants felt strongly that workfare operated as an end in itself rather than a stepping stone to wage-based employment.
- Health and safety issues. In dozens of cases workfare workers were expected to do the same work as full-time employees, but often were not given the same training, uniforms, equipment, or safety precautions.
- The support services DPSS were supposed to provide, such as bus tokens, and clothing allowances, were often sloppily delivered making it difficult for the workfare client to maintain a job-like commitment to his/her workfare assignment (Rathke & Schur, 1999).

The combination of ACORN's historical mandate to organize exploited low income constituencies, the draconian elements of PRWORA, and the litany of problems experienced by workfare workers made for a happy marriage of organization, issues, and constituency.

EVOLUTION OF WWOC/ACORN

Recruitment

In late 1996 ACORN organizers began visiting the 500 workfare sites in Los Angeles County, and using a standard labor organizing pitch, asking workfare workers about their concerns. Whenever organizers struck a chord with workers, they asked workers to sign authorization cards allowing WWOC/ACORN to represent them in labor negotiations with DPSS. Here is how one organizer described the ease of getting workers to sign authorization cards:

> The minute we, as organizers, raised the issue of receiving Equal Pay for Equal Work, the rest was easy. When people are so clear that they're being exploited, they almost organize themselves.

Workers were also invited to the next WWOC meeting or event. Adapting the ACORN community organizing model, WWOC held 13 planning meetings at work sites to discuss issues, tactics, and targets before having a large meeting where the members elected officers and decided on a plan of action. Another part of ACORN's model is to immediately follow a meeting with an event, thus within a week of the first meeting 16 WWOC/ACORN members staged an event targeting workfare supervisors at County General Hospital, demanding that workfare workers have the same uniforms as regular employees, use of the same bathrooms, and the same cafeteria discount that regular workers enjoy. Embarrassed by ACORN/WWOC confronting them on these discriminatory practices, County General Hospital agreed to comply with all three demands. The quick but significant win solidified membership commitment and solidarity to the cause (another tenet of community organizing).

After the first win, the momentum of the campaign really took off. Organizers report that from the spring of 1997 until December of 1998 WWOC held weekly planning meetings (8-20 members), monthly membership meetings (50-60 members), and staged direct actions on

targets every 4-6 weeks (generally drawing 60-80 members, but several with over 100, and one with 400+ members and allies). One of the lead organizers, who has over a dozen years of organizing experience, stated, "This [was] the highest consistent turnout I've ever been a part of, in any organization work I've ever done!"

Organizers were aware that turning out the poorest citizens would take more than just a phone call or a visit, so they offered members bus tokens and food at organizational events. The Catholic Workers–who run a soup kitchen on LA's skid row–provided free box lunches at over a dozen events during the course of the campaign. As one member stated, "When you set up a meeting for poor people, make sure to provide transportation and food. The hungriest people are who you want at an action."

The Role of Allies

Although ACORN took the lead organizing WWOC, the organization sought allies to support the campaign on several levels. In the current political climate that is largely positive toward PRWORA (at least among political elites and the mass media), ACORN viewed correctly that it would be difficult to win the moral high ground toward the constituency of able-bodied, mostly male, adults without dependents. ACORN knew it would take the support of as many allied organizations as possible, to not only win the moral high ground, but to have any chance of making major substantive policy changes at DPSS. Accordingly, ACORN solicited the support of clergy, churches, labor unions, civil rights groups, immigrant rights organizations, community organizations, legal organizations, and even a few liberal Hollywood celebrities such as Ed Asner and Martin Sheen. A total of 41 clergy and churches endorsed the Workfare Workers Bill of Rights, and 75 allied organizations signed on their support. In addition to endorsing the campaign with their name the following organizations made substantive contributions either by assisting with research, legal advocacy, strategizing, negotiating, speaking at actions and sometimes turning-out significant numbers of people at events: Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, Public Counsel, Service Employees International Union Local 660, LA Chapter of National Lawyer's Guild, and Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice. Although WWOC/ACORN spearheaded the campaign and consistently turned out the majority of workfare recipients at actions, the role of allies was

critical. ACORN reports that without the support of allies, many of the victories would not have taken place.

Demands

The initial demands and actions were primarily around health and safety issues such as proper clothing, gloves, equipment, and training to perform a job. Organizers reported numerous instances of GR recipients working in potentially dangerous situations. One worker had an allergic reaction to the gloves provided by her employer, and when she asked for a different pair, she was told none were available. To make things worse, when she went to the nurse's office to seek treatment, she was told she couldn't be treated because she wasn't on staff (Rivera, 1997). Another GR worker assigned to do janitorial work at County-USC Medical Center said that regular workers were given better gloves and were trained in how to mix chemical cleansers. Without proper gloves or training she reported getting headaches and dizziness every time she tried to mix the cleansers (Rivera, 1997). Although initial demands were around improved health and safety issues for workers, over the first year of organizing a comprehensive list of demands emerged from WWOC membership meetings. These demands included:

- Equal treatment between workfare workers and regular workers, including the extension of workers rights and protective labor legislation to cover workfare workers as well as pay equity between workfare workers and regular county workers.
- Workfare programs should better prepare participants to obtain a decent job.
- The county should improve workfare participants' access to goods and services that enable them to work. Workfare workers should have access to childcare, transportation, and clothing that allow them to complete their workfare assignments.
- Public and private employers should adopt a First Source hiring policy and to use Los Angles ACORN as a union hiring hall in order to recruit new workers. The First Source hiring policy gives qualified workfare workers the first chance to apply and interview for new county jobs.
- The county should address its job shortage by creating more public sectors, permanent jobs that would pay a living wage and provide benefits (above demands from Rathke & Schur, 1999, p. 4).

- In 1998 DPSS was preparing to move thousands of TANF recipients into workfare. In a major campaign called "Everyone Who Works Deserves a Paycheck," WWOC/ACORN demanded the County implement a wage-based program for TANF recipients rather than dramatically expand workfare.

Over the course of the four-year campaign different demands were emphasized at different points in time, appropriate to the members' interests, the target, DPSS policy, and political opportunities, all of which shifted and changed over time.

Targets

The bureaucratic, political, multi-layered organization of workfare combined with the murky legal status of workfare itself, encouraged WWOC/ACORN to progress against multiple targets. Initial targets included several "employers" at workfare sites such as USC-County Hospital that regularly used 800 workfare workers. The demands on workfare sites included hiring workfare participants for real jobs rather than workfare and improved health and safety precautions for participants. Several private employers with large county contracts were also targeted on the issue of hiring workfare workers for wage-based jobs.

DPSS was a primary target throughout the campaign. WWOC targeted local DPSS offices on issues related to case complaints. The personal target for local actions would be the Director of the local DPSS office. For substantive policy changes the governing power structure of DPSS was targeted, including the Director of the Workfare Division and the Director of LA County DPSS. As is often the case when pressured by citizens' organizations, the targets at all levels of DPSS were quick to deny they had the power to address WWOC's demands, and many tried to pass the buck to a higher level of authority. For example, the Director of General Relief for DPSS claimed her ability to change the time limits for GR was limited by mandates from her boss, the LA Board of Supervisors. The Board of Supervisors became the ultimate, and as it turned out, the most intransigent target in the campaign. The Supervisors are elected by district and are the final governing authority in Los Angeles County, controlling DPSS budgets, appointment of directors, and setting overall priorities for DPSS. WWOC challenged the Board of Supervisors only after the broad coalition was in place, and after it had already targeted many actions on DPSS itself.

Tactics and Strategy

A major innovation of the campaign was to blend tactics from both labor and community organizing traditions. The labor tactic of visiting work sites to recruit members who then sign authorization cards has already been discussed. Since WWOC was a de facto union with little chance of National Labor Relations Board recognition, the entire campaign was built in the streets using a community organizing protocol. WWOC/ACORN created a cycle of planning meetings, large membership meetings, quickly followed by direct actions on targets making specific demands appropriate to the target. Members were de-briefed after actions always with a positive spin and a look to the future. WWOC leveraged smaller victories, like winning equal access to bathrooms or new uniforms, into larger victories such as the grievance procedure while enlisting the support of allied organizations.

With a constituency as politically marginal as workfare workers, it was clear that to attract the attention of DPSS and the Board of Supervisors, disruptive tactics would be required. Planning and membership meetings aimed to agree on the protocol for an event. The action checklist included the following: plan an event, encourage a targeted number of members to attend; select a target that would be accessible and would have the authority to meet the demands; create a list of demands and select member spokespersons to deliver it; plan tactics to enter the building, office, or work site; rehearse chants and songs to build solidarity, make it fun, and disturb business as usual at the site; make banners, signs, and flyers to catch attention and provide photo-ops for the press; write a press release and select member spokespersons to meet the press; and plan to hand out bus tokens, de-brief the members, and lunch.

Many of the actions included street theater and props that would deliver the message symbolically and humorously. At one event, over 100 WWOC members turned in 10,000 signed union authorization cards to DPSS and erected a huge canopy tent emblazoned with "GR Union Hiring Hall Open for Business." Members began turning in job applications. Another action, staged in front of the LA Board of Supervisors building in December 1999, featured a member dressed up as the Grinch Who Stole My Labor. The Grinch had "LA County" written on her back and she danced around a circle of GR recipients and would steal their hand-held cards saying DIGNITY, RESPECT, SELF-ESTEEM, WORK HISTORY, EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT, and PAYCHECK. This action pressured the Board of Supervisors to implement a wage-based program for TANF mothers required to work rather than making them

enter workfare. The symbolic representation of the degradation of workfare was fun for the members, poignant, and garnered great press coverage.

The cumulative impact of over 30 direct actions won WWOC/ACORN a seat at the table for dozens of negotiating sessions to improve conditions and change policy. For example, when DPSS finally agreed to offer workfare workers a grievance procedure, it took eight negotiating sessions to finalize the details. WWOC member leaders gave members a direct voice in the type of policy finally agreed upon, and always attended negotiating sessions. Involving members in all key facets of the business is part of ACORN's organizing model, and plays a key role in leadership development.

Victories

Using the strategies and tactics just described WWOC/ACORN won the following substantive changes in workfare/GR policies:

- A Grievance Procedure for Workfare workers, considered the first such policy in the nation.
- A DPSS issued brochure that spells out the rights (including the grievance procedure) and responsibilities of workfare workers, that all workfare workers receive upon admission to the program. The pamphlet has ACORN's name and phone number (along with two other agencies) and suggests workers contact ACORN if they have questions or concerns about workfare.
- Improved health and safety regulations at work sites. WWOC/ACORN won backbraces for workers doing heavy lifting at the County Museum of Natural History and shovels for beach workers who often found snakes under seaweed clumps that were previously lifted by hand.
- More equitable treatment of workfare workers at many job sites. For example, at the USC-County hospital WWOC/ACORN won uniforms and cafeteria discounts for workfare workers.
- Implementation of priority hiring lists by private and public employers. This program encouraged workfare workers to take the civil service exam. GR recipients who pass are put on a priority-hiring list used by county employers. The county also for the first time ever created a special registry for GR workers designed to fill County clerical jobs.
- Several private companies that receive government contracts agreed to put workfare workers on a priority-hiring list. For exam-

ple, Lockheed Martin Information Management Systems agreed to post any entry-level job openings through WWOC/ACORN's Community Hiring Hall five days before making any other postings.

- In conjunction with other welfare recipients and welfare advocates, WWOC/ACORN helped persuade the County Board of Supervisors to restore benefits for GR recipients to nine months after they had cut benefits from year-round to only six months of eligibility per year.
- In 1998 the GR Workfare program was overhauled to a new program called GROW. GROW is operated more like TANF welfare-to-work programs and includes job search assistance with education, training and/or workfare. Thanks to pressure applied by WWOC/ACORN and its allies, DPSS agreed to make workfare a voluntary rather than mandatory activity in the GROW program. Although most GR recipients are required to perform workfare to receive food stamps, the new policy greatly reduces the number of hours recipients are forced to work (Rathke & Schur, 1999).
- And perhaps the most significant pro-active victory in the campaign–in the fall of 2000 California Governor Gray Davis gave counties the local option to establish wage-based programs rather than workfare for TANF recipients. At the time of this writing (Spring 2001), was the Board of Supervisors reviewing wage-based options for TANF recipients in Los Angeles County.

Keys to Success

Organizers and members attribute the keys to success in the four-year campaign to the collective impact of the following: (1) The depth and breadth of the membership. Turning in over 10,000 signed authorization cards and actively involving hundreds of workfare workers monthly clarified that WWOC/ACORN represented a majority of workfare workers. (2) Winning the moral high ground. The involvement of a large, diverse, committed and active group of allies was crucial here. (3) Persistence. In various ways WWOC/ACORN kept significant pressure on targets for over four years through hard-hitting actions that often took DPSS by surprise and put it on the defensive. (4) The combination of labor and community organizing tactics. Sticking exclusively to either labor or community tactics would have made it difficult to deliver big wins. Again, the labor model was critical to recruitment and, the CO protocol was required for campaign and ac-

tion strategies, and offering direct services like the Case Complaint System.

In terms of the overall strategy, the most brilliant strategic decision was to take a position in favor of work and exploit it for maximum effect. None of the demands said "We do not want to work." One of Saul Alinsky's (1971, p. 128) cardinal rules of tactics was "make the enemy live up to their own book of rules." If the true intent of workfare was to promote work, then workfare workers should have real jobs, with wages and all the benefits and rights normal employees have. WWOC/ACORN did a masterful job of pressuring DPSS and the Board of Supervisors to live up to their own book of rules and create policies that would support real jobs for workfare workers. At the same time, it was crucial to highlight all the ways workfare was not real work and was not leading to real jobs. Through fact sheets, testimonials, and symbolism WWOC successfully painted workfare as "slave labor" and presented wage-based labor as "the promised land." One indicator of the success of this tactic was winning a positive endorsement from the *Los Angeles Times* (1999) Editorial Board for making the TANF welfare-to-work program wage-based rather than workfare. In the end the success of making DPSS and the Board of Supervisors live up to their own rules was probably the most critical factor to the success of the campaign.

Case Complaint System

Traditionally conflict-style community organizations fought hard to win reforms and policy changes but left implementation of those changes to more mainstream social service agencies. Over the years ACORN began to see the advantages of first winning a reform and then providing the service. Benefits included additional resources to hire staff and pay for office space. ACORN would typically attach its name to the service providing valuable, no-cost, social marketing of the organization. Also, providing direct services often became a recruitment tool to build the organization. For these reasons it has become a common ACORN organizing practice to provide direct services after winning a major policy reform. An example of providing direct services after winning policy reforms through direct action is the mortgage loan counseling ACORN offers to low income families in 28 cities across the country. For most of its 30 years ACORN has fought bank redlining, and pushed for improved financial services in low-income neighbor-

hoods. Rather than have someone else provide the services, ACORN decided to run its own loan counseling operations.

The Case Complaint System is another direct service fulfilling these functions for Los Angeles ACORN. Presently, when individuals qualify for GR or TANF, DPSS gives them a brochure outlining their rights and responsibilities. The brochure has the names and phone numbers of ACORN and two other organizations recipients can call if they have problems or need help negotiating the welfare bureaucracy. Since February 1998 the primary staff person assigned to take case complaints is a former GR recipient who started out as a WWOC member. After a year, her knowledge and expertise of the system warranted hiring her to solve case complaints. ACORN hired another WWOC member to help with the 175-200 calls per month. The case complaint workers are currently being trained as organizers to take on an even larger role in the maintenance of WWOC/ACORN.

Several features make the case complaint system an innovative practice. First, ACORN negotiated an agreement with DPSS that a special liaison will take the calls from ACORN and will respond to the complaint within four hours. Since ACORN takes calls everyday from 9:00 to 1:30, the majority of complaints are resolved in the same day. In an era where one of the biggest gripes welfare recipients have about the system is the inability to talk to their caseworker, same-day turnaround on case complaints is a paradigm of efficiency.

Secondly, case complaints are reported to DPSS in a professional, problem-solving manner, different from the boisterous, aggressive tenor of some of the direct actions. This is helpful because it allows DPSS to see WWOC/ACORN as not just a "bunch of rabble-rousers" but also capable of operating as diplomatic, professional problem-solvers. Providing the direct service counters the argument by DPSS that ACORN is exploiting workfare for political gain rather than actively trying to help GR recipients (although targets tried to make that argument; see Rivera, 1997). At the same time, the fact that ACORN is always capable of taking an issue to the streets and disrupting business as usual in an office, constantly reminds the liaisons assigned to resolve the complaints phoned-in by ACORN. In sum, the combination of the Case Complaint System with ACORN's direct actions offers a one-two punch toward meeting the needs of the welfare constituency. Symbiotically each system nourishes the other.

The member/organizers who staff the case complaint system also believe they offer a superior referral service compared to DPSS caseworkers. The present methodology has no way to confirm this assertion, but

the peer advocacy aspect of the system lends some credibility to the notion. The peer advocates offering referrals through the CCS have first-hand experience with the problems recipients are facing and many of the food banks, homeless shelters, legal agencies, medical centers, etc., to which they refer clients.

Taking case complaints for three years has allowed the organization to provide a valuable direct service to over 6,000 GR/TANF clients. Although they do not track the number of active members recruited through case complaints, organizers estimate the system generates several hundred active members a year for WWOC/ACORN. It may seem like a small service, but if you have no money or food, and ACORN returns your food stamps the same day you call, as one member explained, " . . . it is a life and death issue."

Democratic Structure and Leadership Development

From the membership perspective, WWOC/ACORN is one of the few organizations in Los Angeles that empowers low-income citizens to act collectively on their own behalf. One member stated:

> Before I joined ACORN I found out this town is full of organizations of professionals organized to help poor people. But ACORN's the first place where actual poor people can come in and learn how to help themselves.

The democratic structure built into ACORN's organizing model demands that members participate in all activities and decisions made by and for the organization. In practice this means staff do not advocate on behalf of members, but organize members to advocate on their own behalf. Examples of the democratic structure in the organizing model include: members run their own meetings, elect their own leadership, have their own board that controls the organization and to whom the organizers are accountable; members lead the events and are spokespersons for the press, and as much as possible members engage in research, recruitment, fundraising and other maintenance tasks for the organization. Leadership development is both a by-product of the democratic structure of the organization and is also consciously cultivated in members via special leadership training workshops and events. Leadership develops naturally among members by speaking at meetings, chairing a meeting, helping plan an event, speaking at an event, being interviewed

for the local news, or by participating in negotiations with public officials.

Leadership development was a critical part of WWOC's workfare campaign. During the peak 18 months of the campaign WWOC held Leadership Training workshops every other Saturday from 9 to noon. At these sessions members would learn how to chair a meeting, keys to effective negotiating, leading songs and chants, the broader political context of GR and welfare, and the political power structure of LA and the Board of Supervisors among other things. Leadership development has been so successful at WWOC four members have migrated to the professional organizing staff. Another former WWOC member joined the organizing staff and has since been hired by an established union as a labor organizer.

Leadership development is not a one-way street that only benefits the organization. Interviews with both members and staff revealed that many WWOC members experience significant positive personal transformation as a result of their involvement in the organization. Several members stated that before their involvement in ACORN they would feel nervous, hesitant, or intimidated talking to a "suit and tie" professional about their welfare case. But the experience of leading meetings, presenting demands at actions, talking to the press, etc., has boosted their self-confidence, self-esteem, public speaking skills, assertiveness, and overall sense of purpose. The dual process of empowering workfare workers both politically and personally appears to be an innovative example of empowerment practice.

CURRENT STATUS

At the end of 2000 WWOC/ACORN was four years old. In 1998 DPSS overhauled the workfare program for GR recipients into a new program called GROW, which emphasizes job search, training and education rather than simply workfare. Although this may seem like a huge victory, WWOC/ACORN members are critical of GROW. Today, WWOC/ACORN remains active on issues around the implementation of GROW. Over the last two years WWOC/ACORN began recruiting TANF recipients in addition to GR recipients. Both types of welfare recipients plus allies joined forces on a campaign called "Everyone Who Works Deserves a Paycheck." The goal of the campaign was to push DPSS and the Board of Supervisors to implement a wage-based work plan for TANF mothers who are not employed when their two-year time

limit expires. At the time of this writing, the county appeared on the verge of implementing a wage-based program for TANF recipients and had asked for ACORN's input in negotiating the details of how the program will work. If the county follows through, organizers feel a wage-based program for TANF recipients will be the most significant victory in four years of organizing around workfare.

CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

All things considered, ACORN organizers found the GR workfare constituency ripe and easy to organize. The workers felt exploited and were quick to join a de facto union taking direct action to improve their working conditions and fight for GR policy changes. Organizers found that providing bus tokens and free lunches produced large turn-outs for events. Offering the direct service of resolving individual case complaints helped recruit members and build credibility and solidarity among GR recipients. The democratic structure of WWOC allowed members to run the organization and feel empowered both politically and personally. WWOC grew quickly and in coalition with allies delivered a number of substantial victories over the four years of organizing.

Organizers state that the most difficult obstacle in the campaign was the fact that the workfare campaign was the initial ACORN organizing drive in Los Angeles. The normal model for ACORN organizing is to build 10-20 affiliates in low-income neighborhoods and engage the membership in several city-wide campaigns on broader issues such as utility rates, banking, or predatory lending before tackling an issue like workfare that has a narrower base and focus. A huge problem in the workfare campaign was not having the political recognition and power associated with neighborhood organizing and being labeled as "just another welfare group." The main reason ACORN evolved 30 years ago from welfare to neighborhood organizing was precisely the difficulty of building power from the narrow constituency of welfare recipients and welfare issues. Organizers felt if they had been in Los Angeles several years before workfare they would have been able to bring enormously more pressure to bear on the Board of Supervisors and would have been more effective sooner than they were.

Organizers stated if they were to do this again they would recommend building strong neighborhood organizations before organizing around workfare. They also would work harder to win the support of organized labor earlier in the campaign. Labor got involved in the campaign toward its latter stages, and organizers believed if labor had been

involved earlier, WWOC/ACORN would have been more effective. Besides these two points, organizers feel they would not do anything else differently if they had to do it all over again.

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