

Citizens Action Program: dead before its time

Statewide organizations espousing a populist, citizen-based pressure politics aimed at immediate reforms of utilities, taxes, pollution, land use regulations, urban development plans and other visible sources of popular discontent have been rapidly spreading throughout the country.

There is not only Illinois Public Action Council, one of the newer groups (see accompanying story), but also organizations in California (such as Citizens Action League), Massachusetts (Fair Share), the Great Plains (ACORN), Virginia, Maryland, Texas and elsewhere.

At some point many of their organizers were inspired by the dramatic example of the Citizens Action Program, a Chicago metropolitan coalition founded in 1969.

The new groups are thriving, energetically expanding in most cases. But CAP is dead. Only a shell remains—a staff of door-to-door canvassers raising money for other projects.

There are lessons to be learned from CAP's history, and a few of those hard-learned discoveries are now influencing efforts to organize popular resistance to the new era of austerity and the one-two, public-private squeeze on standards of living.

Campaign Against Pollution.

CAP was founded as the Campaign Against Pollution by organizing trainees at the Industrial Areas Foundation, the training and consulting institute run by some of Saul (Rules for Radicals) Alinsky's principal associates.

This small group of organizers brought together a band of people outraged by the heavy air pollution in Chicago. They marched on the Illinois Commerce Commission to complain about smoke billowing from Commonwealth Edison power plant smokestacks. The group was rudely rebuffed, and in classic direct action fashion, CAP was organized from the reaction of officials to citizen complaints.

As it grew, particularly in a few neighborhoods where sympathetic parish priests helped to make contacts with the neighborhood, CAP tackled and won several important air pollution problems. The group's name was changed to the Citizen's Action Program when it expanded to other issues, starting with the underassessment of large industries and office buildings.

One of CAP's most dramatic and extended fights involved the "redlining" of neighborhoods by financial institutions that refused loans to areas where there was—or might be—changes in racial composition. CAP's publicity and pressure on the issue helped to make redlining a national concern. CAP also forced changes in banking policy in some neighborhoods and pushed for new laws that may slow down the process of sudden racial "resegregation" and neighborhood decline.

In its other major campaign, CAP

fought and delayed a multi-billion dollar expressway that would have displaced over 10,000 people. (A deal recently struck between the Republican governor of Illinois and the new Democratic mayor of Chicago provides for a modified portion of that expressway to be built, but the opposition CAP started continues.)

Weaknesses from beginning.

From the beginning CAP had many weaknesses. Groups like CAP need constant excitement, renewed victories, new actions and a flurry of publicity in order to maintain their momentum, but some of the bigger, more difficult issues CAP was interested in could not be resolved quickly and neatly.

While CAP could mobilize hundreds of neighborhood supporters on particularly heated issues, generally its organizing did not go very deep. Its influence rested on showmanship, public embarrassment of officials, good coverage in newspapers, radio and television and a fine sense of how to hit the jugular.

"Almost all of CAP's success was based on smoke and mirrors," original CAP co-chair Paul Booth now says. "There was almost no power—just a scruffy band of a few hundred people. They weren't ultimately interested in having power. They were into having successful fights."

The fights often involved activists in an intense, euphoric fashion, followed by a burned-out exhaustion. Yet the experiences also resulted in dramatic personal transformations of shy, self-deprecating, frustrated housewives, blue-collar workers, small businessmen and others into confident spokespeople for their community.

Organizational and personal rivalries over control of "turf," over issues or over publicity hindered the possible unity between CAP and dozens of other community groups in Chicago. And CAP never really tried to bring in many allies.

There was virtually no effort to link up with independent reform politicians or with trade unions. CAP activists individually worked in elections, and CAP pressure often affected politicians' chances in the polls, but the organization was determined not to back or run candidates.

Although CAP was far more politically sophisticated than community groups fighting for a new stop sign or better rat extermination, it often relied on a lowest common denominator politics, taking advantage of easily-triggered anger about "lazy judges" or high taxes without pushing hard to develop an alternative vision of politics.

Conflicts: organizational control.

In April 1975, when 3,000 people came to the annual CAP convention, the organization looked like a power that had finally expanded beyond its core of white,

thoroughly respectable homeowners (professionals, small businessmen, low-level managers, and some skilled tradesmen). Nearly half of the crowd was black or Latino.

But CAP never had another convention. In the next year, conflicts over control of the organization brought it to a premature demise, whatever its other weaknesses might have been.

Following the Alinsky tradition, CAP had a staff—seven or eight at its peak—of trained outsiders who raised money, did research, and provided the logistical support for demonstrations and campaigns. They were expected to be virtually invisible, working behind the scenes and moving on to another project in two or three years.

Theoretically, Alinsky-style community organizations are controlled by the leaders—people from the community who volunteer their time and make public statements. Yet leaders are always heavily dependent on staff, who are in a position to know what is happening day to day. The staff works full-time and the staff director, in allocating the time of organizers, can influence the success of projects, as CAP leaders eventually discovered.

Leaders from the different community groups that formed CAP were continually exhorted to raise money, often with the implied promise of having more staff time if they brought in large sums. Yet many CAP leaders felt that the promises were not honored.

CAP staff problems were exacerbated by rivalry between the Industrial Areas Foundation, which was retained as a paid consultant and provided nearly all of the staff training, and the new Midwest Academy, another training school for organizers. IAF reportedly wanted a "loyalist" in the staff director position, and the woman, a former leader, who was placed there—over an experienced staff organizer with friendly ties to the Academy—turned out to be far less effective as staff director than she had been as a leader.

Controversy over national network.

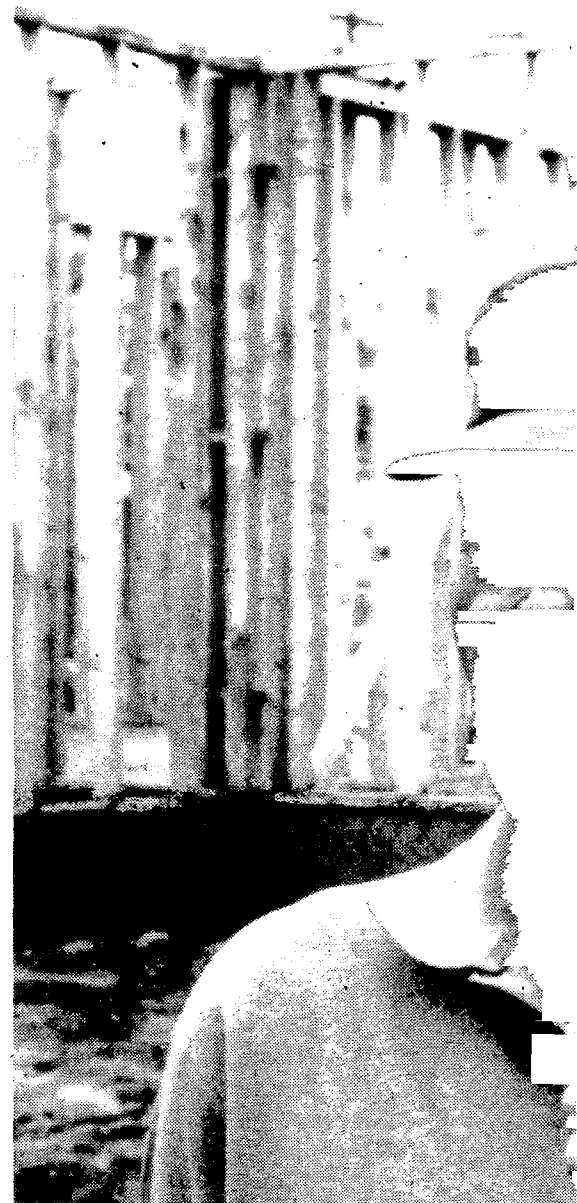
In early 1975 CAP programs began to suffer as staff were placed under extreme pressure to bring in as many "bodies" as possible to the convention. At the same time, there was widespread confusion over CAP's future programmatic direction.

The developing frustrations and conflict between staff and some leaders broke into the open over a proposed national network for funding new community groups. Named "Links," the network would draw off 10 percent of CAP's revenue from canvassing, its primary funding base, up to \$25,000 a year.

Some leaders argued that they couldn't afford the national network, being pushed by the IAF, that they needed more staff for their own work, or that a statewide

Continued on page 20.

By David



Top, Jim Pearl, retired UAW worker, of the South of low income housing his group helped make housing. **Bottom,** Lee Chapman, lobbying for a faces as Public Action's Lifeline bill passes the later defeated by the full House.

A lack of clear program, too few troops, staff domination, competition with other organizations and a tendency to go for the flashy issues, all weakened CAP, but internal conflict doomed it.

Public Action: building from the bottom

Loberg



Bob Creamer/Innos Public Action

Stretching 375 miles from industrial Chicago to sleepy, Southern-style Cairo, crossing coalfields and cornfields embracing rough machinery capitols like Peoria and Moline and small towns out of Norman Rockwell, the state of Illinois wraps within its borders people who rarely see eye to eye on politics.

The predictable divisions of black and white, old and young overlay the downstate suspicions of Chicagoans, the doubts of farmers about unionized urban workers and the worries of long-established residents about recent immigrants still more at home in Polish or Spanish than English.

So something unusual is happening when a young statewide federation of community groups, the Illinois Public Action Council, succeeds in bringing together under one organizational umbrella—with pledges of mutual aid—farmers with sunburned cheeks and white foreheads upset about property taxes, Chicago ethnics talking in the city's distinctive nasal twang about banks redlining their neighborhoods, Peoria blacks fighting shoddy housing projects, coal miners protesting utility rate increases, and suburbanites worried about encroaching superhighways.

Mobilizing "ordinary people."

In its first year "Public Action" has brought together 40 diverse citizen action and community groups claiming to speak for over 100,000 people, won several important victories in the state government and strengthened local organizing throughout the state.

Public Action, like other "new populist" or statewide Alinsky-style organizations, believes in mobilizing a broad spectrum of "ordinary people" to stand up for their interests against banks, corporations and hostile politicians.

Yet Public Action is different, not only in the variety of constituencies it has brought together, but also in its decentralized structure, which preserves financial and organization autonomy for member groups. Public Action provides a competent professional staff that can aid in the "centralized coordination of campaigns and set up local organizations that are locally funded, with their own staff," director Bob Creamer says.

Creamer and many of the Public Action staff got their first taste of community organizing in the Citizens Action Program (See accompanying article on CAP) and have concluded that tight staff control of CAP led to often deceitful manipulations of community leaders and CAP members, ultimately to CAP's demise.

CAP's money problems also led Creamer and others to try the looser, federated model. "To form a serious progressive political base for average people you're going to have to spend millions of dollars," Creamer says. "We're not going to raise that kind of money for a cen-

tralized organization. But you can raise lots of money for local groups."

Trade unions for the community.

Creamer frequently appeals to trade union imagery to explain Public Action's important. "There are two ways of organizing people," he says, "around where they work and around where they live." Public Action's central staff—now 13 people working on programs and 22 canvassing door-to-door to raise money for the central organization—should not dominate local groups, however, which "need people to service them, like locals in a union," he says.

Union staff representatives, of course, do often dominate the locals they serve, but so far Public Action can make a strong case that its organizers have not only formed a new, unprecedented (in Illinois, at least) and effective state-wide force lobbying, testifying, pressuring and protesting on behalf of progressive causes, but have also strengthened and helped to initiate local organizations.

At the state level, Public Action has gained respect from some legislators and administrators as competent and capable of mobilizing a worrisome number of angry citizens. As a result, Public Action played a major role in winning a law—the first of its type—to regulate mortgage bankers (who had been foreclosing on home mortgages held mainly by low-income families at a rate three times the national average and thus contributing to the destruction of many neighborhoods).

It has also forced the governor to appoint a consumer-oriented member to the Illinois Commerce Commission, opened decision-making meetings of the Commission to the public, and pushed through several minor property tax reform bills.

Public Action's "lifeline" electricity rate campaign picked up substantial support before heavy industry lobbying scuttled it. Now Public Action is following up the utility issue with complaints about utility lobbying practices and abuses of customer service, such as unnecessary deposits and quick cut-offs of service.

Access to more resources.

"They have access to people who can do research on some matters we can not," says Dave Garner, 32, an International Association of Machinists business agent, who is leader of the Southern Counties Action Movement. "It's a state-wide organization and has far more lobbying power than a small organization from southern Illinois."

Over 650 people, mainly from small towns, many of them coal miners or unionized factory workers, have joined SCAM since it started in 1976. They blocked half a rate hike sought by their utility and now want to reform property taxes.

Most of the members have little politi-

cal experience. Whether conservative or liberal, they are the sort who "believed you couldn't fight city hall," Garner said. "But when you start hitting people's pocketbooks, then they get mad."

People get mad over other injustices, too. The South Side Improvement Association, a Peoria group led by blacks for the past decade, had long fought against a hostile city council to redevelop their aging neighborhood.

Yet when a developer came in, they discovered he was building ticky-tacky houses with plywood foundations and other structural short-cuts that would have produced a very profitable instant slum.

The leaders, most of whom had been union activists at the big Caterpillar factory, brought in experts to back up their suspicions and persisted in their campaign despite rebuffs from the city. They feel that Public Action guarantees there is more power behind them, "if we need it."

At the same time, like people who learned the lessons of solidarity in their union work, they've gone out of their way to back Public Action projects, even if they had no immediate interest. "We've had anything from three to 20 people practically living in Springfield [the state capitol]," SSIA activist Jim Pearl says, "helping them with anything they want."

Winning the farmers.

Last December farmers in Shelby County, in the southern part of the state, were suddenly hit by staggering property tax increases, often 100 percent. Paul Montgomery, a farmer with a bit more land and success than many of his neighbors, attended a few spontaneous angry meetings before hearing about "this fellow out of Chicago who knew something about taxes."

The fellow was a Public Action organizer, who helped set up the Shelby County Taxpayers Association, which now has over 1,000 farmers in it. The Association filed protests of the increases, which often came from assessments based on high purchase prices for land sold for housing development rather than pasture land, and pressed for new laws.

"I can't see why the land should be taxed on an inflated sales price when you don't intend to sell, want to farm all your life and then hand it on to your kids," Montgomery says. The group wants to defend the family farm, yet they do not want to cut money for necessary services.

Montgomery and organizers have butted up against the traditional stone-willed individualism of small farmers who refuse to join organizations. "That's one of the pitfalls of farming," he observes. "You get so independent you're alienated away from some of the things you should be interested in."

Montgomery hopes that the Shelby County Taxpayers Assn. will move on to

Continued on page 20.



Bob Heneman/Innos Public Action

the Improvement Association in Peoria in front of the city hall. Now he is trying to make sure it is good. The bill was passed by the city council. The bill was passed by the city council. The bill was passed by the city council.

Illinois Public Action is like other new populist groups in seeking to organize mass citizen action, but its commitment to a decentralized structure and building strong local groups makes it work.