

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

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Bob Creamer/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.

Editorial



New beginning in Mid-East?

In an editorial less than two months ago (Oct. 12) we noted that powerful forces were moving not only the U.S. and the USSR but also Israel and the Arabs toward compromise in the Middle East. We said: "If that compromise accomplishes Arab recognition of Israel as a nation, Israeli recognition of Palestinian rights to self-determination, including the right to statehood, Israeli return substantially to its pre-1967 borders, and treaty-secured normalization of relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors," it would be a compromise worth working for.

At that time such talk of compromise seemed fanciful to some. Now it has clearly entered the realm of possibility. The world moves, and given sufficiently powerful forces, it moves quickly.

What are some of those forces?

Strategic American interests in the Mediterranean Sea and its oil, trade, investment, and monetary relations with the Arab nations have moved the U.S. away from unconditional support for Israel and toward exerting intense pressure on both Egypt and Israel to exhibit greater flexibility in negotiating with one another for a Middle East settlement.

The USSR wants to avoid a Middle East conflagration that might bring it into direct conflict with the U.S., which a failure at the upcoming Geneva confer-

ence could precipitate. The Soviets, also, have learned that enmity towards Israel does not necessarily guarantee reliable allies among bourgeois Arab states.

As for Egypt, the government of Anwar el-Sadat recognizes that another war with Israel would probably bring it down in the debris of military stalemate or defeat, skyrocketing debt, and economic deterioration. Egypt carries an enormous debt for past arms purchases. It repudiated its debt to the Soviet Union, and went to the IMF for a \$1.5 billion loan. It cannot have guns and butter and the further neglect of "butter"—economic development and social amelioration—will jeopardize the rule of the Egyptian bourgeoisie.

Israel, for its part, learned from the 1973 war that future wars against the Arabs will incur progressively greater costs, not only in wealth and people but also in national independence and democratic institutions. Israelis of all parties have come to recognize that they can no longer depend upon unconditional support from the U.S., and that continued belligerence can only lead to international isolation and increased insecurity.

All these forces tending toward compromise brought Sadat to Jerusalem. Not the least of these forces, it must be added, is the desire for peace among the Israeli and Arab people, as well as among the

people of Europe, the U.S. and the USSR.

Sadat's exchange with Prime Minister Menahem Begin and opposition Labor party leader Shimon Peres in the Knesset carried tremendous symbolic impact, which is not to be underestimated in human affairs. But there was also substance.

It was a matter of substance for Sadat to declare Egyptian recognition of Israel as a nation and Egypt's readiness to join with Israel and other Arab states in guaranteeing Israel's security and partnership in the Middle East community of nations. Similarly, in offering to guarantee peace and Israel's security prior to Israel's giving up Arab territories and recognizing Palestinian rights, instead of the other way around, Sadat materially changed the Egyptian—and possibly the Arab nations'—negotiating position. As Sadat said, it is now up to Israel to respond, and he has made it virtually impossible for that response to remain within the terms of Begin's previously stated position.

There was something of substance in Begin's address to the Knesset, but more in what he did not say than in what he did. Begin did not denounce the PLO, and though he used the term, "Eretz Israel," he did not repeat claims to Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), but declared everything open to negotiation. Perhaps more significant in the long run was Peres' statement that "the identity

of the Palestinians must be found without endangering the security of Israel," which implies that it can be found.

In engaging in ongoing direct negotiations, the Egyptian and Israeli leaders are seeking to get a grip on forces that have hitherto been moving more and more beyond their control. They are seeking to insure some success at Geneva to avoid another war that they see as inevitable in the event of failure. And they are seeking to attain for themselves and for the Middle East as a whole greater leverage, and hence more independence vis-a-vis the U.S. and the USSR.

It is also possible that Egypt sees in its initiative, which may feasibly lead to an Egyptian-Israeli *entente cordiale*, a new counter-weight against the looming power of an American-fed Iranian autocracy.

The danger remains that the Palestinian Arab people's interests and rights may be lost in the vortex of Egyptian and Israeli power politics. But that danger existed before Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. And the prospect of a new departure opens opportunities for the achievement of Palestinian statehood that were not there before. The Palestinians have carried on their struggle under the conditions of general war and Arab refusal to recognize Israel's existence as a nation. They are well situated to continue their struggle under new circumstances of general peace and greater momentum toward mutual recognition of the right to statehood of both Israel and themselves.

Should peace prevail, Israel can no longer argue on grounds of security for expansion or against a Palestinian Arab state. Nor will biblical arguments be any more convincing. In a condition of general peace, moreover, the PLO will have less need to depend so heavily, as they now do, on the good graces of the Syrian government, which has proved a less than constant ally.

Some socialists and other friends of the Palestinian Arab cause have held that peace is detrimental to Palestinian rights and revolution in the Middle East. The past 30 years' history of warfare does not support that position. Continuing war has strengthened the national bourgeoisies and rightwing political groups in the Arab countries and Israel alike. It has weakened both the PLO and the Palestinian Arabs. It has also provided a continuing pretext for big power intervention injurious to the cause of self-determination.

As socialists, we support direct negotiations between Israel and Egypt and the other Arab states that will lead to Israel's security and the establishment of a Palestinian Arab state. We believe the Palestinian Arabs should recognize Israel's nationhood, and Israel should negotiate directly with the Palestinians, including the PLO, and recognize the Palestinians' nationhood and right to their own state. We believe Israel should return substantially to its pre-1967 borders, and that Israel and the Arab states should enter into treaties of peace and friendship. Such an outcome will aid the cause of self-determination among the nations of the Middle East by making them less accessible to manipulation by the big powers. It will be most conducive to the next stage in the struggle for socialist democracy in both Israel and the Arab nations. In preparing the way for dispelling national hatreds and animosities, it will also be the best way to encourage working class solidarity across national, religious, and ethnic lines.

Both Sadat and Begin invoked the prophet Zachariah before the Knesset in calling for peace with justice. Zachariah is also the prophet who admonished, "Be ye not as your fathers," and who asked, "Your fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live forever?" It was a prophecy of new beginnings that socialists may welcome and help to bring to an outcome beyond the limits that Sadat or Begin may wish them to go.