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Grass-Roots Groups Go National

Throughout the country, activist organizations on the left are developing sophisticated candidate-support systems and broadening their horizons from local issues to national politics.

NYT magazine Sept. 4 '83

By John Herbers

IN CITIES, SUBURBS AND SMALL TOWNS FROM NEW Hampshire to Oregon, platoons of activists ranging from unemployed factory workers to high-school youths are knocking on at least 50,000 doors every evening to press the issue of the day, be it toxic waste in Missouri, utility rates in Ohio or tax reform in Connecticut. Late in the evening, they return to small, bare offices with money, commitments for assistance and names and addresses for computers. Soon, many will be installing telephone banks for the 1984 elections and beyond.

In many grass-roots communities across the nation, where periodic waves of discontent have given rise to such protest movements as the agrarian revolt of the 1890's and the labor strikes of the 1930's, citizens are once again restless. The decline of the nation's old industrial base, uncertainty about what will replace it and concern over unemployment, falling incomes, farm foreclosures and bankruptcies have stirred new rumblings. A multitude of citizen-action groups on the left, which sprang up in the 1970's to secure specific but frequently narrow goals on the state or local level, are now seeking to organize the discontent nationally and reverse the drift toward conservatism evident in President Reagan's election in 1980.

The activism on the left springs from a major development of a decade ago, when millions of citizens became disillusioned with the traditional forms of politics. They organized neighborhood, regional and state groups by the thousands to mount direct actions and legal challenges against what they perceived to be abuses of big government and big business in housing, taxes, insurance, the environment, energy prices, women's and minority rights. They are now broadening their agendas, forming coalitions with such old-line liberals as labor and farm groups. More important, they have been entering elective politics with the kinds of sophisticated candidate-support systems that would have been impossible three years ago. In so doing, they are taking a page from the book written by right-wing activists in the 1970's.

Many leaders of this movement were the angry young of the 1960's who disrupted American society on behalf of civil rights, peace and a host of other causes before disappearing from the national scene. These old-time activists on the left are, how-

ever, only one element in the new political ferment. Thousands of new pressure groups organized around single issues — corporate political action committees (PAC's) and nuclear-freeze advocates, for example — are bringing about a profound change in American government, away from a representative system and toward a more directly participatory one. Yet, compared with other groups, the evolving and merging groups on the left have received less attention even though their influence, both actual and potential, may be greater.

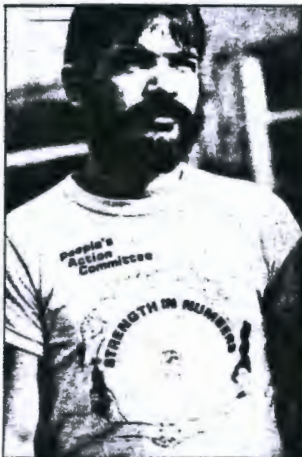
Many of its leaders say the movement has simply been doing

what comes naturally, moving into national politics as a logical next step, with the Reagan Administration as both catalyst and target. They explain the rise of the groups as a result of their organizational maturity coinciding with circumstances favorable to expansion. They assert that even with a somewhat improved economy, unemployment is likely to continue at an elevated level, and the high industrial wages that sustained blue-collar families for decades may never return. The emergence of issues such as toxic waste has brought together blue-collar neighborhoods and environmentalists and moderated their past differences over jobs versus the environment. Labor unions, which for many years could elect or defeat candidates on their own, are losing members and therefore reaching out for allies wherever they can be found. The women's movement, after its crushing defeat in the battle for the equal rights amendment, is looking for new allies. All these centrifugal forces are contributing to a new coalition.

One group typical of this new development is the Illinois Public Action Council, or IPAC, a coalition of about 130 organizations

across the state. In the upcoming 1984 elections, the group's new campaign strategies and techniques will invariably be pitted against those of the new right. The new movement is non-partisan and appeals to citizens of various ideological persuasions; but, in practice, it is seeking to make its impact almost exclusively within the Democratic Party. Its leaders say it is hopeless to attempt any drastic change among Republicans.

The idea for IPAC, and thousands of other self-help organizations across the country, started with Saul Alinsky, a charismatic community organizer and product of Chicago's slums, who perfected confrontational politics at a time when poor communities seemed to have few alternatives. If, for example, a municipality failed to pick up garbage, he and his followers would dump it on the steps of City Hall. When he died of a heart attack in 1972, his successes in Chicago and elsewhere appeared to have been temporary, as urban neighborhoods con-



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tinued to decline and the revolutionary spirit of the 1960's died.

Over time, however, neighborhood groups not only survived but proliferated, matured and gained power. Many of the groups are now engaged in moneymaking ventures involving real estate and transportation and crime-control services. Although very different from a neighborhood organization and involved in more enterprises than Alinsky probably ever dreamed of, IPAC is a direct descendant of one of his last organizations, the Citizen Action Program (CAP) in Chicago. CAP used confrontation stratagems and legal challenges to stop construction of an expressway, to force Commonwealth Edison to reduce air pollution and to secure legislation against the redlining of neighborhoods by banks.

In 1975, Robert B. Creamer, a Louisianian who had moved to Chicago to work for Alinsky and later became CAP's associate director, established IPAC along with several other Alinsky followers as a means for applying pressure on a statewide basis. At first, the group consisted primarily of neighborhood, elderly, minority and other special-interest organizations. Recently, it has added such liberal labor groups as the International Association of Machinists and the United Automobile Workers, as well as several farm groups brought together under an umbrella organization called the Illinois Farm Alliance. Now 36, Creamer calls this organizing "a self-conscious effort to build upon the same spirit as the Illinois Populist movement of the late 19th century and the anti-foreclosure protests of the 1930's."

With an annual budget of \$1.4 million, IPAC operates offices in six cities; ~~Chicago, Springfield, Peoria, Rockford, Joliet, and Danville~~. It runs a PAC providing personnel and research for candidates for the State Legislature and Congress, and maintains a full-time lobby in the Illinois capital of Springfield, where it has been winning some grudging respect in the largely conservative Legislature. On the national level, IPAC belongs to Citizen Action, a new federation claiming to speak for 3 million people in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, Virginia, Indiana, Minnesota and Oregon. This overarching organization's statement of purpose is "to bring together low- and middle-income citizens of every type — urban and rural; women and men; black, Latino and white; senior citizens, union members and church members. All [of the organizations in the federation] emphasize community organizing and grass-roots leadership development as the key to social change. All address the economic questions of greatest concern to their members as neighborhood residents, consumers, taxpayers and workers."

FOR THE MOST PART, THIS BROAD MOVEMENT's top leaders show a surprising uniformity from group to group and state to state. Most are in their 30's or early 40's and egalitarian in their attitudes, preferring to stay in the background while pushing their local members up front. In 1965, when the civil-rights movement was at its peak and the anti-Vietnam protests were just beginning, they were high-school and college students. Like thousands of their peers, they took to the streets, part of a great national ideological outpouring against what was perceived as racial oppression and an immoral war. While the Stokely Carmichaels and Abbie Hoffmans grabbed headlines and went to court, these followers quietly organized rallies, marches and demonstrations.

When the movement faltered in the 1970's, the current leaders did not splinter off into such radical (Continued on Page 42)

and frequently violent groups as the Weathermen, nor did they join the workaday middle class, as most of the rank and file did. Instead, they turned

~~WELL BACKS~~ ON the national scene and immersed themselves in the neighborhoods, becoming what Harry C. Boyte in his book "The Backyard

Revolution" called "a new generation of organizers."

Heather Booth, a soft-spoken woman in her late 30's, is a movement theorist and organizer. She grew up in Brooklyn, was converted to direct-action politics as a university student and led antiwar and women's protests before turning, along with her husband, Paul, to neighborhood organizing. In 1973, Mrs. Booth, a former schoolteacher, founded Chicago's Midwest Academy, which has trained an estimated 10,000 organizers in organizing low- and moderate-income people across the country.

"Politics was in disarray," says Mrs. Booth, recalling the mood of the early 1970's. "People of good faith were embroiled in factionalism. They were bushed out and turning off or turning in on each other. Watergate was just beginning to be exposed. It was a pretty awful period. We were trying to find a way to hold on to something positive."

What Mrs. Booth and others achieved in various regions over the next few years was substantial but circumscribed. They helped build organizations and institute techniques for assisting specific people to achieve such specific goals as stopping a freeway, filling potholes and pushing City Hall, the Legislature or Congress to enact certain consumer legislation. Still, the elective system the young activists had condemned as corrupt rolled on its own track with its consultants, pollsters, managers, media experts and candidates, unimpeded by the citizen-activist movement on the left. "Take 'em on as they come up," was, with rare exception, the activist attitude toward elected Democrats, Republicans, liberals and conservatives alike.

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The election of Ronald Reagan and, especially, the impact of the new right in 1980 changed that. Those working under the umbrella of Citizen Action, among others, decided they could not survive under the new order unless they got into elective politics. "We were at the stage where we could no longer stay out," says Ira Arlook, executive director of the Cleveland-based Citizen Action. "There were public officials with us on the issues whom the Republicans were making a special effort to knock off. We could not simply say to them, 'Good luck, hope you win.'"

To prepare for the 1982 Congressional elections and beyond, Citizen Action set up the State and Local Leadership Project, a nonpartisan training school for campaign workers based in Chicago and under Mrs. Booth's direction. Assistance was provided by Paul Tully, who had been with the George McGovern and Edward M. Kennedy Presidential campaigns and now works for Walter F. Mondale. Statewide groups set up PAC's, selected Congressional and legislative districts where Reagan Republicans could be defeated and sent their workers door to door promoting first the issues and then the candidates who supported their positions. Despite the fact that it was impossible in many instances to separate the effects of their efforts and those of the recession and a widespread reaction against the Reagan policies, their record was impressive.

One of the movement's more celebrated winners was Doreen Del Bianco, a young activist elected to the Connecticut Legislature over a Republican incumbent. Miss Del Bianco joined the (Continued on Page 46)

'I was tired of talking to legislators who don't understand what it is to go from paycheck to paycheck, who don't understand how hard it is to pay Northeast utility bills,' says Doreen Del Bianco, now a member of the Connecticut Legislature.

Connecticut Citizen Action Group four years ago when she decided to sign a petition for lower utility rates.

"I was just a housewife and blamed all my troubles on blacks, Puerto Ricans and other victims," she says, reflecting on her political transformation. "Now I know it's the corporations that are keeping people down in the workplace and in the community."

Miss Del Bianco eventually became one of the leaders of the group, and when the organization decided last year to support candidates in elections she enthusiastically entered the race for state representative from a Waterbury district that had traditionally sent moderates of both parties to Hartford. "I entered the race because I was tired of talking to legislators who don't understand what it is to go from paycheck to paycheck, who don't understand how hard it is to pay Northeast utility bills, who don't get threatened when their property taxes go up," she says. Despite a cool reception from the Democratic Party in the district, Miss Del Bianco got enough money from labor unions and help from grass-roots activists to win by a margin of 137 votes out of 8,200 cast. As could be expected, Miss Del Bianco has found herself at cross purposes with the Hartford corporate lobby, which considered her and her organization radical and out of step with the current pro-business trend in the country.

For most of these groups, the first steps into politics were tentative. Next year, though, they plan a much more extensive effort. IPAC, perhaps the most politically advanced of all the groups, is being watched as a bellwether for the movement elsewhere.

In Illinois, as in other Midwestern states, plant closings, layoffs, fiscal deficits on all levels, declining public services, farm foreclosures and discoveries of new toxic wastes have become routine occurrences. Some of the small industrial cities have unemployment rates above 20 percent.

Every day at 2 P.M., IPAC canvassers gather in scattered locations across the state. In Rockford, Nell Lancaster, a veteran activist and a canvass supervisor, is giving a pep talk on the issues to a dozen or so workers in a store-front office with the stark, unkempt air of a union hall. The workers, in their 20's and 30's, are black and white men and women and, like Miss Lancaster, casually dressed in jeans and jackets. Utility rates have increased in the area, and Miss Lancaster predicts more hikes if President Reagan's bill to deregulate natural gas passes and the State Legislature fails to restrain prices. There is no pretense of objectivity in these briefings. In the Populist tradition, the issue is black and white: the people versus big business and government. By the time Miss Lancaster ends the briefing, the canvassers, recruited from activist ranks, are filled with enough indignation to get them through the evening.

The canvass itself is a highly professional operation. The workers pile into cars and spread out over suburbs of small working-class houses whose occupants are, more often than not, frugal and conservative. When the door opens, Miss Lancaster, carrying a clipboard with credentials and a statement of purpose showing prominently, explains she is with IPAC, a group fairly well known throughout the state, working to keep utility rates down. Her approach is soft but direct. The resident, a white-collar man just home from work, looks vexed but lets her in for a brief discussion of the issues. She emerges five minutes later with a check for \$15 from someone who may support the organization on other issues as well. The man has bought a piece of whatever political impact IPAC can make and a subscription to its Illinois Action.

Others turn her away or decline to contribute, but Miss Lancaster and other canvassers are often successful. She says the canvassing operation is meticulously accounted for. If a canvasser, who is paid slightly over the minimum hourly wage, can not collect \$80 an evening, he or she is fired. Canvassing is not conducted in areas where the population falls below a certain density because it takes too long to get to the next house. The money canvassers bring in — IPAC expects to gross more than \$1 million this year — along with names and addresses for the computer banks, is the lifeblood of the organization's new initiatives. Although canvassing is not a new technique, these activists have so perfected it in the past year or two that many of them claim it has boosted their fortunes even more than the enormously successful direct-mail appeals have the new right's.

At state headquarters in Chicago, IPAC director Creamer, along with a governing board representing various disparate groups, are reaching out in many new directions. The group has set its sights and resources on Congressional districts outside of Chicago, a city considered too encumbered by the old Democratic machine for IPAC to be effective. (Although the group did not endorse anyone in the recent Mayoral primary, it did send out canvassers to work for Harold Washington in the general election.) IPAC is seeking — sometimes over the opposition of county chairmen — to rebuild the state Democratic Party around Populist issues and from the precinct level up. The attempt is to create the same kind of grass-roots structure that existed for many years in the Minnesota Democratic Farmer-Labor Party.

For 1984, IPAC has targeted five conservative Congressmen for defeat. The races will pit the techniques of the right against those of the left. In Presidential politics, IPAC is debating

whether it should support a candidate in the Illinois Democratic primary next year, but organized labor has become such an important element in the coalition that its members have decided its choice would have to coincide with that of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., which has announced it will break with tradition and endorse a candidate before the primaries. IPAC leaders deny that they have become captives of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., explaining that they simply do not want to risk fracturing their coalition at this point. An IPAC endorsement would give any Democratic candidate a leg up in Illinois.

Creamer has recruited Michael McGann, a deputy director of Senator Kennedy's 1980 Illinois Presidential campaign, from downstate Illinois to run the political operation. IPAC's finance director is Rahm Emmanuel, a 23-year-old, well-connected Chicagoan formerly with the Democratic National Committee, who brings in contributions from the North Side rich as well as national political action committees. Further adding to the diversity are leaders such as Vince Demuzio, a Democrat and assistant majority leader of the Illinois Senate, one of the spark plugs on the IPAC board and sponsor of much of its legislation. He is an alumnus of Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty," having

served as director of a federally funded, small-town anti-poverty agency.

Their march converging on Springfield from Chicago, Peoria and East St. Louis last spring was designed to give visibility to the coalition of farmers, urban blacks, the elderly, the unemployed, the clergy, working mothers and organized labor. Out of all this commingling, Creamer says, the various groups are trying to form "a long-lasting progressive political movement that can redirect American politics in a humane, democratic direction.

"The process that is under way in Illinois," Creamer says, "is part of a larger national dialogue aimed at shaping an integrated progressive economic alternative — an alternative both to right-wing, supply-side dogma, and the traditional economic policies of the last 40 years."

Creamer and other leaders across the nation speak of laws and policies that would direct more capital into "productive areas" such as manufacturing plants and equipment and less into "speculation, mergers and acquisitions." Frequently, their discussions trail off into economic theory, but the group's policies are clearly directed toward more public regulation and broader participation by people at the lower end of the economic ladder.

They are seeking, among other things, larger public expenditures to clean up toxic waste; more consumer protection, especially against mortgage foreclosures and the cutoff of utilities; more regulation of energy prices; a shift away from sales and property taxes to the graduated income tax; strengthening of work-safety laws, and higher funding of job-training and social programs — a platform hardly compatible with the Reagan philosophy or that of many modern-day Democrats.

When asked how they are handling the emotional issues — abortion, prayer in public schools, and pornography, among others — that helped give rise to the new right by appealing to working-class people, most movement leaders answer identically: They ignore those issues, thus avoiding divisiveness. Michael Ansara, staff director of the Massachusetts Fair Share in Boston, points out that a family could support the economic and environmental policies of his organization, which boasts 10,000 dues-paying families, and at the same time the social stance of the right-to-life movement.

At the heart of the movement is an element of class struggle. "Our members say things used to work for them and they don't any more," says Ansara. "Many have large families and grew up in

the Catholic Church. Look at the member who is 35 years old, has worked hard, married, obeyed all the rules but is facing declining income and other troubles. They see young professional couples who broke all the rules, evaded the draft in the Vietnam War, lived together unmarried, have high salaries, drive a Volvo and are coming in buying up and restoring the houses of working people. That is the stereotype."

The leaders of Massachusetts Fair Share are considering whether to move into elective politics prior to the 1984 elections. Groups across the country — in California, New York, Texas, Florida, Montana, Colorado and other states — are in various stages of development. California's Campaign for Economic Democracy, headed by Tom Hayden, and ACORN, a national neighborhood movement for low- and moderate-income people based in Little Rock, Ark., have long been supporting candidates. Most groups have not. But this year the trend is the same everywhere — toward coalitions and greater involvement in elections.

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Although the ascendancy of Reagan conservatism has encouraged a renaissance of the left, many cite progressivism's new importance as evidence that the "new left" has simply come of age. Lee Webb, executive director of the Conference on Alternative State and Local Policies, a privately funded, Washington-based research group, gives elected officials and some activists detailed technical assistance in pursuing laws and policies. He provides them with "model legislation and ideas for innovative policies" — how to deal with such issues as housing, plant closings, tax reform, economic development, pension fund investment, and others.

Webb, a student of past progressive and political-reform movements, is seldom surprised when popular movements burst upon the national scene and find national officials poorly prepared to deal with them — as the nuclear-freeze movement did last year. Webb thinks the nation, many of its citizens disillusioned with Washington's solutions, is reverting to a historic tradition of great movements beginning at the local and state levels and eventually bubbling up to the national scene.

Leaders of the activist left

think they may be on the verge of making an impact on national elections. Yet coalition politics have long been a shaky affair in this country. Efforts to unite the poor across racial lines have failed more often than they have succeeded. Paul Tully, a former State and Local Leadership Project adviser, views Citizen Action and other coalitions as a "very serious operation," but warns that such politics work best when a "fire-breathing dragon" — as many in the movement view the Reagan Administration — offers a common threat. If the nation prospers over the next year or so, the dragon may seem less threatening.

Many leaders feel there is dragon enough in the structural changes taking place in the American economy. Ira Arlook of Citizen Action says that such issues as toxic waste are sufficient to keep the canvassers going for a long time. Significantly, the most wrenching social and economic changes are occurring not so much in marginal states as in those with large populations, big Congressional delegations and many electoral votes — Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Ohio, among others.

It seems doubtful that the new progressive movement can achieve basic changes in American political thought at this stage. The radical change that it is seeking lies in putting segments of the economy — the banking institutions, the big corporations and the state utility commissions — under more democratic control, to give rank-and-file Americans a larger voice in how and where dollars are invested. But many of the issues, including public control of utility rates and tax reform, are quite traditional. And the movement seems locked in to supporting a traditionalist Democrat such as Walter Mondale for President in 1984. Yet it is expected to have a major impact next year in the Congressional and state elections.

At a minimum, the new stirrings among the activists on the left are likely to add a balance to the political scales that was absent in 1980, when the new right inspired many religious fundamentalists and other conservatives while many on the left boycotted the elections. In any event, the nation need not be surprised if the activists on the left turn out, as IPAC's Creamer predicts, to be "an increasingly important force in American politics." ■



MAIC FOKEMPER

Canvasser, left, signs up supporters for IPAC in Rock Island, Ill., on the issue of utility rates.