

A GUIDE TO COMMUNITY ORGANISING

STEPS FOR GETTING STARTED

REMEMBER: If you are going to do community organising, DO IT IN YOUR OWN COMMUNITY! Don't be a missionary!

RESEARCH AND PREPARATION

Look around your community and determine what issues it faces. Talk to your neighbours, what issues do they think are important regarding the community. Determine what kinds of projects you can develop or direct action you can take that meet the community's needs or address the community's issues. Find out if others are already working on the problems in their community and if they've been effective and what you can learn from them. Determine what kinds of resources you have available and who in your community might be useful allies in accomplishing your goals.

VOLUNTEERING OR STARTING YOUR OWN GROUP

If there is a group doing work in your community and they are effective, it would be a good idea to volunteer with them to gain experience. If there is no group doing work on the issues you are concerned about or existing groups are not effective, start your own group but try to remain on friendly terms with existing groups.

PLANNING

Set a goal. Devise objectives (or strategies) to achieve the goal. Devise actions to achieve the objectives.

COMMUNITY BUILDING PROJECTS

Plan everything you do in your community with an effort to bring people in the community together and get them involved. Make a special effort to get people in the community who are not politically conscious to work on projects and become active. In short, gear your work towards not just helping the community but towards actually strengthening a sense of community.

FIGHT PREJUDICE AND PATRIARCHY AS YOU ORGANISE

Make a special effort to ensure that your organisation and its projects reflect the racial, ethnic and gender diversity in the community and make feminism and anti-racism explicit parts of your organisation's politics and policies.

GET ATTENTION

Be visible in your community; make every effort to let people in your community know you exist. Seek press attention when you do an action, gain a victory, or establish a project.

THE SIX PANTHER P'S

When people think of the Black Panther party they think Black. Some Black people who have some guns who tried to kill some white people. That they were declared by the FBI as the most dangerous bunch of Black folks trying to kill white folks. In actuality, the Black Panther Party was a group unique from a lot of the other groups who formed during the 60's. It was formed among the unemployed, ghetto sections of the Black youth, unlike the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was an organisation of ministers who were well placed in their communities. The Panthers formed their organising on the basis of the bottom of society - the youth who had no job prospects, who had been hurled off the plantations and into the cities. Of course in that situation, they had a constant confrontation with the police, and the Panthers largely grew out of that relationship. In the course of their organising, we have identified six things they did (or did not do), "the Six Panther Ps" which we see as useful, which confirmed our experience in dealing with the unemployed, displaced people at the foundation of our movement. The Panthers were primarily in the Black communities, but we're seeing that the problem of poverty today is across colour lines. It was a different period back then, but we saw in what they were doing something we can learn from. We've been testing them as a means of building these six ingredients and building a movement against the power of the powerful.

THE FIRST P IS PROGRAM

A program indicates the values, goals, issues and interests of that segment of the population that you're focusing on. We believe that everybody should have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that that should not be reduced in any way. However at this stage of history the upper classes of this country have given up that creed. We think everybody should have those rights, especially in a country that has the kind of productive capacity that this one has. These things should be non-negotiable. We think that our program is a program that is in the interests of the majority of the people, and not the one that is pursued by those being controlled by the rich. We profoundly believe that, and have found that our experience corroborates that. Not only that, but we are being echoed throughout the world - throughout the world people are having to take up this basic program, seeing its fundamental moral principles. We organise and unite around the program.

THE SECOND P IS PROTEST

You cannot be hurting and don't holler. We believe that if you hurt, holler. You got to do something about it; you can't just

accept the situation. The segment of the population that we're focusing on, upon which we're building a movement which includes all segments, is a section which has to move, has to protest, and can't accept business as usual. To stand still is to die. To stand still is to go backward. To stand still is to succumb to the kind of depuration that we're seeing. The idea of protest is key, and of course you see in the experiences of the Panthers and other such groups in the past, their ability to affect public opinion, their ability to get heard was based on continuing campaigning and activities around their basic needs.

THE THIRD P IS PROJECTS OF SURVIVAL

This country and this economy can be characterized in one word, "surplus." It's a shame, but that's the reality. People can't acquire things, but there's surplus. They're throwing away food, but people can't eat. Downstairs [in the human rights house] we have more clothes than we can give away. There are surplus nurses, and not enough medical care. Surplus doctors, surplus lawyers! And yet, people are going without. There are 12 million empty luxury-housing units in this country. Look it up! Not run-down units, but luxury units. They are sitting there empty while we have six to ten million people who are living with their parents, or living on the grates, or in shelters and so forth who are all homeless. 12 million units is equivalent to the entire housing stock of Canada - surplus! So, the question of projects of survival is how do we develop a co-operative effort to procure those surpluses, and to use them as a lever for organising. And we do, we have food distributions. The way we were able to solidify our position when we took over the church was that regularly we were able to get extra baby carriages (cause we don't have cars), fill them with food and go door to door with the carriages and talk to people about their issues and our issues and how we can unite. We get food from bakeries, from food places that are throwing it away. And the food's perfectly good; if you see it you'll see that there ain't nothing wrong with it. Projects of survival are especially significant in our organising experience. Our organising attracts people on the basis of their immediate needs - food, housing, childcare, etc. Activities like tent cities and housing takeovers are designed to meet people's needs and build organisation in the process. As we come together to meet our common needs, opportunities for political education and other key elements arise. We have tremendous strength by virtue of addressing the problems which people are struggling with day-to-day. However, we don't just try to meet people's individual needs - we use that struggle to fight for everyone's needs to be met. But that is how many people come into relationship with our organising efforts. So projects of

survival are absolutely key as far as our organising method.

THE FOURTH P IS PUBLICITY WORK

We, through various forms, generate messages - through newsletters, through T-shirts, or posters, through speaking engagements, through the internet or other things. These are all very critical in terms of getting through our message, and talking to each other and informing ourselves. You gotta have publicity.

THE FIFTH P IS POLITICAL EDUCATION

We're constantly engaging people in study of what their situation is, understanding what their situation is, so they can articulate what's going on and to educate others. Our basic motto is "each one teach

one," and "the more you know, the more you owe," to pass on the message and so forth. The significance of this P should not be underestimated. Political education is essential for building resistance, which is at the base of all our efforts. Also, political education can deepen people's commitment to a struggle. It's important that political education isn't seen as something separate from organising, but as an inseparable part of the process. When political education is irrelevant to the issues that people are struggling with, it's ineffective. It's more effective when it explains their experience, allowing them to gain clarity and insight into their struggles and the struggles of others.

THE LAST P IS PLANS NOT PERSONALITIES

This particular P is a lesson from the panthers by way of a negative experience.

The Panthers, in what they were doing was targeted by the FBI as the most dangerous organisation to the natural security of the country. The FBI developed a plan to fragment, dismantle and destroy this organisation. They recognized that that organisation was organised as factions around personalities, around a leader. Through subterfuges, infiltration, fake letters and so forth the FBI was able to get these leaders to fight one another. Organisationally, the Panthers were based around these personalities more than a policy, plan or program. A sustainable organisation is not dependent on a leader, but dependent on a plan, principles, a policy. We see that as very key.

[Excerpted from "On the poor organising the poor" by Willie Baptist
<http://www.kwru.org/educat/orgmod2.html#six>
with modifications by the editor.]

DOOR KNOCKING TIPS

In community politics, door knocking plays an essential role. From just getting to know your neighbours better, to carrying out a local survey or trying to sign people up to a local campaign or petition, talking to people at home is a valuable exercise, due to its face-to-face nature,

However, it can be a daunting task, so we put together a set of tips to help you on your way, with pre-planning and then how to act on people's doorstep.

BEFORE YOU GO

Never go out on a rainy day, people are put off if you look like a drowned rat or are covered with a hood, hat or umbrella

Similarly, avoid going out if you are ill.

Dress smartly, not necessarily suited but ironed and clean. Don't look like a burglar or bailiff - people are less likely to answer the door to someone wandering up their drive with a big hood or black hat and scarf...

It's best to start organising with your closer neighbours, so you have a basic trust already.

The best time to go knocking is during daylight hours. It is best not to go around dinnertime. Yes people will be home, but they won't be happy to talk. Similarly, don't go just after work, people need at least half an hour to relax before doing anything like talking to strangers.

It's always good to have a clip board in you hand - even if you don't really need it, take one with some leaflets on.

The resident's first point of eye contact is either your face or the clipboard so always make sure that your group or campaign's header is present and clearly visible on the board.

Depending on what sort of thing you're doing it could be useful to have two sets of leaflets, one for people who are out or answer the door and tell you they've got no

time and a separate one for people who are more interested.

If you have enough time it is worth calling back to houses that didn't answer the first time. Just make sure that you keep an accurate record of which houses you spoke to people in or else you'll end up calling on the same person several times and they'll get pissed off...

Bring a sheet to note down the contact details of particularly interested people.

Some people have put a card through the doors of the areas to be visited announcing the time they'll be along - if people don't want to talk they can just put the card in the window to indicate they're not interested. While time-consuming this can be worthwhile.

If you're leafleting for a 'controversial' issue (e.g. anti-fascist) then start at the top of a tower block, otherwise you may have to walk down past hostile people who might have been alerted by your leaflets.

AT THE DOOR

Say the most important thing first. Avoid apologising for bothering them in the first sentence - people prefer you get to the point of why you're calling.

The person opening the door won't want to hear too much complicated stuff in the first minute or so, so leave aside complicated explanations in favour of making a good first impression.

If you seem confident and relaxed, so will they - if you're nervous and tense then they will also tend to react defensively.

Use inclusive gestures, open stance - never cross arms while you speak, or stand like you are about to leave for example.

Don't be intimidating, and don't approach people's doors in groups.

Remember to smile; don't go if you're in a bad mood. People always pick up on it.

Look people in the eye, use a strong

handshake - it makes you seem trustworthier.

Always be honest about what you know and don't know - don't flannel to sound more informed.

Know your script and answers to frequently asked questions, so you don't fumble your words when asked.

It sounds silly, but your knocking style is important. If you sound too official, people may not come to the door.

Behave from the moment you touch the gate - people often hear it and will check you through the curtains. Close the gate behind you, and don't walk on the grass. Close the gate behind you when you leave as well.

FINALLY...

You shouldn't be nervous about knocking on people's doors. Most people are very nice even if they're not interested in what you have to say. It helps if you have a leaflet to give people because then you can refer to it, point out the date and venue of a meeting etc. Also if what you're trying to organise is local and for the good of the community then you have an immediate advantage over most people who are door-knocking for other reasons.

Once you've knocked on a few doors and got some feedback it's plain sailing usually, although don't be disappointed if all the people who seemed enthusiastic don't actually turn up to a meeting or event.

Last of all, enjoy it! It's a great buzz when you get into it, and a great way to get to know people in your community.

Source: www.libcom.org

Distributed by:

More copies can be downloaded from
www.zabalaza.net/zababooks