

ACORN: What can we learn?



JOHN ATLAS

1 ACORN'S MISSION



- **AUTHOR SEEDS OF CHANGE**

- ACORN's mission: to improve the lives of lower- income people by organizing them into a national force, focusing on bread and butter issues including: Affordable Housing; Health Care; Education; Voter Registration; The Minimum Wage

- Founded by Wade Rathke in 1970 in Arkansas.

- By 2008:It grew to an organization of 400,000 members.

- In 38 states; 100 chapters

- Hundreds of talented low paid hardworking organizers and staff.

Involved in electoral politics, the delivery of services, and community organizing;

Worked simultaneously at the neighborhood, municipal, state, and national levels.

2. Family of Organizations



- By 2008, ACORN's combined "family of organizations," had an annual budget of \$100 million. Those entities included:
- The core non-profit group, which was not tax exempt.
- Two nonprofit tax-exempt corporations that conduct research, policy analysis, and leadership training,
- Two union locals: two southern-based radio stations (KNON and KABF); many publications (including the magazine *Social Policy*),
- An accounting, financial, and payroll services firm (Citizen Consulting, Inc.),
- A corporation that builds affordable housing and provides homeownership counseling (ACORN Housing),
- A law office; Financial Justice Center; The Living Wage Resource Center;
- Project Vote. And ACORN International Argentina, Canada, Peru, and Mexico, and he hoped to establish membership chapters in the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Kenya, and Nigeria.

3.MANAGEMENT



- Management. Run by a management committee chosen by the chief organizer, Wade Rathke. Most decisions were made by local chapters, but Rathke had to final power to hire and fire.
- At first this committee was white, about half male and female.
- In 1990s, Bertha Lewis became the first black member.
- The president of the board of trustees was a black woman, Maude Hurd. BOT was mostly people of color. Very talented and competent leaders who were leaders of the local chapters.
- IT WAS A **NATIONAL, HIERARCHAL** Association. Both top down and bottom

4 WHAT ACORN ACCOMPLISHED? 1



- **EMPOWERED EVERYDAY CITIZENS RALLYING THEM ON BEHALF OF ISSUES THAT ACORN'S MEMBERS DEEPLY CARED ABOUT**. Basically solving problems to improve their lives.
- **FAIR HOUSING,**
- **INCREASING WAGES,**
- **SAVING NEIGHBORHOODS,**
- **STOPPING PREDATORY LENDING,**
- **INCREASING HOME OWNERSHIP,**
- **TURNING ABANDONED BUILDING INTO AFFORDABLE HOMES**
- **GETTING STOP SIGNS UP AT DANGEROUS INTERSECTIONS.**

5. WHAT HAS ACORN ACCOMPLISHED? 2

- **LED THE FIGHT TO SAVE THE LOWER NINTH WARD IN NEW ORLEANS AFTER KATRINA.**
- **REGISTERED VOTERS—MILLIONS OF POOR, MINORITY AND YOUNG.**
- **BUILT A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION SO THEY COULD WIN VICTORIES AT THE LOCAL, STATE AND NATIONAL LEVEL.**
- **NATIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND MINIMUM WAGE LAWS**
- **ACORN LED THE SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN TO INCREASE THE NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE**

6. HOW DID ACORN ACCOMPLISH SO MUCH?



- **STARTED WITH THE TRADITIONAL ALINSKY ORGANIZING MODEL (SEE PAGES 20-21 OF MY BOOK) AND THEN ADDED 4 CRITICAL INNOVATIONS :**
- **1. ELECTORAL POLITICS;**
- **2. UNION ORGANIZING**
- **3. DOOR TO DOOR RECRUITING DUES PAYING MEMBERS;**
- **4. ENTERING INTO AGREEMENTS WITH ITS ENEMIES AND TO PROVIDE AFFORDABLE LOANS AND TAX RETURN SERVICES**

7 ACORN 's Opponents.



Local politicians Democrats and Republicans

Banks, predatory payday, and mortgage lenders opposed to government regulation

Businesses in the low-wage restaurant, bar industry, and non-unionized factory owners opposed to living and minimum wage campaigns.

Republican Party opposed ACORN because of its successful voter registration campaigns

Conservative think tanks and entertainment media--for ideological reasons and profit.

8. THE ATTACKS



- The ACORN story is a cautionary tale of what can happen in an increasingly polarized political environment, when a activist group
- challenges the profits of big business
- and the power of conservative and mainstream politicians.
- And promotes the idea that government when it works with civic groups as a big role to play in solving problems

9 ATTACK: VOTER FRAUD



- After the 2000 presidential election, Karl Rove (President Bush's top political adviser) and conservative Republicans began orchestrating attacks on Acorn for alleged "voter fraud," as part of a campaign to suppress the voting of minorities and the poor. As part of this effort, U.S. Attorneys were asked to investigate Acorn. Attorney gate?

10. Attack: THE OBAMA ELECTION. An important cause of ACORN's demise



- Leading up to the 2008 election, the right wing base was pushing McCain attack ACORN and to tie the group to Obama.
- Republicans were feeding stories to the press about ACORN phony registered voters.
- McCain vilified ACORN and linked the group to Obama.
- This narrative fit with the McCain campaign's attempt to link Obama to evil people like Bill Ayers, the anti-war activist from the 1960s.

11. ATTACK: ACCUSATIONS TRUE OR FALSE?



- **ACCUSED OF ENGAGING IN WIDESPREAD VOTER FRAUD.**
- **INTIMIDATING CITIZENS WHEN THEY GO TO VOTE.**
- **CAUSING THE SUBPRIME CRISIS AND THE RECESSION THAT FOLLOWED**
- **MISUSING FEDERAL FUNDS.**
- **STEALING A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION.**
- **SHAKING DOWN BANKS, BIG CORPORATIONS ,AND THE RICH SO ITS MEMBERS CAN GET MONEY FOR THEIR OWN POLITICAL PURPOSES**
- Although none of the accusations were true the stories planted before and during the 2008 election defamed ACORN

12 Breitbart, Okeefe Fox News



- IN July of 2009, just a few months after Obama was elected president, two conservative activists, twenty-five-year-old James O'Keefe and twenty-year old Hannah Giles, began visiting ACORN's offices with a hidden video camera.
- O'Keefe and Giles devised a scheme to lure ACORN staff into providing questionable, perhaps even illegal, advice on tax evasion, human smuggling, and child prostitution.
- Over the summer, they visited ten ACORN offices. Giles, claiming she was running from a former pimp, they would try to coax ACORN workers into giving outrageous advice, and O'Keefe secretly captured it on videotape.
- O'Keefe took the footage and made salacious, misleading and doctored video.

13. Breitbart and the beginning of Fake News



- As our new documentary reveals ***Breitbart***, **Fox News**, and **James O’Keefe** targeted ACORN with a sophisticated internet campaign devised by *Breitbart*.
- It began with a salacious and doctored video produced by O’Keefe.
- *Breitbart* then deployed an army of bloggers to make sure the video went viral, and Fox News ran the story 24/7.
- They also worked and coordinated with several members of the Republican Party.

14. The attack and THE MAINSTREAM PRESS



- After the right-wing echo chamber orchestrated its war on ACORN, the mainstream news media joined the chorus.
- A media campaign alleging a voter fraud controversy was the story, even when there is little or no truth to the story.
- 83 percent of the stories that linked ACORN to those allegations failed to mention that actual instances of voter fraud were nonexistent.

15 Breitbart's Target



- Their target audience was liberal supporters and the mainstream media, including *The New York Times* and CNN, Washington Post
- They dutifully joined the right-wing chorus denouncing ACORN rather than independently investigating the story.

16. The strategy refined and Applied to other progressive orgs and people



- After 2009, the same forces refined and applied the strategies that defamed ACORN in attempts to destroy other progressive groups like:
- Planned Parenthood,
- the teachers unions and public radio,
- the candidacies of Louisiana Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu and, more recently, Hillary Clinton.

Lessons 1-8



1. Improving the lives of the poor requires community organizing.
2. Our organizations should include people from all walks of life, crossing race and class lines: lower-income and middle income working-class families, white and black and brown.
3. Our groups should have members who are trained and motivated to lobby, march, and participate in decision-making
4. Members encouraged to vote so they can elect people who support them.
5. Members pay dues so they don't have to completely rely on foundations and government
6. Effective community organizing requires smart, dedicated professional staff. Why? Because volunteers alone can't change the behavior of powerful corporations, Wall Street, rich individuals and others dedicated to preserving the status quo.
7. We need national organizations because significant change cannot be won at just a local or state level.
8. National organizations need local chapters so we can win victories on the national, state and local level.

Lessons 9-13



9. Leadership counts. Spread the leadership and emphasize leadership training.
10. ACORN had a a form of hierarchal democratic structure that gave the leadership a capacity to lead and coordinate national campaigns. In contrast to the Occupy Wall Street movement which didn't and died out quickly
11. Electoral politics counts. If you want to do more than provide band-aids for the poor, you have to be engage in electoral politics. If you are a non-profit not tax-exempt, you need to also have a Pac, and a 501c 4.
Keep careful records.
12. You need an inside outside strategy that continues to mobilize the base around economic issues. Don't depend of the DP for progress. Don't depend on foundations. That's why ACORN charged it members dues.
13. Successful campaigns and social change require the mobilization of members and allies.

Lessons 14-19



14. Look for issues deeply felt by the poor, issues that will make a significant difference in their lives,
15. Pick issues popular with the public, morally just i.e. the right thing to do.
16. The issues can be hard to achieve, but need a path to victory.
17. Building power counts. Social change that benefits the poor requires power. Not charity or therapy
18. ACORN was deliberately organic and adaptable. Rathke: “The structural rule was really if it built power, then it should be done.” Nothing about the organizational structure was limiting; everything was expansive.”
19. Allies are important. Unions are very important allies.

Lessons 20 -23



20. **Communications is important.** In this media driven age your organization must have a communications capacity to tell your story, define who you to the local and national media, as well as your members and allies.
21. **If you are successful, you will be attacked, so it's best to protect your group by minimizing self-inflicted wounds especially the accusations include illegal activity and misuse of funds.**
22. **ACORN was a multi-issue organization.** It was able to wage multiple campaigns simultaneously, always keeping members in motion on local, state and national issues. Each campaign was in different phases/stages. If one campaign faltered or was slowed down, members could be mobilized around another one.
23. **Education.** Relying on the so-called “free market” to lift everyone out of poverty will not work. The best progressive government policies for helping the poor should rely on self-help such as encouraging citizen participation by activist civic groups as was done in the case of the Community Reinvestment Act.

Lesson24-25



24. Social Movements Count. ACORN's success was limited because it was fighting for progressive change that benefits the less fortunate and powerless in a conservative era, where the poor were invisible. Our society has a better chance of reducing inequality and poverty during a progressive era where there is a social movement demanding more quality and democracy. Even though it was short lived, Occupy Wall Street movement helped with its slogan the 1%.

25. If you follow most of these rules you likely to effective and successful. AND you will be attacked maybe ferociously, by those who benefit from the status quo. If you succeed at small, marginal change you will be safe.

Give a man a fish and he eats for a day





John
McGoy
BORN IN FLORIDA
WORKS IN THE
UNIVERSAL CITY
TIMOTHY

2 Speak to the headlines



“Protests Spread Across the Country”

“SOARING POVERTY CASTS SPOTLIGHT ON “LOST DECADE.”

“A RECORD 46 MILLION OF US---18% OF AMERICA’S FAMILIES—ARE LIVING IN POVERTY.”

FOR A FAMILY OF FOUR, POVERTY MEANS TRYING TO MAKE ENDS MEET ON LESS THAN \$22, 400 A YEAR.

3 Speak to the Headlines: **INEQUALITY**



- **THE 400 RICHEST INDIVIDUALS IN THE UNITED STATES HAVE MORE WEALTH THAN THE BOTTOM 64 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION (2 MILLION), AND THE THREE RICHEST AMERICANS HAVE MORE WEALTH THAN THE BOTTOM 50 PERCENT (1,600,000) OF THE U.S. POPULATION.**

WHILE THE RICHEST 1% GOT RICHER, MILLIONS OF FAMILIES LOST THEIR HOMES TO PREDATORY LENDERS.

- **WE HAVE MORE INEQUALITY THAN OLD BANANA REPUBLICS LIKE NICARAGUA, VENEZUELA, AND GUYANA.**
- **INEQUALITY DISTORTS OUR PUBLIC POLICIES**