

It's How, Not Whether Issue Campaigns Can Help or Hurt

By Charlie Bernstein

These days, democratically run grassroots organizations, from small, unstaffed groups to statewide organizations and national networks, are constantly invited, encouraged and enticed to take part in big issue campaigns. The reasons to include them are sound, and when such involvement is done right, it works. People working together gain power. When it's done poorly, when groups built through painstaking long-term organizing get bought or rented for purposes other than their own, it hurts them. And – the concern of this article – it hurts the movement for social progress.

Issue campaigns that work successfully with grassroots community organizations have two characteristics:

- They work on an issue the grassroots organization is already involved with.
- They offer help – not instructions, orders, hoops, critiques or demands for deliverables.

National People's Action (NPA) has worked for many years on national issues that bubble up from the work of local community groups. PICO, a national faith-based network of community organizations, has achieved impressive “trickle-up” vertical integration, with leadership and issues that work their way up from the neighborhood to Washington and Wall Street and have members who make and act on decisions at every level. Ohio Organizing Collaborative has learned to connect grassroots organizing with broad issue

campaigns and gets impressive results, turning out as many as 20,000 people to its public actions.

But we're seeing a drain of dollars for the community organizing that has made those groups successful. On the religious side, Catholic Campaign for Human Development is raising and giving millions less than it once did. On the secular side, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation has stopped funding

organizing altogether, at least for now. More “progressive” dollars are flowing to short-term issue and electoral campaigns and fewer are going to long-term cultivation of community power.

Much of this is fueled by national foundations, unions and donors who have come to embrace a “pay-them-to-play” approach. Groups that sign on to national campaigns – for instance, around such issues as immigrant rights, affordable health care, safeguards against toxic chemicals or wage theft – agree to a concrete list of so-called deliverables and receive money to do the work for as long as the deliverables are delivered and the funders continue to be interested in the issue.

Reforms are sometimes won, but even when they are, there's a cost. When grassroots organizations take their cues from funders rather than from their community leaders, the organizations – and the communities they serve – can lose power. Grantmaking that demands deliverables while starving deep organizing and grassroots leadership development is not good grantmaking. Campaigns should not ask grassroots community organizations to sacrifice good organizing at the altar of the cause of the month.

Rather than second-guess current efforts, let's step back a few years to find some answers.

HOW GOOD ISSUES GO BAD

More than a generation ago, the Hill-Burton Act was passed to give hospitals federal dollars to pay the bills of

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patients who couldn't afford treatment. But some hospitals began using the money to pay off bad debt rather than to serve the poor. As a result, people who should have benefitted were forced into debt – some even losing their homes to the very hospitals receiving the federal money that should have paid the patients' expenses.

So a national effort by low-income people's organizations was launched in the 1970s to fix the problem. (The George C. Scott/Diana Rigg movie *The Hospital* used that community agitation as a backdrop for the mystery.)

In the course of that NPA-driven national campaign, the organization I worked for, a chapter of a statewide membership group in New England, agreed to take part. After all, it was a prominent poor people's issue and an opportunity to align with the NPA network.

But our organization wasn't working on health care issues, and no one in my chapter had even heard of Hill-Burton. Nonetheless, I dutifully (and naively) stopped everything for several weeks to achieve the deliverable I was assigned: filling a bus with welfare moms for a trip to a federal building to raise a ruckus for the media. In the end, national reforms were won, but it could hardly be because of my work. And none of my protesters joined the organization, because they had no sense of owning it. And beyond disrupting my usual work, the campaign's short timeline required that I neglect building relationships with key community contacts, causing repercussions felt for several years. Bottom line: Taking part hurt the organization and didn't help the national cause. It was a distraction from the issues our members were already immersed in.

"HOW CAN I HELP?"

Compare that to another national campaign we took part in just a few years later.

If we had no experience with health care issues, we had a rich history of

progress on utility rate reform, which was an ongoing priority of the members who made up the group's elected local and statewide leadership.

Because there was a direct connection between our utility reform work and that of the national Citizen/Labor Energy Coalition, our statewide leadership voted to join the coalition. A C/LEC organizer soon came to visit our local chapter office, shook hands with everyone, took off his coat, and said, "How can I help?"

We had a lot of neighborhood members, but we hadn't made many inroads with local unions. So we explained that one of our highest priorities was connecting with labor. And because C/LEC's president was the former leader of the International Association of Machinists and headed the National Council of Senior Citizens, it was easy for the C/LEC organizer to pick up the phone and arrange a meeting for us with the presidents of the local labor council, the IAM local and the local NCSC chapter.

It was a prayer answered. People who had been politely aloof became partners and leaders, and the relationship lasted. The door was finally open. One IAM officer became our president. Many retirees found that being a member of our community organization was fun and fulfilling. Thanks to the machinists' president's mother, an 80-something who ran the Italian parish bingo, we also were able to strengthen our relationship with the Catholic Church.

As a foundation director for several recent years, I heard tales of both scenarios: the national foundations, unions and issue campaigns that impose deliverables (of any quality: the 5,000 phone calls can be good or bad as long as they're made) and the funders and campaigns that ask how they can help. The first type is in ascendance these days, exemplified, for instance, by a group that one organizer

New and Renewing Members

Arcus Foundation

Association of Black Foundation Executives

Center for Effective Philanthropy

Children's Movement of Florida

The Clowes Fund

CODEPINK

Communities for a Better Environment

Deaconess Foundation

Dyson Foundation

Eisner LLP

Foundation for Louisiana

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations

Hagedorn Foundation

James Irvine Foundation

Justice at Stake

Kansas Health Foundation

Lloyd A. Fry Foundation

Max M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation

Melville Charitable Trust

National Institute on Money in State Politics

National People's Action

Northwest Area Foundation

Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Southern Coalition for Social Justice

Surdna Foundation

Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock

Walter and Elise Haas Fund

William and Flora Hewlett Foundation



friend calls “two white guys in Washington sitting around deciding what to tell the rest of us to do.” The second type, according to many grassroots leaders and funders I talk with, is an endangered species. Carefully quantified and charted deliverables (known among grantees as “the holy grid”) have become the coin of the realm.

FIFTEEN ORGANIZERS?

I live in Maine, a rural state. We have fewer people than San Diego and more moose than anyone. The best-selling new car here is the Ford F-150 pickup truck.

But national funders invest heavily here because we often elect moderate Republicans to Congress.

So when a national campaign dropped 15 “organizers” for health care reform into our state a few years ago, people expected big things.

The national entity was pouring mon-

ey lavishly into our state and others for the priority *du jour*, which evolved into support for the so-called public option, a federal health insurance program that would compete with private insurers. There were dozens of house meetings and several rallies. But in the end, the targeted U.S. senator, who, at a seemingly pivotal rally, pledged her support, ultimately voted against the public option. Maine failed to deliver the Senate vote, and the 15 organizers disappeared. Without notice. Overnight.

While the campaign was in full swing, my mom, then in her 80s, went to several of its meetings. My wife and I hosted two house meetings. But there was no attempt to connect with us beyond getting our friends and us to write some letters, no effort to learn what skills we had to offer, what our interests were, what activities might make sense to us, what issues mattered to us. In the

course of six one-to-one meetings with my wife and me, none of the field staff ever asked us about our experiences, backgrounds or interests. They might have liked to know that my wife had 30 years of community organizing experience. They might have already known that I ran a grantmaking social justice fund, but they never brought it up. They asked no open-ended questions and never probed. Their conversations were one-way with us and with the friends we invited to our house meetings.

In short, they weren’t organizers. Conversation, except at its most superficial, just wasn’t in their script, training, method or mission. We weren’t members, we weren’t people. We were what they called “activists”: a commodity, units to be mobilized, counted and discarded. No local leaders emerged, but that didn’t appear to concern the national campaign. It already had its leaders within its own progressive bureaucracy. And I’m sure our senator, a reasonably smart person with reasonably smart staff, understood that there was no real grassroots movement afoot in Maine – just a paper tiger that would be (and was) gone tomorrow.

SO WHAT WORKS?

Grassroots organizations suffer when they’re asked to jump (and, via money, coerced into jumping) through hoops. They lose momentum when the process of cultivating relationships and helping members learn together and agree on issues and strategies is short-circuited. And they thrive when funders and campaigns that seek their participation respect their ability to make decisions, strategize, act and build their bases.

This is a working class nation, and that’s a strength. But issues of wealth, privilege, position and power make it tempting for large, well-funded organizations to simply treat smaller working class organizations as hired help. But in the long run, (continued on page 12)