

## CHAPTER 12

# Build It!

As my momma used to say, “You can put a sack of flour in the oven, but it won’t come out biscuits.”

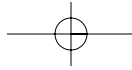
*(Disclosure: Actually, Lillie Mabel Hightower never said any such thing. While she’s from the country, she’s not much given to country sayings. But she is a lifelong biscuit maker, and she’d certainly agree with the observation.)*

Good biscuits seem simple, but they don’t just happen. They take care, preparation, and a practiced hand. You’ve got to measure, sift, mix, stir, knead, roll, and cut—all before exposing the biscuits to the heat. And you can’t be afraid to get your hands sticky in the process.

It’s the same with democracy.

*(Good gravy, Marge, did they just compare our precious democracy to a biscuit?!)*

We did. Precious democracy is not something you find, but something you make. It requires building and nurturing the grassroots base. Democracy builders are our experienced hands. They are the individuals, the groups, and the institutions that retain the collective



## 112 Swim against the Current

knowledge, teach the techniques, share the tools, and spread a progressive movement.

This is politics with a long vision. It's not focused on who's running for office right now, but on creating a political infrastructure to support progressive issues and goals over the long haul. These democracy builders are community organizers, independent media people, Internet designers, grassroots fund-raisers, public interest researchers, coalition builders, educators, motivators, community lawyers, artists, festival organizers, and so many others. Maybe you?

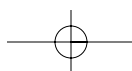
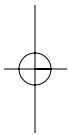
For those who don't want to run for office or put their energies behind particular candidates, this is a place to do essential and satisfying political work. It's also a home for anyone who wants to break the grip of corporate politics, for the very nature of this pro-democracy work is antiestablishment.

Meet some people who are doing it.

### THE POWER OF AN ACORN

In 1820, Felix Walker was a U.S. Congress critter from Buncombe County, North Carolina. Like many pols throughout history, Walker was a droner—a dull fellow intent on expressing his dullness on every topic and at great length. Whatever subject came up for debate on any given day, he insisted that his constituents back home would want his voice heard, and he then launched into a long and wearisome discourse that he called “a speech for Buncombe.” Exasperated colleagues began to refer to his endless prattling as “just so much buncombe,” a term that has been passed down to us as “bunkum,” or, more pointedly, “bunk”—a synonym for meaningless political claptrap.

That's what folks of modest and low incomes are used to getting from the political system. There are liberals who want to “give” certain benefits to the less fortunate—benefits that ultimately aren't delivered or fall way short of the need or end up being taken away. Then there are conservatives who simply want to berate lower-income people for a lack of initiative and for having bad morals. The one thing neither group wants to see is for these millions of people to become empowered, because then they would confront both the



corporate and the political order (excuse the redundancy there) to achieve their own sense of justice.

It was an abundance of liberal-conservative bunkum that back in 1970 allowed a group named ACORN to sprout—a grassroots, populist effort to organize low-wage communities so they would have the power to win changes through direct action, negotiation, legislation, and voter participation.

It began when George Wiley, the smart, charismatic founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization, realized in the late 1960s that very-low-income people were destined to remain a small minority with limited power in the American system unless they could forge an alliance with those living a rung or two higher on the economic ladder—people who were also being knocked down by the Powers That Be. To give this broader strategy a try, Wiley dispatched a young, savvy, tireless, and talented organizer, Wade Rathke, to Little Rock, Arkansas.

All Rathke had to do was unite such disparate constituencies as black welfare mothers and low-income Southern whites in a state that was deeply divided racially. At the time, this seemed as impossible as trying to herd cats. However, *anyone who says you can't herd cats never tried a can opener*.

Rathke's can opener was the notion of the common interest. As Jesse Jackson would put it a decade or so later, "We might not all have come over in the same boat, but we're in the same boat now." That's a powerful, uniting political realization, and Rathke put it to work to form the Arkansas Community Organizations for Reform Now: ACORN.

This was not a mere organization but a *movement* that would grow, adapt, branch out, and flourish. Over the years, it would unite races, join neighborhoods, and link the dreams of the have-nots and the have-littles.

Thirty-seven years after its Arkansas start, ACORN (renamed the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) has become America's largest neighborhood-based group fighting for economic justice. It has some 350,000 members in 110 cities in 39 states, plus new organizing efforts in Argentina, Canada, Mexico, and Peru.

**114 Swim against the Current**

ACORN's organizing model has been to take on the local concerns of a particular community (utility bills, bank redlining, air and water pollution, the lack of affordable housing, poverty wages, lead paint poisoning, etc.) and link them to coordinated national actions that target those responsible: major corporations, bank-holding companies, government agencies, politicians, and other highly visible agents of established power.

The great strength of ACORN is that it gives members a chance to assert their collective power by taking action on issues that their own communities define. The heart of its work is old-fashioned, face-to-face, door-to-door organizing.

Working with a start-up committee of local residents recruited by ACORN, organizers systematically walk the neighborhood, holding casual front-porch conversations in which people are asked what concerns them, what makes them angry, what their hopes are. Then there's a neighborhood-wide meeting, where residents form a chapter, elect their own officers, and choose a set of issues to push. Within days, the new chapter does something about one of the items on its agenda, giving members their first taste of the fun of collective action.

What it amounts to is civic education. Very few members have ever been active in community decision making, so they learn how to work together, how to operate in the public sphere, and how to see themselves as political players with the actual *power* to get things done. As each new chapter develops and achieves some local victories, members begin to see the broader agenda of economic justice, to make links with people they never would have met without ACORN, and to connect their neighborhood needs with those of other cities, states . . . and the nation.

Not only has ACORN become a master of practicing the grassroots gospel of Organize-Strategize-Mobilize, but it also does this with

"Almost without fail, our members say that the reason they joined ACORN is that 'no one ever came to my door and asked for *my* opinion before.'"

—Maude Hurd, ACORN  
national president

a dash of sass that energizes its own people, discombobulates the stuffed shirts of the power structure, attracts widespread public attention to its issues . . . and gets results. Here's a sampling:

- Missouri senator Jim Talent had been part of a GOP cabal to keep killing congressional legislation to raise our nation's paltry minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour. So, in 2006, St. Louis ACORN members decided to knock on Talent's office door—and knock on his thick head. They showed up toting a large box of old shoes. Each pair of footwear was labeled with one of America's least-desirable minimum-wage jobs. The members challenged their senator to walk a day in each set of shoes, doing the jobs of people whose wages he was holding beneath the poverty level. No go, of course. Talent's staff said that the honorable lawmaker was “unavailable” to talk with them, much less walk in non-Gucci shoes. ACORN, however, did lots of its own walking, sending members door-to-door to collect signatures to put a state minimum-wage hike on the November ballot and to register tens of thousands of new Missouri voters. They also informed voters of the senator's refusal even to talk with them about minimum wage. On Election Day, the ACORN initiative won . . . and Talent did not. His low-wage stance was not the only reason for the senator's defeat, but it was an energizing issue for many of the thousands of voters organized by ACORN, and they provided the margin in a race that he lost by only forty-eight thousand votes.
- A utility company in Gary, Indiana, had notoriously high rates and a nasty habit of pulling the plug on financially strapped folks who fell behind on their winter heating bills. Individually, low-income customers had no power to stop the quick shutoffs. But, organized into an ACORN chapter, they learned how to confront the company and make their collective voice heard. Accompanied by the media, about a dozen local ACORNers went to the utility's busy payment center in 2006, got in line, and politely waited to pay their bills . . . *in pennies*. The first one to reach the teller dumped thousands of the one-cent coins on

**116 Swim against the Current**

the counter to cover her bill (literally to the penny). The wide-eyed teller looked down the line to see the other customers wearing ACORN's signature red T-shirts and toting Hefty bags of pennies. A call was made, a corporate officer came scurrying out, and a meeting was quickly arranged for ACORN to speak to the utility's president about a moratorium on shutoffs. The meeting resulted in a reduction in utility bills for some customers, and ACORN continues to negotiate and organize to achieve full reform of the utility's customer practices.

- An ACORN chapter in Toronto held a highly publicized cockroach derby in which low-income renters raced bugs they brought from their apartment buildings. The action won repairs from the shamed landlord.
- To make progress in a lengthy nationwide loan-sharking battle against the Household Finance Corporation (HFC), delegates to ACORN's 2002 national convention in Chicago thoroughly embarrassed the lender's top executives and board members. Some two thousand ACORN members spread out to upscale enclaves where the corporate honchos live, knocking on the doors of neighbors and distributing WANTED posters that featured the bigwigs and said "Wanted for Predatory Lending." This action helped close the deal on a large multistate settlement between ACORN and the HFC.
- In Minnesota, an ACORN member moved out of an apartment after a rat bit her baby. The property owners said that by leaving she had broken her lease, and they sent the account to a collection agency to force her to pay the remainder of the rent due under the lease. The local ACORN chapter responded en masse, going to the landlord's office wearing rat noses. When a startled company official tried to turn them away saying that they couldn't come barging in without an appointment, one of the members didn't miss a beat, retorting, "That rat didn't have an appointment when it bit her baby." The owners agreed to cancel the woman's lease and clear her credit report.

“Ordinary citizens step up to do ACORN work. Once you get involved, you will never be satisfied with grumbling again. After getting organized and making change happen, you can never go back to doing nothing.”

—Toni McElroy, chair, Texas ACORN

Well into their fourth decade of agitating and organizing, ACORN's members have become a formidable force for producing progressive change in low-income neighborhoods, and ACORN itself is now an American institution. It is not merely scrappy; it is strong and capable of sustaining long-term community development and grassroots political action. The annual budget of the nationwide ACORN network is nearly \$37 million, which comes from members' dues (\$10 a month or less), services it provides, and occasional grants. With special training centers for organizers, its own housing development corporation, a separate research arm, two radio stations, and more than a hundred offices from coast to coast, ACORN can go toe-to-toe with the corporate and political powers that usually consider low-income working folks easy to run over.

### A LIVING WAGE

It's interesting that our society commonly uses the expression “to wage war,” for the matter of wages has most certainly been at the center of many wars (bloody and otherwise) in our country's history. Just look at how corporate interests and their obedient troops in Congress constantly engage in class war to hold down the wages of America's workers.)

One deplorable example was the stingy, decade-long refusal to raise the minimum wage above \$5.15 an hour. That's \$10,500 a year *gross* (in both meanings of that word) for full-time work. Under \$200 a week, this left hardworking people thousands of dollars below the poverty line. It's impossible to stretch that to cover even the basics of living: rent, utilities, groceries, transportation, clothing, and medicines.

**118 Swim against the Current**

Yet, even when the new Democratic Congress finally raised the minimum wage in 2007, the initial hike was only 70 cents an hour—still abject poverty. After two years, the minimum wage is to rise to \$7.25 an hour. That's better, but by then the real value of this wage will have deflated to about \$6.42 an hour—roughly \$13,000 a year—which will still leave full-time workers mired in poverty.

Think of what that says about our society, which happens to be the wealthiest in the history of the world. The minimum wage is the ethical floor that we choose to set, and it's a moral abomination that our so-called leaders say it's okay to reward America's vaunted work ethic with poverty.

Meanwhile, since 1997, guess how many times the chuckleheads in Congress have raised their own pay? Bingo, if you said eight! Lawmakers now take \$165,200 each in annual pay. (*Warning: the following comment could cause some readers to lose their lunch.*) Asked a few years ago about these self-propelled pay hikes, then majority leader Tom DeLay snapped, "I challenge anyone to live on my salary."

Rather than wait for Congress to be struck by a random bolt of sanity, ACORN became the leader of a phenomenal grassroots economic movement to win raises for millions of low-paid workers. Its members (again, people of limited incomes who have traditionally had no clout in economic and political decisions) have led successful campaigns in fifteen cities and led efforts in eight states to raise the minimum wage above the ignoble federal level.

The central concept behind these campaigns is called the "living wage." What's a living wage? Simple: *It's a wage a family can live on without having to go Dumpster diving once a week.* More than a minimum, a living wage is a measure of social decency, set at least high enough to ensure that an American working family does not reside in poverty.

In addition to the campaigns that ACORN has directly run, it has been a key member of coalitions that have passed living wage laws (mostly through ballot initiatives) in 140 cities and passed hikes in dozens of states. While the establishment media have largely ignored it, this is a widespread and remarkably successful movement,

delivering a significant economic (and spiritual) lift for low-income workers all across the country—and *the people themselves are causing the change*.

Like churches and unions that are also integral to the success of the living wage coalition, ACORN has the institutional staying power to keep pushing. In 1998, it created the Living Wage Resource Center within its organization to provide training, research, campaign materials, strategy, and direct assistance to local organizers and coalitions that are trying to increase minimum pay. The center has become a major force in spreading the success of the living wage movement and also in strengthening the grassroots groups that form it.

William Kyser and the ACORN chapter in his Albuquerque neighborhood show the importance of this staying power. Kyser's family joined in 2004, and the next year, William found himself in the thick of the chapter's effort to raise the city's minimum wage to \$7.50 an hour. By then, he had become the host of ACORN's TV talk show

#### ACORN 71, KERRY 47

In 2004, ACORN and allies collected nearly a million signatures from fed-up Floridian voters to put a modest \$1 increase in the state minimum wage on the ballot. As expected, Governor Jeb Bush and Florida's business establishment went all out to kill it. What was not expected was that John Kerry, then the Democratic presidential nominee, would be such a wuss.

The geniuses advising Kerry shooed him away from endorsing the wage initiative, insisting that Florida was too conservative to pass it and that he should not taint himself with an unpopular reform.

Yet on election night, ACORN members were the ones celebrating. *Their initiative passed with 71 percent of the vote—carrying every county.* Meanwhile, things were less cheerful over at Kerry headquarters. The guy who was too skittish to touch the minimum-wage increase got only 47 percent of the vote.

**120 Swim against the Current**

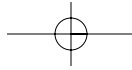
on the local public access channel, and he put it to work, bringing economists, city council members, and minimum-wage workers from such outfits as McDonald's to inform and energize the community.

"I'm not Merv Griffin," William said, "but I like talking to people." He also faced off twice in debates with the Albuquerque chamber of commerce CEO, and the whole Kyser family helped ACORN gather thirty-three thousand signatures to get the wage increase on the ballot. It was a tremendous organizing effort, but the business interests (no surprise) dumped a truckload of cash into the fight, and the initiative was narrowly defeated.

In too many progressive battles, that would have been the end. Volunteers would be discouraged, money would dry up, and the coalition would disperse. With ACORN, however, a loss can be seen as a learning experience and a building block for the next step. "We've got people talking about the wage increase now," William said buoyantly, just after the 2005 vote. "We've learned a lot. I think we know now how to pass it." And they did. ACORN came back in 2006 to win in Albuquerque, and in 2007 it got New Mexico's legislature to extend the pay raise statewide.

This kind of success is the direct result of organizing and nurturing genuine grassroots political power. In 2006, ACORN members led coalition efforts to win minimum-wage hikes in Arizona (66 percent voted yes), Colorado (53 percent yes), Missouri (76 percent yes), and Ohio (56 percent yes). In these states, ACORN registered more than two hundred thousand new voters in low-income neighborhoods—and then it stuck with these and other voters through the election, visiting them door-to-door multiple times, involving them personally, and making them feel crucial to the election outcomes (which, of course, they were).

One of the most effective components of ACORN's organizing structure is its PAL program. PALs are Precinct Action Leaders who are recruited from the neighborhoods and trained to build strong networks among their neighbors for civic participation. Each of the volunteer PALs creates and services a list of about a hundred friends, family members, and other residents in his or her immediate community. The PALs are responsible for staying in touch with each voter on



their list to make sure that the voters are registered, informed, and ready to vote.

The election, however, is just the start, for the PAL process builds ongoing political relationships, generating neighborhood power that lasts beyond any single election cycle. The community learns that its votes can produce changes that it cares about, so staying engaged actually matters. “Neighborhoods with a higher voter turnout get more respect and more resources from politicians. That’s just a fact,” noted John Shields, an ACORN PAL in Missouri.

This is a fact that affluent neighborhoods have long known—and have tried to keep their little secret. But the secret is out. People all across the country are learning that they really do have the power to rule—if they get themselves organized. The assertion of democratic strength in ACORN neighborhoods is a textbook example of what it means to be self-governing . . . and how satisfying the results can be.

