

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND EMPLOYEE REPRESENTATION

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The decline in the scope and power of American unions has led to a search for both new strategies and new organizational forms to better succeed in representing the interests of employees and prospective employees in the labor market. Within the context of unions themselves innovations have included union branded credit cards, minority unions (i.e. unions that do not represent fifty-plus percent of the force), greater emphasis on organizing, and mergers and consolidations. Although there have been isolated examples of success, union membership has continued its seemingly unrelenting decline.

At the same time that unions have struggled to reinvent themselves there has been considerable innovation outside the framework of traditional representation structures. For example, within large firms affinity groups organized around identity have emerged and pressed management for fair treatment along a variety of dimensions, e.g. gender equity or gay rights (Scully and Segal, 2002; Piore and Safford, 2005). Another innovation has been Worker Centers, which are organizations that provide a range of legal services and political advocacy for people at the low end of the labor market. These have been particularly vigorous in immigrant communities. At the upper end of the labor market professionals have organized associations or guilds that seek to provide a range of services to their members. Yet another example are efforts to establish non-profit temporary help firms that enforce higher labor standards than are observed in the free market.

The range of these initiatives is impressive and a fair conclusion might be that in the vacuum created by a weakening traditional labor movement there has been a surge of creativity around new organizational forms and strategies. However, at the same time, there are obvious weaknesses and limitations to these efforts. Virtually all of these innovations are small scale and, although hard data are not available, they almost certainly add up to a tiny slice of the labor market. Furthermore, they are isolated in the

sense that they typically are not part of a larger organization that can wield political power. The linkage of local unions to a broader union movement has been one of important sources of union influence and power yet this seems absent in many of these newer efforts.

What then are other alternatives? One that leaps to mind is community based organizations of the sort that proved so powerful during the Civil Rights Movement. However, the traditional presumption is that these are not effective with respect to labor market issues. This presumption is exemplified by Ira Katznelson in City Trenches. Katznelson, in examining the characteristics of American working class and labor movements, argued that the nature of the American political system, and in particular the behavior of political machines, led to a sharp separation of neighborhood and work. When people are organized on the basis of community they do not think of themselves as having workplace based concerns in common.

These arguments and this history notwithstanding, a strong national network of community organizations has emerged in the United States in the past few decades and this network is very active in representing employees and in engaging in political action on their behalf. The network is neighborhood based and draws heavily on churches and other community institutions. It is local in that the organizations are, at least initially, put together in neighborhoods, yet they also wield power at the city and state level. This paper will examine the characteristics and achievements of this network and draw conclusions about possible trajectories of employee representation.

In the next section I will describe the nature of this network and how it goes about organizing. I will then describe the labor market strategies of the network. Following these two descriptive sections I will assess the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to employee representation and place these organizations in the context of the literature on the organizational trajectory of unions.

### **The Industrial Areas Foundation**

The Industrial Areas Foundation is a national network of community organizations that had their beginning with the organizing of Saul Alinsky in Chicago

during the Great Depression (Horwitt, 1992). Alinksy founded several organizations in Chicago as well as ones in New York and California. Today there are IAF affiliates throughout the nation, and the organizing model is fairly standardized.

The research<sup>1</sup> underlying this paper focuses on the network of organizations in the Southwest, defined in IAF geography as Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Nebraska, and parts of California (the Southwest IAF or SWIAF). The first organization, Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), was founded in 1974 in San Antonio, and there are now nearly thirty cities with organizations. The Southwest network is more tightly bound together than is the national IAF network. There is a core of senior organizers and a central service organization, the Interfaith Education Fund, which provides training and supervises the organizations. For the purposes of this paper, it is fair to consider the Southwest network as a whole in studying the trajectory of organizational behavior (Osterman, 2002).

Local IAF organizations are organizations of organizations. Individuals do not join Valley Interfaith (in the Rio Grande Valley) or COPS (in San Antonio) or any other local IAF organization. Rather, the members of the IAF are institutions, such as churches and schools. Churches are the most common organizational affiliate, but increasingly schools are joining, and to some extent other organizations, such as labor unions or community groups (such as health centers), are members. Individuals get connected to the IAF through their institutions. To give a sense of magnitudes, Valley Interfaith has forty-five member churches and sixteen schools as members, and these represent over 60,000 people. When churches or schools or unions affiliate with the IAF organization, they commit to paying dues. The goal varies by organization, but a typical target is that congregations contribute two percent of their annual budget to the IAF organization.

The IAF believes that organizing through institutions has several advantages. Institutions are inherently more stable than are individuals. People may leave town, their life circumstances may change, or they might lose energy. Churches and schools, by contrast, will normally always be there, and if an institution is committed, then as specific people move through life's transitions, new individuals will be available. In addition, since an obvious problem facing any organization is resources—money—by affiliating with institutions and requiring dues, the IAF partially solves this concern.

What does an IAF organization do? First on the list is leadership development and training. This is at the core of how the IAF defines its mission. Over the course of any week, organizers and many of the members<sup>2</sup> will hold one-on-one conversations with people whom they contact through their churches or schools or other venues. These conversations are aimed at identifying people who might want to become active in the organization and also at learning what issues people are most concerned about. People who do become connected to the IAF then attend a variety of training programs, ranging from intensive ten-day training to shorter weekend or even evening programs.

The IAF also brings people together. On a regular basis the IAF organization conducts house-meetings, attended by ten to twenty neighbors, to talk about issues that are on their minds. Several times a year there will be conferences that people involved in the organization attend. Some of these are local while others are statewide or regional. Some conferences focus on specific issues, e.g., job training, school reform, or voter registration, and others are training sessions in IAF doctrine and organizing strategies.

The IAF approach to organizing is centered on identifying and training members. In a subsequent section I will describe this training, and people's reactions to it, in greater detail but suffice it to say that the investment in developing the capacities of IAF members is substantial and the consequences in terms of personal transformation are considerable.

Parallel to the ongoing identification and training of members, the IAF organization works on issues. Some of these are very local. For example, a regional subgroup of Valley Interfaith, consisting of half a dozen churches in Brownsville, might be working to convince the city to open a branch library in their area. Other issues are broader in scope. For example, most IAF organizations are active in school reform in their communities. Other typical issues concern expanding eligibility for health insurance, and protecting local water supplies from overdevelopment. The organizations also cooperate with sister organizations on statewide issues, passing a specific piece of legislation on topics such as child health funding or school reform funds, or conducting a statewide voter registration drive. And, of course, the organizations work on labor market issues and these activities will be described shortly.

Over the years the SWIAF has compiled a substantial record.<sup>3</sup> It was instrumental in passing statewide bonding and regulatory legislation to clean up and limit the spread of *colonias*, which are residential areas along the U.S.-Mexican border that lack basic infrastructure. It has a substantial labor market program which will be described below. The IAF launched a major school reform effort, and its Texas Alliance Schools program has received considerable state funding. In all of the cities in which it works, it has achieved numerous local victories with respect to parks, police protection, sewers, housing, and the like.

### **The Labor Market Programs of the SWIAF**

The IAF's first substantial labor market intervention began in January, 1990 when Levi Strauss closed a plant in San Antonio that had employed more than 1,000 people. Following this closure the IAF organizations started to investigate the economic situation of their members. In house meetings people told stories of past unsatisfactory experiences with training programs, particularly those in which no recognized certificate or diploma resulted, or in which there were no available jobs after the training period.

In the spring of 1991 a job training core committee was formed. The committee met bi-monthly for almost two years and worked on three fronts. The first was the design of a training program, Project QUEST. The committee and the IAF organizations then worked to obtain job commitments from the business community. In the end, they were able to generate 650 commitments to hire QUEST graduates. As a result, the people entering the program knew that there were jobs on the other end and the training itself could be tailored to actual job requirements. Third, the organizations struggled to raise funds. They put considerable pressure on the city via accountability sessions and lobbying. In addition, because the IAF network had played an important role in the election of Ann Richards as governor the organizations were able to tap into state funds.<sup>4</sup>

QUEST differs from standard training programs in that it is long term, works closely with employers, and sets clear wage standards for placements. In 1996 I evaluated Project QUEST (Osterman and Lautsch, 1997). Over the course of a year I collected pre-enrollment data on all people who had attended QUEST and executed a

follow up survey to learn their post-program status. The quantitative evaluation showed that QUEST led to substantial gains for its participants, gains that far exceed those of typical training efforts. I estimated the typical annual earnings gain was between \$4,900 and \$7,500 with the expected payoff of costs being a very short 3 years.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent evaluations by the Aspen Institute found a similar gain from the program (Aspen Institute, 2004).

QUEST had impacts beyond the gains of its clients. It affected wage levels by insisting that employers pay trainees a living wage and in some instances this led firms to increase the pay for certain categories of jobs. It altered employer hiring patterns by demonstrating that skilled employees can be drawn from pools of workers that the San Antonio employer community had previously ignored. QUEST also led to important changes in how the local community colleges operate, changes that redounded to the benefit of many more students than just the QUEST enrollees. These changes include the creation of a Remediation Institute (that prepared people to pass the entry exam and hence take credit courses) open not only to QUEST trainees but to all people who attend the schools, and various forms of curricular reform that make the programs more accessible. As a consequence of these efforts the impact of QUEST is greater than simply the gains achieved by clients.

In order to stabilize funding for QUEST and for its replications the state network launched a drive to permit the use of economic development funds for human development programs. The economic development funds were generated as a small fraction of the city sales tax but state law required that the money be used only for physical projects. The IAF's proposed and obtain passage of state legislation permitted their use for training programs, after-school programs, and the like.

The QUEST model has been replicated in the IAF network although different cities have modified it in various ways. In the Rio Grande Valley Project VIDA offers shorter term customized training in cooperation with firms as well as the standard QUEST model. This works well provided that the hiring commitments from the firms are very strong and are at acceptable wages. Capital Idea, the program in Austin, also offers the customized option and also has a component of the program aimed at high school drop-outs that brings them up to the level that permits them to enter the "classic

QUEST” track. In Tucson Job Path requires that its graduates pay the program back either financially or via community service. QUEST-like programs have also been established in by IAF organizations in El Paso and Dallas. The IAF network is aggressive in promoting learning across the projects and holds frequent training workshops.

### Living Wages

At the core of the IAF labor market strategy has been a long-running effort to oppose the economic development strategy of selling their cities as havens for low wage employment. In response the IAF network has emphasized Living Wage campaigns and efforts to set wage level conditions on the use of tax abatements to attract firms.

Valley leaders and organizers began to think seriously about a living wage campaign in 1997. The Living Wage campaign was aimed at 32 school districts in the Valley. In each of these districts there were food service workers, cleaners, grounds staff, and bus drivers earning the minimum wage or just above.

Negotiations went on for a two year period. In some cases Valley Interfaith mobilized large numbers of members to attend meetings with school boards and county commissioners while in other instances small group negotiations worked. In the end the campaign was a remarkable success. The campaign increased the wages of 7,400 people by an average of just under 90 cents an hour (Osterman, 2002). Since then additional school districts have been induced to raise the wages of 1000 more people. Although 90 cents may not seem like much, it is a substantial increase over the base salary of \$6 an hour.

### Other Strategies To Raise Standards

In addition to living wage campaigns directly aimed at increasing compensation the IAF has also struggled to ensure that public subsidies to firms are used to attract high wage employment.

Like many other cities and states, the governments in the Valley and in South Texas deploy a varied set of incentives to attract firms to the area or to enable existing firms to expand. The model that everyone has in the back of their mind is the success of the American South in attracting firms from the North.<sup>6</sup> The professional economics literature tends to be quite critical of these kinds of efforts. From the national perspective they are a zero-sum game in which areas compete with each other by subsidizing companies but only succeed in transferring wealth from taxpayers to companies without generating any net new jobs. Nor is it clear that even from a local perspective these incentive packages make sense. The variations in subsidies from one city to another are typically dwarfed by other location specific cost differences such as access to markets, labor costs, and transportation and other forms of infrastructure. The best that a recent review of the voluminous research literature could say was that “no definite conclusions can be reached on the basis of published research.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite these doubts few political leaders are willing to simply refuse to offer support and then face the political consequence of complaints that they cost their local economy jobs. As a consequence the incentive game continues at full throttle. A question, however, remains about what kinds of firms are targeted. A low road approach still exerts a powerful appeal in South Texas. In order to change this dynamic the IAF organizations in several cities have campaigned to limit tax incentives to firms that pay living wages. These campaigns have included public meetings, electoral efforts, and daily pressure on local governments. As a result of political action by the IAF in the Valley the economic development officials in both Brownsville and McAllen now aver that subsidies will only go to employers who pay living wages. In San Antonio COPS succeeded in attaching living wage requirements to subsidies to new and expanding hotels in the city.

### Building Power In the Labor Market

The IAF has also built more formal employee representation structures. In Omaha, Nebraska (that is considered part of the Southwest for IAF organization chart purposes) the local IAF affiliate held house meetings with employees—mostly immigrants—in the city’s meat packing industry. These house meetings were organized

out of the churches since it was easier, and safer, to contact workers via their congregations than at the workplace. From the house-meeting process emerged the idea of establishing health clinics to assist with occupational injuries, a constant problem in the packing industry. The success of the health clinics laid the basis for pressing the Governor to investigate health and safety issues in the plants. Not only did he do this but he, remarkably, issued a statement supporting the workers' right to organize. From all this emerged a union drive, in cooperation with the United Food and Commercial Workers, that to date has won two organizing elections.

An even more dramatic initiative is also underway in the Valley. Valley Interfaith is beginning to build an employees association. This drive has proceeded in classic IAF fashion. On a Sunday (termed by Valley Interfaith a "workers Sunday"), the pastor preaches on religious social doctrine regarding work. At the end of the service people are asked to attend house meetings if they are interested in discussing work related issues. At the house meetings people are asked, as one organizer put it, to "tell a story about how they learned about work values."

The house-meetings are followed-up with individual one-on-one meetings with organizers. The goal is to identify potential leaders who want to build the association. To date these efforts have identified about nine hundred people who have an interest in building a workers' association. About half of these had no prior contact with Valley Interfaith. The people who are interested come from disparate parts of the Valley economy. They include low wage health care workers, public employees, workers who were laid off when the Valley's apparel plants closed and who find themselves trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of training programs which lead no-where, call center employees, and taxi drivers. When people talk about what is motivating them to participate the issues which are most commonly mentioned include health insurance, dignity at work, and career ladders.

The next step in this process will be a longer series of training workshops which will include economic education (sessions on how the economy works, labor history, and the like) as well as sessions on IAF principles of organizing. This will be followed by creating an organization and establishing a dues structure. The organization will take its

place alongside the churches and Alliance Schools as an institutional member of Valley Interfaith.

### Summary

Cutting across these efforts are three broader themes. First, it is important to see how the IAF labor market efforts have evolved and broadened over time. The early training initiatives, though high quality, were also very traditional in their strategy and aspirations. The workers association, on the other hand, is cutting edge.

Second, like everything else it does, the IAF views its labor market programs not as ends in themselves but as vehicles for building broad-based power organizations. The job training programs have given the organizations substantial credibility in their communities, both in the neighborhoods and among businessmen. In addition, the IAF is working to organize the programs' graduates so that over time they can act as a powerful voice in the labor market. In a similar pattern the success of the Valley's living wage campaign laid the foundation for initiating the employee's association. There is a dynamic relationship between program and power. Good programs provide a foundation for extending organizing and this in turn provides the basis for creating yet more expansive programs.

Finally, the IAF has not been willing to take labor market outcomes as given and simply try to fit people in. Rather, the organizations have worked hard to improve the structure of the labor market: the quality of jobs, the hiring channels of employers, and the performance of educational institutions.

### **Meeting Organizational Challenges**

As traditional unions declined many scholars, even those sympathetic to the labor movement, attributed at least a portion of the blame to the internal organizational dynamics of the unions themselves. This explanation emphasizes a loss of energy due to the "entrenched leadership and conservative transformation associated with Michel's iron law of oligarchy (Voss and Sherman, 2000, p. 304)" Related to this is a tendency for an

entrenched leadership to maintain its hold on power and a failure to develop new leaders who reflect demographics and interests of the emerging labor force(Lichtenstein, 2002).

These critiques draw on a very longstanding concern about the fate of what the literature terms Social Movement Organizations (SMOs). The scholarship on these themes is long-standing and substantial. Richard Scott writes in his review of the literature that “most unions, most professional associations and other types of voluntary associations, and most political parties exhibit oligarchical leadership structures; the democratic machinery...functions primarily as a feeble device” (Scott, 1998, p. 336). Other scholars read the literature in the same way. Voss and Sherman (2000, p. 306) report a consensus that only informal organizations can avoid the iron law of oligarchy. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956, p. 403) say that “the functional requirements for democracy cannot be met most of the time in most unions or voluntary organizations.” Clemens (1993, p. 755) writes that “we have come to expect co-optation, conservative goal transformation, and the ‘iron law of oligarchy.’”

Lipset et al. (1956) succinctly describe the dynamics that create a situation in which the leadership comes to dominate the membership. Leadership wants to maintain power, and the complexity of large organizations offers it the opportunity to do so. To this natural complexity, the elite adds a degree of mystification that makes it appear that only they can manage the organization’s tasks. The leadership also maintains a monopoly on political skill, dominates the channels of communication, and controls resources. Over time, these tactics lead to low membership participation, which simply reinforces the pattern.

In the literature the general expectation is that the iron law has adverse consequences for SMOs. The most widely cited is loss of membership commitment, or what Zald and Ash call “becalming.” Zald and Ash (1966, p. 334) define this as when organizations “have created or found a niche for themselves in the organizational world but their growth has slowed or ceased. Members do not expect attainment of goals in the near future, and the emotional fervor of the movement is subdued.” A more recent statement of this point is made by McAdam (1996, p. 340), who lists a social movement’s six tasks, of which two are maintaining energy and recruiting new members.

The complaints of dissident factions within the labor movement that it has stopped organizing and instead is devoting too many of its resources to feathering its bureaucratic nest reflects these concerns. In fact, this critique has led to several large unions threatening split off from the AFL-CIO. Put into the language of social science, the dissidents are complaining that the labor movement has been “becalmed.”

The second consequence of the iron law is goal displacement. The general expectation is that when the iron law takes hold the organization’s leadership is more likely to be coopted and to become more concerned with personal and organizational survival than with achieving the initial goals.

One of the striking characteristics of IAF organizations is that, compared to traditional unions, they have avoided the loss of energy associated with oligarchy as well as the temptations of goal displacement. Understanding how this is accomplished offers important insights into the effective design of organizations promising new channels for worker representations.

### Who are the Oligarchs?

There are two groups of people who are part of an IAF organization: members, who connect to the IAF through their member institutions, and the organizers, who are full-time paid employees of the organization. Organizers are professional staff who work full-time on IAF business. A typical IAF organization has somewhere between three and five organizers, the most senior of whom is called the lead organizer.

The IAF distinguishes among several levels of members. Primary members are committed to building the organization and to their own development and also have a substantial following whom they can deliver. They will typically sit on the executive committee of the local organizations. This executive committee, consisting of primary members and the organizers, is the forum in which the major decisions facing the local organization are discussed and resolved. Secondary members are committed to raising funds and building the organization but have somewhat less reach, while tertiary members have smaller followings and work on narrower issues, such as local schools, parks, or events at their workplace. Of course, over time many of these people may

attend a training session or an issues workshop and deepen their involvement, and so the distinction among the different types of members is not permanent.

With this distinction among types of members in mind, one clear danger point is that the so-called primary members hold on to their power. If there is no circulation of leadership among these members, then the organizations will have clearly fallen into the classic SMO trap. In fact, as a matter of organizational structure, this is less of a problem than it might appear. The IAF has strong internal incentives to bring new institutions (churches and other institutions) into the local IAF organizations. As this happens as a matter of course, new members emerge. Although it may take some time, these members climb the internal ladder of power within the IAF organization and become influential. In my interviews of primary members, 35 percent had been with the organization for five years or less.

A much more serious worry is the role of organizers. The IAF network in the Southwest employs roughly forty organizers. One of the distinctive characteristics of the IAF is that organizing is treated as a professional career. Organizers are paid respectable wages, there are frequently training sessions, and the organizers have strong peer networks. The skill and sophistication of the organizers and the fact that they are full-time while the members frequently have other more time-consuming commitments, such as earning a living, raises the natural question of whether the organizers in fact dominate decision making. Making the danger even more salient is the fact that among the organizers there is a clear hierarchy. In the Southwest, a small group of senior organizers, led by the charismatic founder of the network, Ernesto Cortes, has dominated the network for several decades. These organizers are personally close to each other and form a cadre within a cadre. It is easy for an observer of the network to believe that the organizers in general, and the inner core of them in particular, are the real decision makers in the IAF.

### Have the Consequences of Oligarchy Been Avoided?

The foregoing section suggested that the IAF organizers are, in important respects, a self-perpetuating elite, and there is much evidence supporting this in the decisions of the organizations. However, to stop here would miss much of the story. Despite the powerful role of organizers, the members of the IAF manage to retain a very substantial voice. Equally important, they do not feel as if they are dominated by the organizers, and there has been no loss of energy due to elite control.

We can begin by asking how issues are developed. One key source is house-meetings, where problems of concern to the members are surfaced. The early days of Valley Interfaith illustrate how this works. The two organizers at the time had identified equalizing school finance and cleaning up Brownsville Harbor as the two key issues. COPS and the other IAF organizations had been very involved in school finance for several years, and the harbor was of considerable concern to some of the more middle-class parishes in Brownsville. In preparing for a visit by the Governor to the Valley, The organizers were surprised to discover that the energy in house-meetings was mostly about conditions in the *colonias*.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the IAF decided to make this the centerpiece of the Governor's visit.

Whether they emerge from house-meetings or are defined by organizers, what is decisive in determining which issues get the organization's attention is the willingness of the members to work. The most common sentiment about the decision-making process had to do with energy. One member commented:

[What]... plays into what we're going to do is where's the energy and who has the energy? Because you may identify many issues, but you have to identify what are the issues where more people have energy. And who has the energy to work with them.

Decisions in Valley Interfaith are made via a representational structure that aggregates upward from house-meetings through an intermediate body (the regional representatives) to the executive committee. This means, of course, that the broad base of the organization speaks its voice either in house-meetings or via their representatives; this is not an organization in which plebiscites or large assemblies make decisions. However, the structure of the organization forces the top level to listen to the opinions of the base.

Are debates genuine? The answer seems to be yes. One type of debate has to do with what is, in effect, horse-trading within the organization. Each neighborhood or area within the organization might want the organization to go to bat for some particular local project, and the members have to sort this out. As another member describes it:

North McAllen and South McAllen IAF members negotiate. For example, at a certain moment we had to talk about a north side and a south side library because both want one. We have public transportation system here. The north side wanted an extension of that. We said, fine.

Another kind of debate has to do with overall priorities. Recently Valley Interfaith had to decide whether it would get involved in helping people obtain their citizenship papers. In the words of a member:

There was a discussion: is it something that we want to do? This is more in the line of social work. We normally do more building, working with people and educating and identifying members. It took a lot of energy and time to work with citizenship. And we decided we wanted to because there were people in our community that were afraid of losing benefits, because they were elderly and if they had worked in the fields there was no record of them ever working and their only source of money was a check that they got. So there was an interest. But there was some discussion on that.

In this example, after the debate the members decided to pursue the citizenship program because of the strong interest in it among the membership. This was a decision made by members, not by organizers. Another example was the Valley Interfaith campaign to pass a referendum requiring McAllen to elect its city council by neighborhood rather than at large. The pressure for this campaign came from Valley Interfaith members, and the idea was initially opposed by the organizers (on the ground that they would lose; in fact, they won).

In these debates about the broader mission of the organization, the voices of the organizers are obviously heard—for example, when they push local organizations to get involved in statewide issues. As a member comments, “Sometimes from the perspective of a member of a local region, there are periods when there's a lot of time and energy that's taken out by the statewide network.” And another member, in describing the system, notes, “Well, there's a lot of studies. There's study. There's discussion. There's

recommendations by the organizers and then the committee that is in charge looks at the situation.”

In short, decision making within the IAF is complex. The ideas of the broad membership are voiced in house-meetings. There is a process of voting “by energy,” there are different levels of decision-making committees of members, and there is the role of the organizers. In the end, the broad membership feels that it is fully involved in the decisions which are made. In none of our interviews did members express serious dissatisfaction about the nature or openness of the decision-making process.

It is, of course, important not to be naïve about these patterns. Certainly organizers are very influential and certainly there are key members who have remained in place for many years. IAF decisions are not taken by plebiscite or even necessarily by voting of representative bodies. The point, however, is that IAF members feel they have an influential voice, and the evidence is that indeed they do. Furthermore, the organizations are open, and indeed eager, to recruit new members.

### Goal Displacement

Another source of evidence regarding the ability of the IAF to evade the negative consequences of oligarchical control is the organizations’ ability to avoid significant goal displacement. In thinking about this, it is important to see that the risks are real. IAF organizations operate by mobilizing political pressure on local and state governments to improve services, engage in education reform, provide job training resources, and so on. In doing this, the IAF inevitably becomes entwined with government. This tight relationship is given additional weight by the fact that the IAF does not limit itself to election cycles but rather works hard to maintain pressure on elected officials and bureaucrats. This kind of relationship inevitably leads to a deep involvement in the day-to-day issues of government. When all of this is considered, it is certainly possible that the IAF might come to resemble just another pressure group. Its interest in maintaining good relationships with the politicians and bureaucrats with whom it works on a daily basis might well lead it to become less adversarial, less concerned with directly addressing distributional issues, more sympathetic to the “realistic” viewpoint of what is

possible, and increasingly dependent upon the goodwill of government officials for the organizations' continued success. All of this may add up to a recipe for goal displacement.

To a very large extent, the IAF has, despite these pressures and temptations, avoided goal displacement. One particularly dramatic example occurred in the spring of 2002 in San Antonio. COPS, the oldest IAF organization in the Southwest, had engaged in a variety of cooperative arrangements with the local business community, including Project QUEST, which relied on firms making commitments to hire program graduates. In addition, COPS had for many years worked closely with city government in allocating funds to particular neighborhoods for improvements of one kind or another. The stage, therefore, was clearly set for goal displacement.

However, contrary to expectations, when the business community and the city government announced plans to attract a Professional Golf Association (PGA) golf tournament to the city by utilizing public funds to subsidize construction of a resort, COPS led the opposition. COPS organized a petition drive which collected over 100,000 signatures, and it waged a vigorous public relations campaign against the project. The business community reacted with fury, withdrawing its cooperation with the job training program and pressing the city to cut funding to that program by fifty percent (which the city did). In the end, a compromise was reached (which involved commitments to a living wage for resort employees and the use of a different source of funds to support the project), but the point here is that the organization was willing to risk its position in "business as usual" to maintain commitment to its original mission.

Another example of the ability of the organization to avoid goal displacement comes from its involvement in housing programs. These programs, which delivered services to COPS neighborhoods were popular but also used up a good deal of organizational energy and began to divert the organization from its mission of building countervailing power to one of simply being a social service agency. However, the IAF leadership demonstrated a high degree of self-awareness and took action to intervene. The problem was described as follows by one organizer:

She [another organizer] did a training session with the membership. She said we can become this super civic organization that does a lot of good for a lot of people on health care and housing and infrastructure, fixing all the ills and needs of the community, you can become that if you're not careful. Or you can continue to challenge yourself and agitate yourselves to become a broad based powerful organization. And if you're about building power then your question for the membership is: who are you identifying and developing as members. Because for a broad-based organization the primary concern is what members are you developing. How are you developing other members and identifying other members.

In order to return to the organization's mission COPS took a numbers of steps. First it began a series of workshops to help members identify the problem. Some of these workshops were led by senior organizers but others were led by members from Valley Interfaith. In addition, COPS pulled back from the business of providing services. One member, describes what happened:

We had established a housing alliance. We identified families in the community that wanted to be home owners and helped them through that process. But it was eating up the talent. It was eating up the membership. We came to the realization that while housing was needed in San Antonio, COPS is not about providing services. We've never been about that. And we shut down they housing alliance. Now that was very painful to do. But they understood the role of COPS was to organize this power organization and identify members. There was no debate about where we needed to cut the line.

COPS has also pulled back from its involvement in the allocation of Community Development Block Grant funds (Federal money which flows to cities for local projects) and, over the past year, re-dedicated itself to a project much more in the original spirit of the organization, a drive to divert sales tax revenue away from physical infrastructure and towards education and job training projects. Developing the support for this has meant voter registration, identification of new members with energy around the issue, training sessions in congregations: in short, all of the traditional organizing and power-building work that lies at the core of the model.

What is striking about this story (and the story of the golf course) is not that COPS, and by extension other IAF organizations, teetered on the edge of settling into routines that diverted the organization from its mission. The IAF is remarkably sensitive to this danger has built a self-repair kit into its culture. This achievement distinguishes it from the vast majority of organizations, political and otherwise.

### How the IAF Avoids the Consequences of Oligarchy

At the core of the IAF success in evading the iron law is its commitment to training members to develop their capacity and sense of agency and building an adversarial culture in the organization, which enables them to exercise these new skills and attitudes. The sense of capacity and agency helps the organizations avoid becoming becalmed because the members come to believe that they have a strong stake and voice in the organization and that they have the ability to be influential.

The IAF approach to organizing is centered on identifying and training members. One member's comment is representative: The IAF is "a university that educates us. We're prepared for any event." This training takes place via the individual relational meetings and through seminars and workshops. At a typical training session, organizers or outside experts run small-group workshops on particular topics, both substantive (e.g., new ideas about school curriculum, or water law, or the economics of living-wage campaigns) and organizational (e.g., how to run a house-meeting, or social doctrine in the Bible, or voter registration strategies). In addition, IAF members read material ranging from economics to theology. Several small groups often read a common set of articles, and one group then summarizes the material for the entire assembly while another discusses how the readings relate to ongoing concerns in their lives, neighborhoods, and cities. In addition, members attend more extended training which lasts (depending on the program) three, five, or ten days. These are extended introductions to the IAF's philosophy of organizing and personal development.

The organizers are constantly prodding members to try new activities and to gain new skills. In the formal training sessions, members go through role-plays in which they perform core IAF activities, ranging from recruiting other members to talking with

politicians and government officials. Prior to public actions, ranging from simple meetings with politicians to full-blown accountability sessions, members often practice and rehearse.

A description of this process is provided by a member:

The organizer has been instrumental in helping me keep the fire lit and challenging me and putting me in situations where I can apply what I've learned. Putting me in leadership positions. She would say, "I need some help. I need a co chair. I need somebody to run this meeting and I need you to say a little bit about this. Talk about what you learned in training and share it with the other people. She would ask me to attend state rallies where we were focusing on a variety of issues and then come back and report to the group. Basically it was through action. Putting me in situations where I had to apply what I had learned. It has become very comfortable for me because I've done it so many times, and it's become part of the fiber of who I am.

And another member provides a similar story:

I think a turning point was a time when [an organizer] confronted me. She said, "What have you learned? You've been with us for a year, a year and a half. What have you learned?" And I had never thought about it. About myself. No, you don't just know how to run a meeting. Not just about how to talk to people. What have you learned about yourself? And that's when I just had to sit down and say, "Oh, O.K. this is what I've actually learned. What I've changed." But it was her confrontation with me that made me dig deeper inside myself and find that spot. She gave me a couple of books to read and that helped also.

In our interviews we asked members (leaders) how they felt that they had changed as a result of IAF training. The following comments were typical in virtually all of our interviews: "When I got to know Valley Interfaith I was one of those persons who was never involved in anything." Another: "When I began to train I didn't know how to talk." Another: "I was a timid person, ashamed. I couldn't talk." Another: "I was more like a shy person. I couldn't talk to other people. I was like in my little shell, not speaking out."

By the same token, the comments were all followed by descriptions of personal transformation. The most common reaction was that the IAF had given people the courage to speak. The people who made the comments above now say: "It is difficult to change these habits but in the two years I've been with the organization I have learned a

lot and have changed a lot.” Another: “It gave me the courage to talk.” Another: “I’m not afraid anymore. Before I thought I’d be afraid to confront a political person of one kind or another.” Another: “I have changed a lot. I’m no longer afraid to talk.”

We asked members how they thought an old friend, who hadn’t seen them for some time, would perceive them differently if they were to meet that person now. This reply was typical: [She would] “probably say I’m more assertive. That I understand issues a whole lot better.” And in fact a friend said, “When I first saw [ ] she was a person very closed up in her house, doing nothing more than taking care of her husband and children. Now she’s involved in the problems of the community.”

Many of the people we talked to described personal changes that went well beyond the purely political. In one member’s words:

Well it goes deep into you. I mean you go deep inside. You just don’t go a little bit into the surface. I mean you go deep into the soul and you really look into yourself. Because often we go through life not knowing who we are. So you get to know yourself better, I think. National training did that to me a lot.

This notion that the IAF leads to broader horizons is also emphasized by another member, who commented:

Well, I think that if it wasn’t for Valley Interfaith I think I would probably be trapped in my own little job, and little world, little family. Not thinking that I could make a difference in anybody’s lives and for that matter in my home. I think I’ve been able to get outside my own family and my own job and been able to get to know other people. Help other individuals and grow that way. And by being involved in other people’s lives, in other things, it’s helped me expand and not lose sight of what’s really important. In that respect I think it’s kept me really intact as to my community.

### Building an Adversarial Culture

As the foregoing demonstrates, the IAF enhances people’s perceptions of their capacity.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the union members studied by Lipset et al. came into the union with confidence in their status and abilities, the IAF is composed of people who lack this confidence, but the organizations work hard to help them develop it. The next question is how this sense of agency is exercised. In the Typographical Union, members participated

via the formal competition of competing political parties. In the IAF there are no elections, but the organization's culture creates an environment in which people are encouraged to be assertive, and, by acting in this manner, prevent the organizations from falling prey to the pathologies that concern us here.

A central element of the IAF culture is skepticism towards authority. This skepticism is developed via training exercises, rituals, and readings. Because members are encouraged to develop this skepticism, and because their sense of capacity and agency has been developed, they are more likely to resist organizational tendencies for elite domination.

The IAF also has cultural norms about how people behave towards each other that taken together might be described as "tough love." These norms are repeatedly conveyed in both formal training sessions and also in informal interactions between organizers and members. The organizers take it as one of their core tasks to teach these norms and to reinforce them via ritual.

One norm is the so-called iron rule: "Never do for anyone what they can do for themselves." People need to learn to act on their own behalf, and if organizers or other members are too interventionist, this learning won't happen. In a similar spirit, groups of people—be they employees who are paid too little or disgruntled residents of a *colonia*—need to do the hard work of organizing to change their circumstances. Obviously this rule does not imply that no assistance will be rendered, since the IAF exists to help individuals and groups move forward, but it does imply that people have to make an effort. There is also internal political content to this norm: the organization has to choose what battles to undertake, and if affected parties are not willing to make a significant effort, then that particular issue is unlikely to be on the agenda.

Another ritual is constant evaluation. After every activity the members and organizers will come together to talk about what went wrong and what went right. These conversations can be quite direct. At one evaluation I attended, the event (a rally combined with a meeting with state representatives) was evaluated by out-of-town organizers and the local organizer on several criteria: the size and diversity of attendance, whether the members took ownership of the event, whether it was clear that the members represented specific institutions, and whether the event articulated issues

that the politicians in attendance could be pressed to act upon (as opposed to problems that are not actionable). Even at the conclusion of one-on-one conversations, there will be an evaluation of the experience.

Finally, the IAF trains members to make a clear distinction between public and private relationships. Private relationships are those among family and friends. They are governed by a set of emotions—love, loyalty, desire to be accepted—that are widely understood. It is a mistake, however, to expect that these kinds of relationships should be extended to the world of organizing and work. Public relationships are those among colleagues and also between IAF members and public officials. These are governed by power rather than love, by the desire to be respected, not by the desire to be accepted, and by self-interest. The implication is that no one, colleagues as well as adversaries, should be fully trusted nor should their leadership be unquestionably accepted.

### The Organizers Once Again

Why do the organizers go along with this? Why do they not work to undermine the model? After all, the normal expectation is that the temptations and incentives to reach for power and to aggrandize their position would lead them to take actions to move the organization along the traditional path towards elite domination.

Part of the answer is that the model is self-perpetuating in that once the members develop their sense of capacity and then find themselves operating in the kind of adversarial culture that I have described, then they will work to maintain the balance of power in the system. This is, indeed, an important part of the answer and should not be underestimated. However, it is also important to inquire about the ideology, behavior, and incentive structure of the organizers.

The organizers begin with a deep grounding in the IAF ideology regarding the role of members, an ideology that has its roots in the 1930s and the work of Saul Alinsky (Horwitt, 1992). In this view, the very purpose of the organization is to build the capacity of the members, and any particular programmatic actions are secondary to this larger goal. The organizers, very much like the members, attend regular training sessions

and seminars (on the order of once every six weeks), and at these the ideology is systematically reinforced.

This strong ideology, which is regularly re-taught, is an important part of the story, but there is more. Another element is that the SWIAF has a set of organizational practices aimed at preventing organizer domination. The organizers are rotated every three or four years to another city and hence are prevented from developing a vested interest in building power in any particular location. In addition, when a lead organizer moves to another organization in a new city, he or she has to be approved and hired by the new local organization, i.e., by the members. An organizer with a poor reputation in the network could have difficulty at this point (and there is a network of members in the region since they see each other at the training sessions and conferences).

Beyond the ideology and the organizational practices, it is also worth considering the career incentives facing organizers. First, looking at the potential downside, unlike union leaders, IAF organizers do not face elections in which they could be ousted. IAF organizers lose their jobs if their supervisors (more senior organizers) believe they are doing poor work. However, they do not face electoral risk and hence do not have an incentive to build a power base or to limit the capacity of potential opponents.

On the upside, the question is what it means for an organizer to get ahead in the IAF. Salaries in the IAF are good relative to other community organizations, but the salary structure is compressed, and no one gets rich by moving up the organization.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the organizational hierarchy is flat, with only three levels (trainee, organizer, and lead organizer). Advancement means first becoming a lead organizer and then getting assigned to challenging and interesting cities. In addition, advancement means gaining respect in the eyes of one's peers and hence becoming influential in the network. None of these sources of advancement depend upon establishing a power base in a local organization or suppressing the role of members.

In short, a combination of consistently reinforced ideology, lack of threat, and the nature of positive career incentives taken as a whole predispose organizers to accept an organizational framework in which their power, while not inconsiderable, is limited and constrained by the countervailing power of the membership. This balance is what permits the IAF to maintain the practices and culture that evade the iron law.

## Summary

One way of thinking about how the IAF avoids the fate that have befallen many unions is to note that its strategy is consistent with a line of argument found in the Social Movement Literature, but with a twist. As already noted, Lipset et al. (1956) place important weight on the social or cultural capital which members brought to the union, arguing that because the members saw themselves as high-status, they were inclined to insist on a voice in union affairs. Clemens (1993) argues that the turn-of-the-(twentieth)-century women's groups she studied avoided the iron law because the social status of the members (typically not required to support themselves or children) rendered them relatively immune from the blandishments of the political establishment, and hence they were unlikely to be tempted by co-optation and less likely to use the organizational levers to maintain internal power for personal gain.

In both of these lines of argument, status and capacity are central in the process of maintaining energy, but in both cases these are exogenous to the organizations themselves. The members brought this status with them to the organization. There was no sense, for example, in which the union consciously created the preconditions for "union democracy." By contrast, the IAF starts from a different point. Its members come into the organization with a weak sense of capacity, and the IAF puts enormous effort into building it. There are no political contests, but the IAF creates an adversarial culture. In short, the IAF case is an example of an organization shaping the character of its membership. The dynamics built by the IAF permit strong self-perpetuating leadership to coexist with high levels of membership energy and commitment.

## **LESSONS FOR EMPLOYEE REPRESENTATION**

There are four key elements of the IAF organizing model. First, it is based in the community, not in the workplace. Many of the issues that it address are community issues but, in addition, the institutional base of the organizing lies in churches and schools, i.e. in neighborhood institutions.

The second key element is that the organizations are broad-based. They are not centered around any specific substantive issue nor do they focus on any specific group of people or identity issue. Rather, their goal is to assemble a broad coalition and to build political power for the organization. With that power in hand they move from issue to issue, typically using their issue based campaigns as the foundation for further building the political power of the organization.

The third key element is that the organizations place a great deal of weight on leadership development. The development of a strong grass-roots leadership cadre is also central to the ability of the organizations to avoid the trap of the iron law of oligarchy.

Finally, these organizations are deeply involved in labor market issues in a variety of ways and they have had considerable success. However, they view these issues, just as they view all issues, as part of a larger organizing campaign to build broad-based power organizations. In this sense labor market concerns, while a very significant part of what they do on a day by day basis, are not the focus of the organizations but rather are a by-product of their larger agenda.

The organizing model described above is has spread reasonably extensively in the United States. In addition to the IAF national network there are several other networks that have adopted the same model.<sup>11</sup> A recent survey examined the diffusion of the model, including all of these networks and the IAF, and identified 133 organizations in 33 states that in total reached somewhere between 1 and 3 million people (Warren and Wood, 2001).

### An Assessment

Given these characteristics, what can we say about the prospects of these organizations as alternative forms of employee representation? One strategy for answering this question is to focus on the practicalities of day to day accomplishments. It seems apparent that the combination of political power and creative ideas has led to successful job training, living wage campaigns, and efforts to push up local wages via

restrictions on economic development funding. In the cities and states in which the organizations are powerful they are clearly players in shaping labor market outcomes for people at the low end of the job queue.

Moving beyond these practicalities we can ask how this style of organizing fits into some of the current debates regarding employee representation. What is most striking about the IAF is its insistence on its broad-based character and its unwillingness to become involved in issues of identity politics. The growing importance of identity concerns in employee representation has been noted by a number of scholars (e.g. Piore and Safford, 2005) but has also been subject to strong criticism (Gitlin, 1997). The most persuasive line of criticism is that while identity politics has led to important gains for many groups it has failed to either build or maintain a sense of broad community of interests nor has it effectively addressed economic inequality. Indeed, one might attribute the political silence in the United States in the face of growing inequality to the decline of unions and the rise of identity politics.<sup>12</sup> The IAF, like traditional unions, seeks to incorporate a broad range of interests into its membership and agenda and to force these interests to develop a common agenda.

If the IAF shares with traditional unions an appreciation of the advantages of broad-based memberships and agendas it differs from them in other important respects. As we have seen, despite the fact that the IAF does not have internal election campaigns its culture puts much more emphasis on membership involvement than do typical unions. Unions with a hierarchical tradition are often uncomfortable with the IAF style of leadership development. And, unlike traditional unions, the IAF does not endorse particular political candidates nor does it participate in their election campaigns. Instead, the IAF runs what it terms “accountability sessions” at which all candidates are invited to respond to the IAF agenda, and the IAF then engages in voter registration campaigns in the areas in which it is strong.

Another key distinction is that the IAF labor market efforts take the form of being outside the employer and looking in. That is, in no employer are there groups of employees who are organized around the basis of a common employment setting. There are no contracts or collective bargaining agreements that are attained. This means that

while the IAF organizations are very stable and well institutionalized, the changes in the practices of any particular employer may not be as well established.

A second concern is one of scale. Unions simply are larger than IAF organizations and as such reach more people (albeit less intensively) and have access to more financial and political resources. A successful union organizing campaign can enroll thousands of people at one swoop whereas the IAF will take a much longer time to reach this scale. Of course, while this point is true in principle the hard fact is that successful union campaigns are few and far between and the union movement is declining, not growing.

What these considerations suggest is a twofold path involving the IAF and other community organizations that are based on its model. On the one hand, these organizations have proved themselves vital and effective on their own terms and they will likely continue to grow. On the other hand, they can link with and assist the traditional union movement in two ways.

First, the IAF can be one leg of community-union coalitions that seek to organize by deploying the idiom and style of the Civil Rights movement alongside more traditional union concerns. The success of Justice for Janitors is an illustration of the potential power of this style of organizing. The advantage of this strategy is that, when successful, it can attain the traditional goals of a union—a collective bargaining contract—but does so by employing novel organizing strategies. Furthermore, it can energize the union movement by bringing in new supporters and constituencies.

Second, once the connection is made between IAF style organizations and unions, then the IAF leadership development model may begin to influence how unions operate internally. As already noted, the IAF model holds important lessons for unions that seek to revitalize themselves by attracting new leaders and creating mechanisms for them to have a voice within the union. The success of the IAF in developing these leaders and avoiding the traps of the iron law of oligarchy is striking. This is particularly valuable for leaders from low-income communities. The importance of finding a way to accomplish this has been stressed by scholars of the labor movement (Lichtenstein, 2002).

In short, the IAF model is powerful in its own terms as a vehicle for employee representation. The reach of the model may be even greater, however, if it is picked up by traditional unions as they go about their own business and as they seek to develop stronger relationships and coalitions with low income communities.

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<sup>1</sup> The research underlying this paper began in 1995 with an initial visit to several of the Southwest organizations. Between this date and 2000, I traveled several times a year to Texas and Arizona, observing the organizations in action and conducting informal interviews with a range of members and organizers. Commencing in 2000, I undertook more systematic research and conducted formal interviews, which were taped and transcribed. During this period, in addition to continuing the informal observation, I formally interviewed 52 members and 6 organizers. The interviews with the organizers asked about their career in the organization and in the network, their perception of decision making, their view of how the organization's goals and tactics had changed over time, and their perceptions about the role of the members. The interviews with the members asked about the history of the respondent's relationship with the organization, the nature and extent of participation and how that varied over time, the impact of participation upon the attitudes, capacities, and self-image of the respondent, their views about the evolution of the organization's goals and tactics, and the respondent's perception of decision making in the organization. Although the interviews were not drawn randomly from a list of members, an effort was made to diversify the interviews by length of membership, gender, and race/ethnicity. The interviews with members were conducted in three areas—the Lower Rio Grande Valley, San Antonio, and Dallas—and were conducted in both English and Spanish.

<sup>2</sup> The IAF term for members is "leaders." However, for reasons of clarity in this paper I will use the term "members."

<sup>3</sup> For elaboration of its record, see Osterman (2002), Warren (2001), and Shirley (1997).

<sup>4</sup> A good account of the fund raising efforts is in Mark Warren, *op.cit.*, pp. 170-175.

<sup>5</sup> At that time costs were about \$10,000 per client but this has since been reduced to \$6,000 due to the success of the program in tapping into newly available child care funds from the state. As of December, 2000 the program had served 2,345 people. About 60 percent of QUEST placements are in health care and this has remained stable.

<sup>6</sup> This story is told in James Cobb, The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1980, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 1982

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Fisher and Alan Peters, Industrial Incentives; Competition Among American States and Cities (Kalamazoo: W.E. Upjohn Institute), 1998, p. 16

<sup>8</sup> *Colonias* are communities which are typically developed by large landowners and which, because they lie outside the jurisdiction of incorporated cities or towns, are not subject to zoning restrictions and lack infrastructure such as running water, electricity, and paved roads.

<sup>9</sup> “Capacity” as used here is clearly related to the larger social science concept of “agency” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Agency, in the Emirbayer and Mische formulation, involves the interaction of both history and habit with a drive to transform historically given structures (p. 970). They distinguish three components of agency, one of which (iteration) refers to people’s sense of their competencies and capacities and the second of which (projective) refers to their effort to “give shape and direction to future possibilities” (p. 984). My argument is that people’s views of their capacities and their drive to transform the future can be shaped and taught by the SMO.

<sup>10</sup> An entry-level organizer earns in the \$30,000 range, an experienced organizer between \$40,000 and \$60,000, and the most senior organizers between \$70,000 and \$80,000.

<sup>11</sup> These networks are Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART), Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO), and the Gamaliel Foundation.

<sup>12</sup> Whether the decline of unions has been caused by the rise of identity politics is a different, and controversial, question that I cannot address here.