

Alinskyian Organizing

Ecumenical opportunity or interfaith hazard?

By Stephanie Block

The dream of organizing of religious institutions into an ecumenical political power-base is nothing new. What's new is the widespread acceptance such organizing has gained.

As of late 1995, *Albuquerque Interfaith* - an Alinskyian organization in the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico - had 28 institutional members, all of them religious congregations. Eleven were Catholic, four Presbyterian, five Lutheran, and the rest from an assortment of "faith traditions."

Albuquerque Interfaith is only one of a *network* of local affiliates around the United States. Each of these local affiliates belongs to the national "parent" organization, *Industrial Areas Foundation*. The *Industrial Areas Foundation* [known simply as the IAF] sends its professional organizers to train and engage people in each of these locations. The organizer's job is to bring these denominations into a "relationship" which will enable them to act together on civic issues.

Saul Alinsky founded the IAF in 1940. Alinsky, who died in the 70s, wrote two books: *Reveille for Radicals*, and *Rules for Radicals*. In *Reveille for Radicals*, Alinsky writes about the effectiveness of what he called "popular participation," the civic actions of ordinary people through a "People's Organization," like *Albuquerque Interfaith*.

A critical study of the extent of popular participation in People's Organizations was made, and the findings differed so radically from the prevalent assumptions that the original study was repeatedly checked. Each checkup corroborated the original findings. Conclusions showed that in the most powerful and deeply rooted People's Organizations known in this country the degree of popular participation reached a point of between 5 and 7 per cent! This in spite of the fact that those making the study fully recognized that the organizations being evaluated were so much stronger and included so many more people who actually participate than all the other organizations proclaiming "100 per cent participation..." [p 181]

The assumption that Alinsky is debunking in this passage is that an effective organization requires most of its membership to participate. It doesn't. A

small, well-organized core of people can accomplish a disproportionate amount of good - or damage.

An Alinskyian-involved congregation requires only a small, committed core of active, involved people to transform it. Similarly, a relatively small number of strategically situated, networked IAF locals across the country can have a strong influence on federal policy.

Multiply that several Alinskyian networks, each with dozens of local affiliates, in the US - and add an Alinskyian-trained president in the White House - and one can see something powerful is at play.

How do Alinskyian locals function? How do they operate and organize?

At Ascension parish in Albuquerque, the Alinskyian-trained priest wanted his Catholic parish to become an *Albuquerque Interfaith* member. He began “one-on-ones:” private meetings between him and various high-profile people in the congregation. His goal was to identify those who could become an IAF “leadership team” for the congregation. These handpicked “leaders” were chosen for their influence in the community and for their personal openness to social activism.

Albuquerque Interfaith then trained the “parish leadership team”, personally chosen by the IAF priest, to run organizational “house-meetings” in the parish. House-meetings are designed to expand awareness about the local IAF and to establish the Alinskyian organization’s credibility among parishioners. They encourage parishioners to be active and supportive of the IAF organization and stimulate a controlled set of concerns, predetermined by the organization, around social and economic needs of the community. These concerns are quite limited - for example, Alinskyian organizations won’t address the issue of abortion.

As support in the congregation grows, participants engage in tightly orchestrated public actions. Public actions around Albuquerque have included ritualized meetings with government officials and school administrators, demonstrating apparent public support for the Alinskyian organization’s public policies.

Each member congregation in the local Alinskyian organization pays dues. In Albuquerque, member congregations pay 1.5% of their income to the *Albuquerque Interfaith*. This helps to pay the professional organizer a middle-class salary, benefits, office and travel expenses. *Albuquerque Interfaith*, in turn, pays the national IAF \$30,000 yearly. This money helps to pay the

corporate-level salaries of the eight regional IAF directors who travel extensively.

What do Alinskyian organizations do? What are the changes they mobilize member congregations around the country to initiate?

The goals of the Alinskyian networks exist on two levels. The first is to seek the self-interest of their membership, that is, to identify some issues of concern to them. If a street corner needs a traffic light, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and Protestants ought to be able to work together to get one in place.

To achieve this requires research: what does it take to have a traffic light installed? What are the costs involved? Is the money there? Is the need urgent? Who does one approach about it? How do we pressure them if they don't agree with us? How do we involve the media, if necessary? How do we build public support for our issue? These are the questions that form part of the citizen education in which the Alinskyian organization trains the participating individuals from its member congregations.

The goals of the Alinskyian organization exist on another level, though. It not only has local goals, tailored to the self-interest of local people, but its own goals. Ernesto Cortes, the southwestern regional IAF director writes: “[The organizer’s] issue gets dealt with last. If you want your issue to be dealt with first, you’ll never build anything. So you lead with other people’s issues, and you teach them how to act on their issues. Then you model what is to be reciprocal, you model what it is to have a long-term vision.” [Ernesto Cortes, “Organizing the Community: The *Industrial Areas Foundation* organizer speaks to farmers and farm activists,” *The Texas Observer - A Journal of Free Voice*, July 11, 1986.]

To obtain a power-base that will support the *organizer’s* issues, the Alinskyian organization must build a constituency that trusts it. Working through the churches, using sympathetic clergy, an Alinskyian organization develops those relationships of trust within member congregations and dioceses. The hands-on, citizen education that teaches people how to get a traffic light installed has the additional advantage of identifying and developing a small but committed and active group of people who will support the Alinskyian organization’s “long-term vision”.

What is that “vision”? In general terms, the Alinskyian organization’s embrace a practical philosophy of governance called variously “third way,” “participatory democracy,” or “democratic socialism.” All these terms, and

others, are an attempt to describe a brand of socialism that aims to be a middle ground between laissez-faire capitalism and right wing, totalitarian socialism (like communism). Proponents of this “middle ground” believe that their system of government can use democratic mechanisms to administer the state’s benefits. The *mechanisms* of administration for those benefits are the “*mediating institutions*”– such as churches - which they believe will render government control more benevolent and “just.”

The “mediating institutions” are schools, churches, unions, community centers and the like, held together by the relationships they have forged within their community organization - like *Albuquerque Interfaith*.

To achieve this utopian “vision,” the Alinskyian networks are engaged in “restructuring” activities of all kinds. On the **political level**, these networks do a lot of voter registration. In the late 90s, for instance, the IAF made national headlines for a massive naturalization drive that it included hundreds of *invalid* naturalizations. New citizens - validly so or not - were driven straight from receiving their citizenship papers to the polling booths. The situation was not rectified until after the 1996, California elections which unsettled pro-life Congressman Robert Dornan to the IAF-backed, pro-abortion candidate.

The Alinskyian networks operate in the **economic arena**, also, pushing the comprehensive Empowerment Zone and Enterprise Community packages in dozens of areas around the country.

The Alinskyian networks supported Hillary Clinton’s universal **health care** plan and have experimented with their member churches in “community-based” health-care clinics.

The Alinskyian networks have pushed **welfare reform**...of a sort. In Arizona, this “reform” was fought by a coalition of over 30 community-based human services organizations, including food banks and health care facilities (hardly “radical right” types), who argued it was an attempt to overrun “existing organizations with demonstrated track records and accountability for working with the poor...” to control public money for its own organizational purposes. The human services coalition warned that, “Any diversion of funds to create another layer of providers would detract from the present effort and be disastrous.”

Alinskyian networks are deeply involved in **education reform**. On January 24, 1996, the *Albuquerque Interfaith* began the first in a series of Professional Development Seminars funded by a \$450,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Involving about 60 teachers, administrators, community center directors, high school students, and parents from the city’s public school

system, these all-day seminars at the Albuquerque Hilton were, according to one local school board member, designed as the educational establishment's response to the radical right. Unlike other states, however, there was no organized opposition to systemic school reform in New Mexico, so there was no need for a program to counter it.

What was its real purpose, then? What did the IAF hope to accomplish among area educators? Dr. Benjamin Barber, a political scientist out of Rutgers University, during a radio interview, gave the answer. The Alinskyian networks, he explained, are conducting "practical experiments to empower people in their own lives." These groups "don't simply talk about citizenship and democracy, but are engaged in working for it." Barber identified, specifically, the *Industrial Areas Foundation*. The IAF-lead Albuquerque "Professional Development Seminar" for public schools graphically the IAF's connecting **public education to civic education**.

This is occurring all over the United States. The scope of IAF involvement in the recent federal movement toward systemic education "reform" is vast. And it is *necessary* for the IAF to maintain its involvement in the movement toward systemic education reform, because this reform is extremely unpopular.

Marc Tucker's *National Center for Education and the Economy* [the NCEE] is the think-tank that produced the rough draft of what became the *Work Force Development Act* of 1995. The NCEE was well aware that public support for its plans was weak. It sought no less than "transformation in virtually every important aspect of the American system of education."

A NCEE proposal for the legislation stated: "It will require thoughtful and sustained communication with the citizens of these states to build the public consensus needed to support these revolutionary changes."

Weeks-long media campaigns and town meetings were suggested to "increase public discussion" and "focus daily news coverage" on education. Parents would have to see themselves as "collaborators" in their children's education. The proposal said: "The *Industrial Areas Foundation*, perhaps the most experienced agency in the United States in the arena of community organizing, will help us think through the parent engagement and organizing issues."

An example of the IAF's work to generate parent involvement in OBE restructuring is documented in a vision paper called "Community of Learners," ostensibly written by a network of Texas IAF locals in 1990. However, it was "facilitated" into being by an educational consultant from the NCEE board of trustees who was, in the early 1980s, the president of the IAF San Antonio local,

Communities Organized for Public Service. The vision paper was then used by other locals around the country as the basis for their “own” educational policy.

Why did the Texas IAF locals need an education consultant from the NCEE to “help” them write their vision paper? The answer, we are told, is that she provided “...a larger framework for people to think about their own schools and the troubling questions about whether their children were being prepared for the work of the future. Schools are about political power, Hernandez explained.” [William Greider, *Who Will Tell the People*, 1992, p 231.]

No wonder children are graduating from the public school system unable to read! Recall Barber’s radio interview where he describes the IAF’s “civic education” activity in the public schools. Place that next to the NCEE consultant’s idea that “Schools are about political power.” What sort of educational system are the Alinskyian networks putting together?

The even more disturbing question is: how did the churches come to be involved in such schemes?

Using Religious Institutions

It’s a chicken and egg debate over which came first: do **liberal religious communities embrace Alinskyian faith-based organizing** or does participation in such organizing tend to liberalize the community? Perhaps both assertions are correct.

The IAF has, for example, conducted a national project called “IAF Reflects.” IAF Reflects is a series of “intense, 2-week seminars for veteran organizers.” These retreats for congregational leaders are, in the words of one enthusiastic observer, designed to put those “leaders in touch with the biblical tradition that might give deeper insight into their work together, bind them more closely, and empower them to go forward to build God’s reign. The IAF has come to realize that it is about holy work...”

Faith communities, writes the Catholic Villanova religion professor, Susan Toton, “must be conversant in two languages -the language of the faith and the language of public discourse,” which Toton equates to IAF-style activism. “Both are essential for communities committed to furthering God’s reign.”

Ed Chambers, national IAF executive director, has a similar idea. He says: “I’d had a little training in philosophy. And I started forcing myself to look at what our kind of organizing meant to people. We worked with people in the churches, and their language was the language of the gospel. Their language was nothing like Alinsky’s language. His language was power talk. Tough,

abrasive, confrontational, full of ridicule. And those are really all non-Christian concepts. So I started looking at it. Here are the non-Christian concepts...here are the Christian concepts. Are there any similarities? Is this just a different language for the same thing?"

What is this language of Alinsky's? Alinsky explains it. According to him, in his *Rules for Radicals*, this "power talk" is Machiavellian. "What follows [Alinsky writes in the opening paragraph of the *Rules*] is for those who want to change the world from what it is to what they believe it should be. *The Prince* was written by Machiavelli for the Haves on how to hold power. *Rules for Radicals* is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away."

Machiavelli's *The Prince* used to be on the Catholic Index, when the Church had an Index, as forbidden reading. This was **not** because the object of Machiavelli's discussion was to protect the rich. It was because the principles Machiavelli gave the rich for holding on to power were unethical.

The "power talk" of Alinsky is also unethical. He teaches, at great length, (for instance) that the "ends justify the means." (In fact, Alinsky devotes an entire chapter in the *Rules* to rationalizing why the ends justify the means.) Romans 3:8, however, says "it is not licit to do evil that good may come of it," and Pope John Paul II, in *Veritatis Splendor*, insists that the Christian must accede to the truth of this moral teaching.

These two positions are not reconcilable. It is not moral to speak the language of pious ethics at worship, and then go out into the world and speak the language of opportunism and might-is-right and whatever else "ends justifies the means" ethics produces. They are not simply two different languages saying the same thing.

What, then, are the Alinskyian networks doing when they apply the biblical language to their "power" talk, or use scriptural references to support their reform "vision"? They are making religious people comfortable with socialist goals, confusing them into thinking socialist "change" and religious "conversion" are the same thing.

Expansion

Collectively, there are over 200 local affiliates of an Alinsky-style organizations in the United States and several of the networks are expanding into Latin America, Europe, and Africa.

Therefore, it is extremely important that people of strong religious convictions understand the funding mechanisms that support these

organizations. In addition to the dues paid by member congregations, expansion efforts require “seed money.” The *Catholic Campaign for Human Development* annually channels millions of dollars into Alinsky-style, faith-based organizing. The *Jewish Fund for Justice*, the *Lutheran Fund for Justice*, grants disbursed through the *United Methodist Global Ministries*, and the *Presbyterian World Services* are similar sources of funding.

The dream of organizing of religious institutions into an ecumenical political power-base is nothing new - but we’d better be very watchful of what we organize.

In a Nutshell

1. There are several national networks of Alinskyian organizations around the United States - The *Industrial Areas Foundation* (IAF), *Gamaliel*, DART, and PICO are the largest (ACORN is also an Alinskyian network, but is structured differently).
 - Each of these national networks has dozens of local affiliates in different cities around the country.
 - Each local affiliate is comprised of member institutions, many of which are religious congregations such as churches.
 - Each member institution pays the local Alinskyian organization a percentage of its income - and the local affiliate, in turn, pays a percentage of its income to the national network. This pays for network organizers to run the local affiliates and the national network.
 - The national network trains local “leadership” in the member institutions and establishes the network’s larger goals.
 - The local affiliate identifies progressive “leadership” potential and builds local “relationships”.
2. The goals of the Alinskyian networks are to restructure society along a socialist “vision”:
 - All the Alinskyian networks’ projects at the national level are “comprehensive”, resulting in federal control of all facets of a citizen’s life, from birth to death.
3. Alinskyian organizing is a problem for religious institutions because:
 - The socialist vision follows a different moral framework from most traditional religions - it does not accept a fixed, moral truth but believes “truth” is established by public consensus (which can be manipulated, when and as needed).

- Alinskyian networks deliberately confuse biblical language, biblical stories, and religious symbols with socialist goals - this is a technique developed in Latin America (Liberationism Theology).
 - Alinskyian networks almost exclusively support “**progressive**” politicians and their agendas - meaning, specifically, pro-abortion, pro-homosexual, statist platforms.
4. Understanding the work of the Alinskyian networks is particular urgent while an Alinskyian organizer is president of the US.