



A NEWSLETTER FOR ACORN WORKERS • ISSUE #2 • FEBRUARY 19, 2001

WRITE: TO-GATHER C/O IWW, PO BOX 13476, PHILA., PA 19101 • CALL: 215-763-1274 BOX #5 • E-MAIL: giazzoni@usa.net

Philly ACORN workers strike for safe jobs & end to union-busting

The IWW struck the Philadelphia office of ACORN February 8 to protest a series of unfair labor practices that had made working conditions intolerable. ACORN workers asked management to recognize their union and respond to concerns about job safety and working conditions January 29. Although ACORN claims to be a progressive community group promoting rights for working people, management refused to

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recognize the union or address workers' grievances. In the two weeks between collecting authorization cards and the workers' decision that they had no choice but to strike, managers subjected workers to captive meetings, threatened workers for engaging in direct action on the job, threatened to terminate and later briefly suspended a member of the union organizing committee on alleged productivity grounds, threatened to discipline a worker for taking a lunch break during her 10-hour shift, blamed the union campaign for its refusal to transfer another worker to a safer job, subjected union supporters to surveillance and investigations, and fired a member of the IWW organizing committee.

A lively picket line in front of ACORN's offices drew 15 ACORN strikers and supporters, and enthusiastic support from many passersby. Several ACORN members pledged to speak to management to demand better treatment for workers. The picket line concluded with a march into the

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Why we're organizing

- We want organizers working in pairs in the field after dark for more safety. In the past two months one worker was molested, another robbed at gunpoint, and others have experienced harassment. When we raised the issue in Philadelphia, management responded with a memo claiming that there have been "no major incidents" in the past three years. Maybe they're waiting for someone to get killed.

- We want an eight-hour work day, and two weekends off per month. Fifty-four hours a week is just too much.

- We want guaranteed lunch breaks. Putting in eight or ten hours at a stretch, we need a chance to eat.

- We want procedures to deal with racial bias. We're tired of unequal pay and management insensitivity.

ACORN management can afford to meet these demands. Instead, they order us to continue unsafe work practices, and engage in union-busting. Attempts to intimidate and harass union supporters are illegal, and unworthy of an organization established to work for social justice.

from a flier distributed to Philly ACORN members during a February 8 picket

A Local 100 organizer remembers

LOUISIANA. The struggles of ACORN workers in Philadelphia for workplace democracy is not a new phenomena. Periodically workers in this "peoples' organization" have organized to challenge the undemocratic and exploitative practices of this organization and its leaders. Let me briefly tell you about my experience in one such fight. In the fall of 1986 I began working for ACORN-affiliated Local 100, SEIU, AFL-CIO, in New Orleans, as a union organizer. In the mid-1980s ACORN struck a deal with then SEIU president John Sweeney to open or take over existing SEIU union locals in a number of cities—New Orleans, Boston and Chicago. The local in New Orleans was run by self-proclaimed "chief organizer" Wade Rathke, also the chief organizer of ACORN. I came into the job with zeal similar to that of a lot of young people who are attracted to organizing and who see ACORN as an opportunity to work for progressive social change.

I started noticing that the organization had serious problems regarding democracy and exploitation of its own workers, and the consciousness-raising efforts of Local 100 organizers in North Carolina showed me that the problems were widespread. Let

me explain. One major grievance of the organizing staff was the competitive environment created by Rathke. This "organizing genius" developed a "piece rate" strategy of organizing. All the names of Local 100 organizers were placed on a chalkboard in the office along with a list of all sites where Local 100 had contracts. Scores were kept on how many new dues paying members organizers had signed up at each facility. Later, a bonus program was developed based on how many workers we were able to get on dues check-off each month. Local 100 management also promoted and provoked petty divisions among staff. Thus, management helped to create the competitive, cut throat environment we were supposed to be fighting.

Other issues, which the Philadelphia campaign reminds me of, included late checks, and wages that worked out to be below or near the minimum wage. All these issues were also expressions of the lack of democracy in the organization for both staff organizers and members. In light of these grievances and problems, and due to the efforts of the "Carolina contingent" — the name for the group of organizers from North Carolina — the Local 100 staff organizing drive began in the spring of 1987. There were about 20 organizers and staff involved, which included Local 100's offices in New

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ACORN office to collect pay checks owed the strikers. While inside, Wobblies asked the boss a barrage of questions about ACORN's unsafe working conditions and union-busting, finding that he had almost nothing to say in response.

"We work 54 hours a week, we work every weekend, and we don't get overtime pay," says ACORN worker Gina Giazioni. ACORN workers' low salaries combined with weekly overtime means an hourly wage hovering around minimum wage. They plan to bargain for a guaranteed lunch break, eight hour work days, and at least two weekends off per month.

Another urgent concern is job safety. "Every night after dark we are sent out alone into city neighborhoods to recruit new members," Giazioni explains. "It's not safe for us. I've been grabbed and molested while out in the field by myself. Our supervisors haven't done anything except issue a vague memo saying to take appropriate precautions. We want to work in pairs, but they won't let us."

Another worker was robbed at gun point while working the streets alone after the union had demanded the right to work in pairs.

ACORN workers have also discovered disparities in pay and in work assignments which seem to be based on the race of the workers, and called for measures to address institutionalized racial biases.

ACORN is closely linked to the AFL-CIO, making its union-busting even more ironic. One of ACORN's founders, Wade Rathke, is also an international vice president of SEIU, and head of HOTROC, an AFL inter-union committee to organize hotel workers in New Orleans.

While Rathke leads a campaign for management neutrality, urging employers to stay neutral instead of fighting against their workers' organizing efforts, the Philadelphia branch of ACORN is fighting the union tooth and nail – going so far as to advance the ridiculous claim that it would be "illegal" to recognize a union for its Philadelphia staff.

From the March issue of the Industrial Worker, the IWW's newspaper. Contact To-Gather for a copy.



Write for To-Gather

We'd love to hear from you. We hope to publish twice a month. If you would like to receive *To-Gather* by e-mail (as a .pdf), by fax, or by mail, please contact us at the addresses under our masthead.

We are also looking for people who can help us distribute the newsletter.

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A little corny...

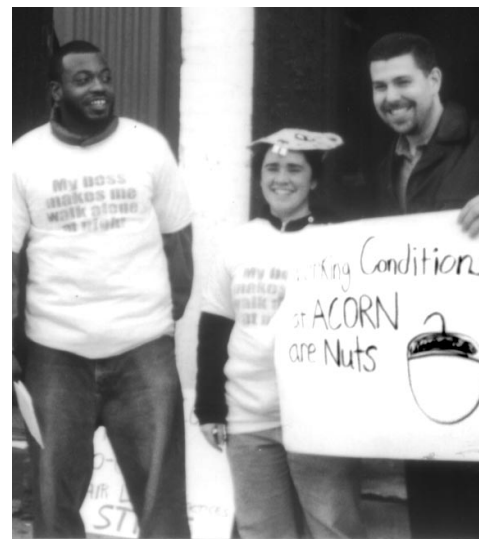
Adapted from a children's song, sung on the picket line in Philadelphia

I'm a little ACORN round
Walking through the cold dark town
My boss he always steps on me
Because I'm just one nut you see

I'm a nut crack, crack,
I'm a nut crack, crack,

But that's not OK with me
We're organizing with Wobblies
Then we'll grow up big and strong
And more acorns they will fall

On the boss crack, crack
On the boss crack, crack



ACORN workers picket on February 8

Local 100 from page 1

Orleans, Baton Rouge and Shreveport.

After a few weeks of clandestine organizing, union supporters marched into Rathke's office to demand union recognition. Rathke, well versed in labor law, refused to accept our petition demanding union recognition.

The battle then began in earnest. Rathke quickly called a meeting of ACORN's inner circle, which included his wife, Beth Butler, head organizer of Louisiana ACORN, and Rathke's brother Dale, who is the financial guru of the outfit. The troika devised a variety of tactics, such as can be expected from any union-busting corporation, to divide and destroy our solidarity. He was successful in peeling some weaker members of over to his side. A couple of them are now high-ranking officials in SEIU. (There are some rewards for breaking ranks.) He also sent some organizers out of New Orleans, the center of the organizing campaign, in order to disarticulate the movement. Other leaders of the campaign were given more onerous and unnecessary assignments. He also worked to get ACORN members to denounce us – not very successfully – as rich brats that wanted to destroy the organization.

Finally the core activists of the drive decided that Rathke would never negotiate. Thus, a good portion of the organizers decided to leave Local 100. The group, including myself, went to Jackson, Mississippi, to organize independently among public sector workers. One of the organizers, who was a Mississippi native, already had good relations with a small SEIU local at the VA hospital in Jackson, which Local 100 was supposed to be servicing, but was not doing a very good job. The union leadership asked us to take over servicing from the far-

away Local 100 in New Orleans. The support from this local would allow us to carry out more organizing. Rathke was furious when the local decided, democratically, to have our local group of organizers service it, rather than Local 100. Rathke attempted to get the international to nullify the agreement and put the local into trusteeship. He also tried to red bait a number of his former organizers. We were (and are, at least some) reds – but this "progressive" tried to use the label to run us out of the labor movement. He was unsuccessful in regaining the breakaway local in Jackson.

Our organizing efforts among state employees laid the groundwork for the still existing Mississippi Alliance of State Employees (MASE) – which was first associated with ACTWU and is now with CWA. Back in New Orleans post-organizing repression was carried out. An African-American employee who had supported the drive, but did not leave for Jackson, was later fired from her job as a part time accountant.

The experience of Local 100 activists in New Orleans, those of ACORN Philadelphia and others shows that it is important to challenge the undemocratic practices of these and other progressive organizations, whether they be labor, community or environmental ones. We should not be prevented from speaking out because it will supposedly give ammunition to the enemy. By baiting us, these outfits avoid being confronted with their own exploitative practices. Further, the ways they deal with their own employees is reflective of the manipulative way they handle their membership. The efforts of workers in these progressive organizations is part of broader struggle to establish truly democratic organizations that can lead a real fight against this racist, capitalist system.

- Jay Arena

Show me the money

ACORN member turned employee has trouble getting paid

CALIFORNIA. As a result of meeting with former ACORN workers and distributing newsletters to current staff, organizers from the San Jose IWW group have learned that poor treatment, high turnover and overall dissatisfaction is widespread among ACORN staff.

Bridgina French was passed *To-Gather* #1 by a co-worker during a training session who said, "Shhh, don't tell anyone I gave this to you, I'll probably get in trouble." Bridgina, an African-American ACORN member, quit her film-processing job to become a paid organizer in early January because she wanted to become more involved with the community.

Working at ACORN Bridgina felt that supervisors lacked basic concern for staff when she was yelled at during a role play training and when a co-worker at ACORN was sent to a street known for prostitution where a man made advances. That woman soon quit.

Less than a week later, Bridgina also quit but without receiving any pay for her work. She was never explained when or how much exactly ACORN staff were paid. When she asked the San Jose supervisor about her pay he wrote a receipt on an index card and gave her a cash advance of \$80 out of his pocket.

After many broken promises of receiving her owed wages, two weeks later Bridgina has still yet to receive her paycheck, causing her extreme economic hardship.

Also since quitting her staff position, Bridgina has stopped receiving any phone calls or notices of ACORN meetings.

She is writing a letter explaining her experience as a staff organizer at ACORN, which she wants to present to ACORN management and has agreed to publish in *To-Gather*.

Bridgina is now working with IWW members to pressure her former supervisor to pay her owed wages that she desperately needs. At presstime of this newsletter, Bridgina has still not been paid.

She is asking concerned community members to call the San Jose ACORN office at 408-729-8961 and ask Jon, the supervisor, why has Bridgina not received her check.

- Adam Welch

It's Not Anti-ACORN to be Pro-Union

NEW YORK. From June 1997 until May 1998, Scott Gorman worked 80 hours or more each week with ACORN's workfare organizing project in New York City. While he was fiercely committed to the goals of the campaign and to the members he worked with, he left after a year feeling mistreated and burned out. He watched many other committed organizers leave under similar circumstances. While he still believes in ACORN's mission, he thinks that low pay, long hours, and basic lack of respect for its workers make the organization much less effective in carrying out its mission than it would be if it treated its workers decently. "I still support ACORN—I would take

part in any of their actions in a heartbeat. I differ in philosophy with them as to how to build a stable organization and on how to be consistent with the philosophy that people deserve dignity and respect."

Scott started working at ACORN as a 3-month-long "apprentice." He was at work early in the morning six days a week, often before dawn, talking to workers at sanitation garages and parks, and waiting outside welfare offices for new workfare workers to show up for their orientations. He worked all day, and stayed at the ACORN office making phone calls until 10 every night. "You could never leave the office at 9:30pm without catching grief from your supervisor." Organizers had intense schedules, travelling to worksites all over the Bronx, going to workers' homes to talk with them at length, organizing meetings, recruiting for committees, collecting dues, and helping to organize local and city-wide actions. Supervisors tried to motivate the staff by appealing to their sense of dedication to the campaign and to their sense of guilt. The lead and head organizers constantly reminded the staff of the goals they set for the campaign. Staff were constantly asked how close they were to meeting the goals and how they planned to improve their performance. Supervisors provided almost no positive reinforcement. Scott didn't like the way he and other workers were treated, and he thought the goals they were asked to meet were nearly impossible. He felt and was encouraged to feel, however, that the campaign was more important than his own well-being.

When he moved out of the "apprenticeship" program into a permanent job, we was

promised a raise in pay from \$12,000 to \$15,000 a year. He needed the extra money in order to survive, and when his next few pay checks didn't change, he talked with his immediate supervisor about it and then with Jon Kest, the director of NY ACORN. They promised to fix the problem, but his pay remained the same. Some of Scott's co-workers were experiencing the same situation, so they decided that they should talk

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with the director collectively. According to Scott, "As soon it became apparent that I wanted to speak to a higher level superior with one of my co-workers about problems we had in common, management immediately took on the charac-

teristics of a union-busting firm." When Scott and a co-worker tried to schedule a meeting with Kest, Kest flatly refused to meet with them together saying "No, I'll talk to you now, and I'll talk to him on Friday." But their efforts did force their boss to pay the amount that had been promised. Kest also began to complement Scott on his work and to offer him encouragement.

But the encouragement only lasted a few weeks, and Kest reverted to a pattern of constant criticism. Scott began to point out in conversations and in meetings that no one was able to consistently meet the goals that management set. "I said that I thought the world of all the organizers, and that if none of us are consistently meeting the goals, perhaps they're unrealistic." He also argued that organizers needed more positive reinforcement, and less negative criticism. He was the only organizer in the campaign who spoke out about his concerns to management, and he feels that he was singled out for scrutiny because of his outspokenness. In May 1998, the director of the NY office gave him an ultimatum: this would be his last week not meeting all of the campaign's standards. Scott had just coordinated a large, successful action, without the help of any other organizers, at the Bronx Sanitation headquarters, and he'd been bringing in the required amount of dues. Despite the fact that no one on the campaign was able to meet all of the goals at the same time (including organizers who had been there longer than he had), and even though he was doing well by any reasonable standard, he was told that he would absolutely have to meet all of the goals or

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else leave. Scott and Kest worked out a plan for how the goals could be met, but after thinking it over, Scott decided to quit.

The director then offered him the chance to begin a new workfare campaign in New Jersey. Scott worked for two months in NJ, operating out of his mother's house because the NY office failed to give him the support he needed to get office space. The lack of support and resources became intolerable, and Scott decided to leave ACORN for good.

Scott sees the low morale and high turnover among staff in the workfare organizing campaign, the limited effectiveness of the campaign, and the more general problem that ACORN has in encouraging sustained, long-term activism among its members as being interconnected, and he believes that these problems are related closely to management's lack of regard for staff. "I feel that management's philosophy was to squeeze out as much productivity as they could get out of me for as long as I was willing to stay, and that they had no concern for my well-being as a person." Very few of the organizers who were with the campaign when Scott started were still there when he left, and the staff turnover affected the members in very negative ways. "When I left the Bronx, the membership base that I had built up became very inactive, and I believe that this is because the organizer and member develop a special relationship, and you can't just plug in a new organizer with the same membership and expect the machine to continue functioning without missing a beat. . . . It's a shame — a new organizer dealing with the same community in many ways starts from scratch. Or it can be even worse — sometimes we'd refer to a community as 'burnt turf,' because the people there had already seen organizers come and go and were less likely to believe that a new organizer can help them to effect any change."

Scott believes that management's lack of respect for workers impairs the organization in other ways as well. Tired, worn-out organizers cannot consistently do a good job; and unreasonable expectations, arbitrary discipline, and constant negative criticism drain organizers of their enthusiasm.

And if the organizers do not feel that they can talk freely with management about the goals they are asked to meet, about the priorities they should have, about the tactics and strategies that are used, they cannot use the knowledge they gain doing organizing work day to run effective campaigns.

He thinks ACORN would be different much more effective if field organizers had more of a say over what goes on in their workplace.

— Interview by M. Chanin

An Open Letter to ACORN Members

This letter, along with the first issue of To-Gather, was distributed to ACORN members in Philadelphia on February 17 outside of a New Year Kick-Off meeting.

Dear ACORN members,

I'm writing to explain to you some of the reasons why my co-workers and I are trying to form a union at ACORN. As any member who has been with ACORN for an extended period knows, the turnover rate of ACORN staff is outrageous. You are lucky if the organizer who signed you up stayed around for a month after you became a member. Our bosses will tell you that the high staff turnover rate at ACORN is due to organizing being "hard work that few are cut out to do." We've come up with solutions that will make the work a little easier and will ultimately strengthen the organization. We want an eight hour work day, two weekends off per month, a guaranteed lunch break, working in pairs after dark, and policies to deal with cultural bias. We asked management to recognize our union and to begin negotiating with us, but they haven't.

The ten hour days and work every weekend make it nearly impossible for organizers to spend quality time with family and friends. The ACORN worker with children sees them off to school in the morning and comes home from work at night to sleeping children. Weekend hours that the organizer could be spending with his or her children are also spent at work. Of course these working conditions are much easier to handle for young people fresh out of college with no family to take care of or debt to pay. While the ACORN workers with debts and families struggle to balance work life and home life, young college grads can dedicate extra hours to work, and quickly advance to a management position. This excludes many people who live in the neighborhood from working as organizers in their own neighborhood.

When the head organizer and boss at Philadelphia ACORN refused to negotiate with staff, the staff took these concerns to the elected Philadelphia ACORN Board of Directors. The boss immediately notified Philadelphia staff that we were not allowed to go to the Board with our concerns. We were told that if we discussed our concerns with Philadelphia ACORN members we would be fired. Our boss explained that the membership structure runs parallel to the staff structure. According to the ACORN by-laws, Philadelphia ACORN members have no say in how the staff is treated. Orders come down the line from chief, Wade Rathke, who lives in New Orleans, Louisiana.

If you think that the ACORN worker who knocks on your door understands how ACORN members want staff to be treated better than the chief in New Orleans, if you would like to see more of your neighbors as permanent ACORN workers, if you are disgusted with the high staff turnover rate, you can do something about it.

Join with other ACORN members who are demanding justice ACORN employees, by contacting us at 215-763-1274 box #5 or by writing to our union's office: IWW • PO Box 13476 • Phila., PA 19101

— Gina Giazzoni

ACORN management freaks out

When the Philadelphia ACORN workers presented union authorization cards from a majority of the staff, their boss, Jeff Ordower, told them he would not recognize the union. He told the workers that it would be "illegal" to recognize the union unless a majority of workers in every ACORN office across the country signed authorization cards.

Ordower, who was expecting the request for recognition, fabricated a reason to not recognize the union, but strangely still asserted that he and ACORN held a "neutral" position on the matter.

As the weeks went on, and after the first issue of *To-Gather* started getting around, the following e-mail came into Gina's inbox:

There were only 4 cards signed in a unit of 9. It is illegal under the NLRB [sic] to recognize less than a majority! Or they would have been recognized. Furthermore, we told you orally and in writing

that we supported unions and would be neutral.

Now, you know this, and instead of doing the organizing of the workers, you are attacking ACORN and telling lies about the organization.

It went on to say that the union insulted ACORN members, that if they had only organized one more person they would have been recognized (her figure of 9 workers includes 2 managers), and that the union's credibility was "botched" because an organizer stood up the members (presumably referring to a sick day a worker took.) It was signed by Beth Butler, who is Wade Rathke's wife.

We beg to differ of course, but are happy to see that management will negotiate with units that present a majority of cards. Write us for a full copy of the e-mail.

— Alexis Buss