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Community Analysis and Organization

Saul D. Alinsky

ABSTRACT

In the industrial area adjacent to the Stock Yards of Chicago, a community council was formed which included the two basic institutions of the area — (1) organized religion and (2) organized labor — as well as all of the other interest and action groups in that community. “Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council” is an experimental demonstration of a community organizational procedure predicated upon a functional conception of the character of a community and its problems. On the local scene the council has operated a successful program. It has brought about not only a tangible improvement in the way of life of the local residents of Back of the Yards but has also resulted in the development of an unusual sympathy and understanding between organizations which previously had been in opposition and conflict. This Council has not confined its efforts to the local scene but has also addressed itself to the task of coping with those larger socioeconomic issues which converge upon the local scene to establish the plight of Back of the Yards. The Council is aiding other industrial areas to organize in a similar manner in the hope that the combined strength of many such community councils will be sufficient to deal effectively with these major destructive forces.

Community organizational enterprises have traditionally confined themselves to co-ordination of professional formal agencies which are, first, superimposed upon the community and, second, play a superficial role in the life of the community. It is a rare phenomenon today to discover a community organization in which the indigenous interest and action groups of the community not only participate but also play a fundamental role in that organization. Even where the possibility of organizational work of this character has evidenced itself, it has not been accompanied by any significant understanding of the social forces involved in the functional nature of a community or of the socioeconomic strata of the community and its corresponding implications.

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The two major defects in the traditional community organization movement are (1) that it views each problem of the community as if it were independent of all other problems and (2) that it views the community as a social, political, and economic entity which is more or less insulated from the general social scene. This appears to be true both of those agencies which are concerned with some one special problem of the local community as if this problem were isolated and of those which claim to be interested in the development of a program for such a local neighborhood as a whole, without recognizing that the life of such a neighborhood is shaped by forces which far transcend the local scene.

An understanding of the fashion in which a local community functions within the larger social organism demands a marked departure from the conventional procedures characteristic of that kind of communal organization which proposes that the community elevate itself by means of its own bootstraps. It means that, while the community as a whole is taken as a specific starting-point for a program of social construction, the organizational procedures must direct their attention toward those larger socioeconomic issues which converge upon that scene to create the plight of the area.

In this paper it is proposed to discuss very briefly and generally an effort now being made to project these considerations into a concrete situation. I propose to indicate an employment of the foregoing philosophy in the formation of a community council.

Among the many neighborhoods whose names have been synonymous with certain characteristics responsible for their reputation, such as "Hell's Kitchen" and "Harlem" in New York City, there is none which stands out more conspicuously than that part of the city of Chicago known as "Back of the Yards." This is "The Jungle" of Upton Sinclair. Colorfully dramatized in American literature, immortalized in poetry, "Back of the Yards" has come to be in the eyes of the American people a byword for disease, delinquency, deterioration, dirt, and dependency. The history of Back of the Yards is to a large extent a study of the immigration movements to this country. It is a story graphically demonstrating the methods employed by a rapidly expanding industry in its drive to secure cheap labor. It is a history of the American "melting-pot" process. It is also the saga of organized labor in the United States. It reflects the history of the Knights of Labor, of the American Federation of Labor, and of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. It is a story of desperation, of surging enthusiasms, of violence, and of heartbreak.

A survey of the possibilities for community organization of the residents of the Back of the Yards neighborhood reveals two basic social forces which might serve as the cornerstone of any effective community organization which would, first, be representative of the people of the community and, second, by the very virtue of such representation, possess the necessary strength to effect

constructive changes in the life of the Back of the Yards neighborhood. These two elemental social institutions are, first, the Catholic church and second, organized labor.

More than 90 per cent of the population of the Back of the Yards community is Catholic in religion. It is the Catholic church which serves as the medium through which these people express some of their most cherished traditional hopes, desires, and aspirations. The Catholic church is an integral and dynamic factor in the experiences and lives of the people "back of the yards." In this area one finds a variety of nationalities. There are Poles, Lithuanians, Slovaks, Germans, Irish, Ukrainians, and Mexicans. The Poles constitute the dominant nationality group. The parishes are to a large extent composed of distinct nationality groups. For example, there is a Slovak church, a German church, a Polish church, a Lithuanian church, etc. In this particular neighborhood there are seven large parishes. It is common knowledge that, even though parts of the same denomination, these parishes have rarely acted as a unit in attacking community problems. Today, through the medium of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, these parishes are operating as a solid bloc.

Just as the Catholic religion is the common spiritual denominator for the people of the community, so to a relative extent one finds in the neighborhood a common vocational denominator. To a large extent the economic life of this community depends upon the Stock Yards and its affiliated subsidiaries. If production falls off at the Stock Yards, the economic level of the people back of the yards correspondingly declines. If a man or woman in the community is not directly employed in the Stock Yards or in one of its subsidiaries, that person's wife or husband (as the case may be), or child, or relative, or neighbor, or friend, is, or has been at some time or other, employed in the Stock Yards. Organized labor unions not only represent the vocational interests of a large number of residents of the Back of the Yards community, but they also serve as the medium through which these people express their secular hopes and desires for economic security.

The major Back of the Yards labor union today is one large industrial labor union to which belong the vast majority of workers in the packing industry. This union is the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee, which is an affiliate of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. It is obvious that the membership of this union is very closely related to the membership of the Catholic church. The same people that comprise the membership of a parish also form the membership of a union local. It is quite common to find that a steward or member of the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee is also an official of a Holy Name society or another religious organization.

In recent months, after years of the ravages of depression, there has been developed a strong conviction among the various organizations in the Back of

the Yards community that, first, they are confronted by menacing, seemingly chronic social problems. These problems range through unemployment, disease, child welfare, delinquency, and poor housing. Second, these organizations have become convinced that if these problems are ever to be solved they must be solved by the local residents operating through their own organizations and institutions. Quoting from a recent program published by the Council:

For fifty years we have waited for someone to offer a solution — but nothing has happened. Today we know that we ourselves must face and solve these problems. We know what poor housing, disease, unemployment, and juvenile delinquency mean, and we are sure that if a way out is to be found, we can and must find it.

Operating on the basis of these convictions, the organizations came together and banded into the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council. Their objectives are clearly presented in their statement of purpose:

This organization is founded for the purpose of uniting all of the organizations within that community known as the Back of the Yards, in order to promote the welfare of all residents of that community regardless of their race, color or creed, so that they may all have the opportunity to find health, happiness, and security through the democratic way of life.

With the possible exception of some of the smaller organizations maintained by outsiders in the community, almost every person in that area is affiliated to one or more of the organizations which are represented in this community council. It is significant to point out that the earnestness and enthusiasm of the Catholic church is illustrated by the fact that, instead of sending nominal lay representatives to the Council, the priests have personally assumed membership. Similarly, the chief officials of all the other organizations are personally participating in the Council.

The Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council today represents the church, labor unions, both C.I.O. and A.F. of L., the local chamber of commerce, the local American Legion post, the leading businessmen, the social, the nationality, the fraternal, and the athletic organizations of the people "back of the yards." The Chicago Park District has played a dynamic role in the Council as reflected through its local park director, an indigenous leader in the community and one whose aggressive leadership was a highly significant factor in the organization of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council.

It can be seen that the Council is not simply a group of well-meaning individuals, nor is it merely representative of one or two segments of the com-

munity. Above all, it is not an organization controlled by outside groups whose basic interests are, in the final analysis, either not identical with or opposed to the objectives sought by the people "back of the yards." The Council, rooted primarily in the fundamental institutions of the community, now includes practically every organization of significance in the life of the Back of the Yards community.

Its program is carried on by eight committees. Each committee has its elected officials who in turn compose the executive board of the Council. The personnel of the executive board as well as of the various committees is of such an indigenous character that through their experiences (in some cases life-long) and associations in the community they have all acquired a vast fund of intimate knowledge regarding those subtle, informal, and personal aspects of the communal life of Back of the Yards. This is the type of intangible information that cannot be uncovered by formal surveys or studies. The procedures and methods utilized by the Council all stem from this body of personal, informal, intimate data. The objectives of each committee, as well as their composition, clearly reveal the issues of the area as defined by the local residents. A study of these issues is of the utmost significance in understanding why so many organizations seemingly opposed in their programs and objectives nevertheless united. For example, during an early Council meeting the representative of the local chamber of commerce bitterly complained about the problem of unemployment. He emphasized that the price of unemployment was borne in the main by business because of the high taxes for public relief. The labor representative disagreed with this view, pointing out that an unemployed man cannot pay union dues and is a constant drain on the union benefit fund. The religious representatives then interrupted to emphasize that an unemployed man cannot contribute to his church, and, lacking these contributions, the churches could not sustain themselves. After prolonged discussion, they reached the conclusion that the disastrous effects of unemployment were borne by all in common. The blunt fact is that common grave problems presented a fundamental threat to the welfare of all the people "back of the yards" and all of their organizations. Issues such as unemployment or disease are fundamental threats to the welfare of labor unions as well as to business dependent upon the purchasing power of that community.

Therefore it is understandable why, on the committee for unemployment or on the committee for a higher standard of living or on the health committee, one finds represented the leading local businessmen, labor leaders of both the C.I.O. and the A.F. of L., Catholic priests, police officials, leaders of nationality, social, and athletic groups — all putting their heads together and pooling all their efforts and collective skill toward the solution of their common problem. This common immediate stake for church, business, and labor transcended doctrinal differences and has resulted in the development of an

unusual understanding among them. It is this unity of purpose, this organized sentiment and opinion, that generates an almost irresistible force and explains the record of achievement and speed of accomplishment of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council. Because the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council represents the mobilized sentiment of the community as articulated through their indigenous organizations, it is not only a community council but a movement. The fact is that, when a community is organized so that it moves, it becomes — a movement.

The final authority of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council is lodged in a community congress which meets on a minimum of twice a year; elects officers, amends by-laws, ratifies or disapproves policies, and acts upon all matters referred to it. The community congress consists of one representative for each twenty-five members of each member organization of the Council in good standing. This community congress insures control of the Council by the people. The following is the program achieved by the Council during the last eighteen months.

1. An infant welfare station has been secured.
2. A contract was signed whereby the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council secured a large section of land in the neighborhood for the purpose of creating a community recreational center. An all-community recreational center is now in the last stages of construction.
3. Within five months the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council became recognized by the Community Fund of Chicago, secured an allocation, and became a participating agency in the fund. Now in its second year, the Council's allocation has been doubled.
4. A survey is now being completed of specific immediate needs of the community so that they may be met as quickly as possible.
5. On the subject of relief, the Back of the Yards community was singularly articulate and unanimous in waging the fight for adequate relief standards. It has exerted constant pressure for the support of humane relief standards for those in need of relief. It has carried its fight to the state as well as to the national capital.
6. Negotiations are now under way regarding a possible housing project.
7. More than 2,800 jobs were secured through the co-operation of both the National Youth Administration and private industry.
8. A delinquency subcommittee has been created which comprises representatives of various organizations. This committee investigates each case of juvenile delinquency, then takes appropriate action. If unemployment of a parent of a delinquent boy appears to be a contributing factor to that boy's delinquency, then some kind of job is secured for that parent.

9. A community-owned dental clinic is now being set up to provide free dental service for all children under thirteen years of age whose families are unable to afford such care.

10. Arrangements were concluded between the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council and the owners of the local weekly community paper whereby a special board of governors appointed by the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council have complete jurisdiction over the character and policy of the local weekly paper. As a result, the community today has a newspaper which they write, edit, and read themselves — a journalistic organ reflecting the interests, attitudes, and aspirations of the people of the community rather than of an extremely small segment of the population of the area.

11. A general community improvement project is now under way to convert all empty, dirty, vacant spaces into little individual parks with grass, trees, and attractive facilities, offering places for the workers and their children to relax.

12. Following the example of their elders, the youth in the community have organized their own Back of the Yards Neighborhood Youth Council, and for the first time the youth groups of the community are engaged in a co-ordinated, constructive, well-organized program for the solution of their problems.

13. An agreement was reached between the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council and the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation whereby 1,400 children are fed one hot meal every day of the year. A portion of the expense of this food project is carried by the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council. The project was instigated by the youth organization, which bears the slogan "Not Only Bat and Ball but Bread and Butter."

14. The Council has sponsored a great many affairs, such as boxing shows, carnivals, dances, fairs, and various other forms of community get-togethers. All proceeds from these events have been utilized for the Council program. Here is a demonstration of where the people in the community pay admission for entertainment to their own community affairs and then have their own money turned back to be used in their own general welfare program.

15. The Council is now in the process of purchasing a large summer camp site out in the country. The camp facilities will be constructed and developed by the local people themselves, and it is their desire that every child "back of the yards" shall enjoy the advantages of a summer-camp vacation for at least two weeks of the year. The camp will be owned and operated completely by the community.

16. Recently the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council sponsored a community fair at which they had a large exposition tent. In this tent individual merchants and organizations rented booths for the purpose of advertising their wares and also to indicate their allegiance to the Neighborhood

Council. The spectacle of the C.I.O. booth adjacent to that of the chamber of commerce, and the Democratic and Republican parties sharing adjoining booths, was a vivid demonstration of the new spirit of democracy which has pervaded the culture of "back of the yards."

17. A community credit union is now being financially underwritten through definite agreement with all the major institutions of the community whereby they will purchase shares in this enterprise. This community credit union is the Council's major project for this year. The Council regards this credit union as one of its most important weapons in its drive for the economic security of its people.

To most observers the intangible achievements of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council have been of far greater importance than its tangible accomplishments. Through the medium of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, leaders in various interest and action groups have learned to know one another as human beings rather than as impersonal symbols of groups which, in many cases, appeared to be of a hostile nature. The personal relationships which have been developed have to a large degree broken down that urban anonymity characteristic of all such communities. Furthermore, we today find an independent philosophy developing back of the yards which can best be described as a people's philosophy.

A revealing demonstration of this type of social relationship is to be found in some of the recent activities of the constituent organizations of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council. For example, some months ago when the C.I.O. held a picnic, the local chamber of commerce took the lead in securing advertisements for the C.I.O. picnic program book. Similarly, a few weeks later when the local chamber of commerce embarked upon a membership drive, the C.I.O. leaders not only assisted the chamber of commerce membership committee but publicly informed local businessmen that it was their duty to be members of the local chamber of commerce. This community solidarity does not rest completely upon any special benevolence on the part of the members of the Council and the organizations for which they speak but upon the clear recognition that to a large extent they either stand or fall together.

The position assumed by the Council in a number of crises of impending conflict between labor and capital has caused many observers to characterize the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council as "pro-labor," sympathetic to the C.I.O. The point of view of the Council on organized labor is quite clear. First, it looks to the national organized labor movements to cope effectively with many of those major social forces which impinge upon the Back of the Yards community with disastrous results. Second, the Council fully recognizes the important role of organized labor in the drive for economic security and

the improvement of those conditions under which people work. The philosophy of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council is that a community organization which does not improve the economic life of its community cannot become a really significant force in the lives of the people. The Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council concedes that constructive work within limits can be done without reference to the economy of the community. But until the economy of that community is significantly changed, until the problem of economic security is dealt with, one actually has the paper decoration one finds at the end of lamb chops — but no lamb chops.

From the inception of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, organized labor began to participate actively despite that skepticism and profound distrust which has caused labor to refer to welfare work as “hellfare work.” The grave reservation which labor has maintained toward most social welfare programs and agencies was and is based upon certain fundamental contradictions underlying the field of social welfare. Labor recognizes that practically all private social-work agencies are supported and governed by those very same persons whose activities in the industrial world have, in many cases, not only laid the foundation for many of our social problems but who, by the very nature of a large part of their pursuits, tend to perpetuate those very conditions which in their philanthropic life they profess to be combating.

It is therefore understandable why in a union-conscious community many of these welfare agencies have come to be regarded and defined as “company social-work agencies.” Members of company unions request favors. Members of bona fide unions request their rights. Therein lies a partial explanation of the recent introduction and development by the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council of the concept of “rights” as over and against the prevailing antiquated welfare motif of “benevolence.”

That this shift of emphasis from “favors” to “rights” is a marked departure in the philosophy of community organization is obvious. The organizations and institutions of the people “back of the yards” feel that the only way they can get their rights is through a community organization which is built, owned, and operated by themselves rather than by outside interests which in many cases are basically opposed to many of the fundamental objectives which these people want.

In recent times the people “back of the yards” have become vitally interested not only in the problems of their own community but also in the problems of the state, as well as in national issues. This growing recognition on the part of the people back of the yards of Chicago that many of their problems stem from sources far removed from their own community has been one of the most fundamental developments and achievements of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council and has been manifested in their interest in a national housing program, the national health program, the policies being practiced by

their political representatives, the development of a common curiosity regarding the reasons pro and con of national programs, the inquiries of people about the congressional records, etc.

This broad realization by the Back of the Yards people that their problems are not peculiar unto themselves and that their community is not a little world by itself is responsible for the interest and assistance of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council in the organization of similar community councils in the other industrial areas of the nation. They believe that only through the combined strength of many such organizations can they hope to cope effectively with those major destructive forces which pervade our entire social order. Their problems are the same, the causes of their problems are the same, and the organic character of these industrial communities is very similar.

If the fact of a disorganized community is in any way symptomatic of underlying and pervasive processes, then recreation or any other segmental activity which is held out as a panacea must be regarded as limited in its possibilities. Similarly, it will be increasingly clear that the experiments with community organization on a purely local scale will prove themselves ineffectual. While the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council is not held out as the nostrum for the reconciliation of irreconcilable conflicts, in its basic framework it may be regarded as suggesting the direction in which the problems of social life in complex societies can be met with greater hope of success than previous philosophies of community organization.