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Introduction to Part II on Social Action and Power

Part II of this book will present a number of case studies and thoughts on building successful campaigns. First, I present an overview here in Chapter 4, and in subsequent chapters will elaborate on the 7-stage model for an organizing campaign that was introduced in Chapter 1. To recap, those stages are:

- Have a clear goal or task
- Research extensively on the issue and its effects
- Adopt and maintain a coherent approach to communicating your goal
- Mobilize
- Take direct action to achieve the goal
- Organize legal support
- Use sustainability strategies to keep campaigns alive

While not every campaign utilizes every stage, nor do they necessarily follow them in lock-step order, we will see that the general framework tends to inform the most successful campaigns. And virtually every successful campaign starts in approximately the same way. Perhaps the most important element of a direct action campaign, then, is its capacity to establish the affirmative, stating exactly what one wants to see happen. There is a power in stating what one wants and how to get it, rather than what one is against. *A clear goal, realistically attainable and clearly articulated, is the foundation for a successful campaign.*

CASE STUDY

"Set Jean Free!"

Jean Montrevil is a Haitian immigrant living in New York City. On the morning of December 30, 2009, at a routine check with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Montrevil was detained for deportation to Haiti. This occurred despite the fact that Montrevil had been a legal immigrant in the United States since 1986, was the husband of a U.S. citizen, and the father of four children, each a U.S. citizen. The government's actions stemmed from a 20-year-old conviction, for which he had long since served his sentence. These actions became the latest flare-up in a generations-old controversy over the rightful role of immigrants and outsiders in U.S. life (Sen & Mamdouh, 2008).

What the ICE agents did not count on was how connected Montrevil was to his church and community in New York City. A longtime community activist, Montrevil is a leader in a variety of immigrant rights groups, including Families for Freedom, the NYC New Sanctuary Movement (NY NSC), and Detention Watch Network. In his fight for justice on behalf of all immigrants, Mr. Montrevil has gained the support of U.S. Reps. Jerrold Nadler and Nydia Velasquez, and New York State Senator Thomas K. Duane.

On word of his detention, Montrevil's family and friends and immigration activists around the country immediately got the word out about what had happened by writing letters, leading sermons, and mobilizing supporters. In other words, they started organizing. The NYC New Sanctuary Coalition immediately called for an emergency vigil at 6 p.m. outside the Varick Street ICE Detention Center at Varick and Houston Streets, which ended with a procession to Judson Memorial Church for a service where they demanded that Mr. Montrevil be released and that ICE stop separating families and communities. Mr. Montrevil's wife and children as well as friends were present at the service. Inside a detention center far from home, Montrevil joined a hunger strike with other immigration detainees in York, Pennsylvania. "I am fasting side by side with nearly 60 other detainees to take a stand against this horrific deportation and detention system that is tearing families apart," Montrevil reported. Churches around New York helped get the word out about the situation. Clergy and politicians demanded Montrevil's immediate release and called for reform to the immigration laws, organizing an action. "Free Jean" became a battle-cry.

Throughout the week, the coalition speaking up about Montrevil expanded. Prominent clergy and elected officials called on the federal government to return him to his wife Janay and their children. "Jean represents all that is right about our nation and wrong with the deportation system,"



Jean Montrevil speaking outside the ICE detention center Varick Street, New York, NY, on January 26, 2010.

Source: Photograph by Mizue Aizeki; used with permission of the New Sanctuary Movement

argued Rev. Bob Coleman of the historic Riverside Church and a leader of New York's New Sanctuary Movement. "He made a mistake. He paid his time. He represents a restored life. Who benefits by stripping him of his legal status?"

Montrevil entered the United States from Haiti in 1986 as a legal permanent resident. Following Montrevil's detention on December 30, 2009, hundreds of supporters across the country called David Venturella, Acting Director of ICE's Office of Detention and Removal Operations, urging Montrevil's release and the suspension of his deportation. "Contrary to the claims of ICE leadership that the agency will be transparent and accountable in its implementation of immigration laws, it has not responded to Montrevil or his attorney Joshua Bardavid," said Andrea Black, director of the *Detention Watch Network*. "There is no excuse for their silence."

"Jean has been nothing less than an inspiration. His work on behalf of immigrants being torn from their families across the country has been prophetic," explained the Reverend Donna Schaper of Judson Memorial Church, where Montrevil worships. "On Tuesday at 12:30 pm, I will join other people of faith at 201 Varick Street, the detention center in New York, and demand that ICE respond to us. We will no longer accept silence as an answer." She was not alone.



Members of the Judson Memorial Congregation, including Rev. Dr. Donna Schaper, rallying, getting arrested, singing, and collaborating with artists such as Dan Zanes to set Jean free.

Source: Photographs by Mizue Aizeki; used with permission of the New Sanctuary Movement

January 5, 2010, at 12:30 pm, clergy and parishioners from Jean's church converged outside of New York's Varick Street Detention Center. Singer Dan Zanes was on hand to add a little cultural resistance to the mix. Singing the classic resistance folk song "We Shall Not Be Moved," elders blocked new detainees from entering the center, leading to the arrest of eight clergy. "I am being arrested because it is a moral outrage that our government would do this to such a great man and father," declared Rev. Schaper. "These immigration laws that destroy families contradict the values we should uphold as a society. They need to change now." Throughout the day, local television showed a loop of the members of the congregation speaking up about Montrevil's situation (Edroso, 2010; NY1, 2010).

And the campaign escalated. On January 14, the coalition held another rally, attended by elected representatives from the New York state legislature as well as other supporters. Many carried signs declaring, "Keep our Families Together." Rev. Michael Ellick, a pastor at Judson Memorial Church, stated, "It is outrageous that ICE is trying to tear this good man from his children at this holiday season. We will not rest until Jean is released and returned to his family and until immigration agents stop tearing our families and communities apart." The *New York Times* covered the direct action, propelling Montrevil's story into an international story of a church fighting an injustice with freedom songs and acts of civil disobedience harkening back to another era (Semple, 2010).

Within a week, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security dropped Montrevil off in front of Judson. The following Sunday he told his story. As he rose to speak, the congregation gave him a standing ovation. Rev. Ellick would later say the campaign was his first miracle at Judson. But the result was not a miracle. It was the result of a smart campaign.



In fact, much of the work of Montrevil and his supporters followed all seven stages of a well-coordinated organizing campaign.

- **Task Clearly Identified:** "Set Jean Free," "Keep Families Together"
- **Research Extensively on the Issue and Its Effects:** The church he belonged to and other interest groups he participated in throughout the community researched Jean's situation to help frame the action.
- **Coherent Approach to Communicating Goal:** "Team Jean" pursued a media strategy that used the direct action story to propel Jean's story from local news coverage onto the national stage.
- **Mobilize:** This began at the Judson Church with the news of Jean's arrest to the congregation, followed by multiple meetings bringing together multiple stakeholders.
- **Use Direct Action to Achieve the Goal:** This included the civil disobedience on January 5, 2010.
- **Organize Legal Support:** "Team Jean" developed a short- and a long-term legal strategy, linking Jean's immediate release to a reform of the immigration laws.
- **Use Sustainability and Cultural Strategies to Keep Campaigns Alive:** Include invoking Freedom Songs such as "We Shall Not Be Moved" to tie the specific issue to a larger one that engages the willingness to keep fighting even after the immediate goal of Jean's release was attained.

Direct action does tend to get results, yet none of the work would have been possible if Jean had not been part of an expansive community and network. Through such efforts regular people gain power, address their collective needs, and cope with problems. Many turn to organizing when formal political channels have dried up or offer little but closed doors. After all, organizing is about resistance; it is about a desire to create something better for one's life and community.

"There are those who are called social activists, who have been fighting all their lives for exploited people," explain the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. "[T]hey are the same ones who participated in the great strikes and workers' actions, in the great citizens' mobilizations, in the great campesino movements . . . and who even though some are old now, continue on without surrendering . . . and seeking justice" (Pyles, 2009, p. 43).

Most every progressive gain we have seen in the country—child labor laws, the New Deal, and even the Ryan White Care Act—springs from these sorts of social movements. Social work was born of the Settlement House Movement. Social workers have supported multiple movements from civil rights to antiapartheid. Still, the link between movements and services has never been easy. In the 1950s the field turned away from its links with social movements, breaking with the old left, associated with radicalism and communism (Reisch & Andrews, 2002). Many social workers walked away from social activism, or toward less radical forms of practice (Specht & Courtney, 1994).

Community practice offers any number of spaces for engagement. Our current environment, as we've discussed, offers ample opportunities and challenges. Public sector unions face constant threats, while funding for services continues to erode. Yet how should social services respond? Can social workers support mutual aid networks among those with whom we work? Are social workers willing to contribute to social movements as formal entities or to risk funding to fight oppression? Are social workers willing to support efforts outside of "professional practice"?

The Progressive Movement called for citizens to fight for the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (J. Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 2011). Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) suggested that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. The global justice movement reminded us that another world is possible, while Occupy helped us see the disparities in wealth between the 99% and the 1%. As a field that supports social justice, social work has long been poised to join social movements for progressive change (Tompson, 2002). Yet over and over, the field has favored professionalization and regulation of the poor, over support for social movements (Reeser & Epstein, 1990; Tompson, 2002). Yet, there are exceptions (Piven & Cloward, 1977) that point to a direction for social work advocacy. Since the days of the Progressive Movement, individual social workers have joined movements for social reform around issues related to poverty, labor, race, the vote, and social welfare provision. Social workers have been integral parts of many movements, including civil rights, women's rights, antiwar, antiapartheid, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), to name just a few. They have supported others in countless ways. This is what community practice is all about.

The Changing Face of Social Movements and Social Work

Social movements have long served as a source of innovation for social work (Weissman, 1990). Social welfare scholar Robert Fisher (1994, p. 217) argues that five things characterize the new social movements.

1. Efforts are community based.
2. They transcend class rankings, boundaries, and borders of movements, crossing class lines to include previously excluded groups of social outsiders.
3. The ideological glue is democratic, antiauthoritarian, and bottom-up, not top-down. The leader is the group, not one person.
4. Struggles over culture and identity play a larger role than in previous class-based social movements, although this is gradually changing as many are turning away from identity-based social movements.
5. The focus is on community building, self-help, and mutual aid. In other words, the emphasis is on autonomy, not funding from the state.

Community practice builds on an eclectic range of perspectives from Marxist urbanism to today's social movements. Through this mix a form of practice takes shape, as "genuinely free, self-conscious, authentic activity as opposed to alienated labor demanded by capitalism" (Pyles, 2009, p. 30). Such activity is far more inviting than models of practice controlled by funding (Incite, 2007). Such practice views the world from the perspective of those displaced by storms, evicted from their homes, or dislocated by social policies and economic forces that favor privatization over all else (Pyles, 2009), as well as those organizing to create alternatives in their own communities (Carlson, 2008).

In the ebb and flow of social movements, community organizing keeps the process of social change moving forward in local communities. Here, people come together to act in their communities' interest. This organizing sheds light on the practices of governments and corporations; it also points to alternatives. Sometimes it generates social reforms. Other times it may spark community projects. It helps elect public officials and supports campaigns on the Left and the Right. It brings information about social issues to the general public, highlighting ways we can influence the process through methods including electoral politics, boycotts, picket lines, civil disobedience, and direct action. And perhaps most important, it helps those involved to realize their own power. Action equals life, AIDS activists declare. Organizers gain power through their individual and collective efforts (Homan, 2011).

Organizing efforts include wide cross sections of grassroots, faith-based, and community organization groups, supporting community-building efforts, using multiple methods. A few of these include direct services, self-help, education, advocacy, and direct action. From direct action to direct services, organizing involves steps including (1) forming a group, (2) providing self-help and mutual aid, (3) educating the members and the public about the issues, and (4) supporting efforts involving identifying

problems and ways to do something about them as regular people come together to find solutions to common challenges (Homan, 2011).

Throughout this text, we explore ways organizers do their work. One of the most important qualities for any organizer is flexibility. Unfortunately, this element is often missing. Rather, many organizers tend to adhere to one method, ideologically fixating on a tactic at the expense of a larger strategy. As the old expression goes, theory is when you have ideas; ideology is when the ideas have you. When we are stuck in a rigid ideological stance, we observe reality selectively, seeing only what we want while ignoring those bits of information that fail to support our point of view; this phenomenon of neglecting bits of information that fail to fit into our perceptual schemas is sometimes described as selective observation. Here we omit pieces of data that are not in line with our own assumptions. Along the way, instead of thinking critically, we keep doing the same things over and over without evaluating our work or considering alternate perspectives.

This dynamic can be vexing when organizing groups. “Groupthink involves non-deliberate suppression of critical thoughts as a result of internalization of the group’s norms,” notes Irving Janis (1971, p. 44). The process takes place in any number of contexts. For example, organizer John Sellers (2004, p. 186) argues, “Marx’s critique of capital is terrific, but I’ve always thought Weber was right that human beings can find some way to exclude and oppress one another without necessarily involving capital.” To combat this phenomenon, many try to work with an eye toward outcomes and a respect for different approaches, preventing ideology from impeding goals (Duncombe, 2007).

Social movement scholar George Katsiaficas (2004) argues, “Diversity of tactics, organizations, and beliefs is one of the great strengths of autonomous social movements” (p. 8). Yet, not every organization takes such an approach. Those who have worked in groups or organizations that do not favor autonomous approaches know exactly how disempowering it is to work in a group that does not support diversity of approaches.

When one walks into a room and is told there is only one way to get to the bottom of creating change, this sense of disempowerment takes over. The best organizers favor more flexible approaches. Here methods are linked with circumstances. Rather than support one tactic above others, strategy is used to think about a coherent campaign and the steps needed to move it forward. Tactics are simply the tools used to serve this end. Sometimes those involved make use of an inside/outside strategy, with those at the negotiating table benefiting from the work of activists on the street, and vice versa. In others, organizers work from the streets or from the negotiating table.

Much of the process begins with a dialog in which different partners actually try to hear, understand, and respect each other as they organize around common goals. “I think that that’s one of the great gifts of the kind of DIY direct action approach,” explains Washington, D.C., based organizer Mark Andersen. The strength can only be harnessed when people actually listen to each other “when we are willing to engage in those leaps while continuing the conversation and basing them out of what we can learn from the larger community and not just simply following our own compass,” notes Andersen. “So much of my approach is not about purity, it’s not like there’s one way or one approach or one lifestyle, it’s much more about balance. There are values in all of these different approaches.” This gives room for direct services as well as organizing and organizational innovation (Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005; Minkoff, 2002).

Taking Power and Addressing Needs

At its core, organizing is an approach for those with little else to access power in order to address community needs. The question is, who has the power to influence decision makers to move? Here, action creates reaction. When his insurance company denied his claim for cancer treatment, ACT UP veteran Mark Milano (2009) sent an email to members of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power: “As some of you may know, in November of 2007, I was diagnosed with anal cancer and underwent radiation and chemotherapy treatment. Due to the fact that I also have AIDS, the chemotherapy nearly killed me. My CD4 count of 400 plummeted to 62 and I spent Christmas Eve in the Intensive Care Unit due to life-threatening neutropenia,” wrote Milano. “In March of 2009 a follow-up PET scan found a mass in my right lung, which was removed and biopsied. It was confirmed that the cancer had metastasized to my lung, so adjuvant chemotherapy was recommended to destroy any microscopic cancer cells that may still be lingering in my body. Due to my immune suppression, my doctor and I decided to avoid chemo that is toxic to the bone marrow, and opted for the newer combination of Erbitux and Irinotecan. Unfortunately, while my insurance company, Aetna, has said it ‘might’ pay for the latter drug, reimbursement for Erbitux was flatly denied.” In response, ACT UP New York planned an action with the Private Health Insurance Must Go coalition in front of Aetna’s New York offices on September 29, 2009. “We’re marching to Aetna, to demand that they provide the drug and to highlight the serious problems with private health insurance in this country,” wrote Milano, inviting supporters to join him. The day before the action, Aetna changed course and honored Milano’s claims. Yet the demonstration still went forward as planned. Members of ACT UP held a picket line and a handful of activists blocked the office doors of the building.

The march included signs as well as music. A saxophone player, from the Rude Mechanical Orchestra, played the Death Star theme from *Star Wars* in front of the anonymous Aetna offices, bringing a theatrical, campy quality to the otherwise serious action. Cultural components like this have long served as a resource in social movements. This is why songs such as “We Shall Not Be Moved” so appealed to activists during the civil rights years—and, as we learned, to those advocating for Jean Montrevil. Then as now, they serve as coping tools, humanizing the struggle, helping people feel strength and even joy in difficult moments. Such forms of culture bring a sense of power to a collective experience.

The actions on September 29, 2009, that took place in New York were part of a larger campaign coordinated by Mobilization for



A rally to support Mark Milano. Activists carry signs that declare “Health Care Is a Human Right.”

Source: Photo by the author

Healthcare Now. More than 30 sit-ins took place at insurance companies around the United States, aimed at pushing the call for health care reform.

Mark Milano felt his insurer changed course only because of pressure from ACT UP. “These activists helped save my life,” he later acknowledged. For members of ACT UP, action equals life; knowledge equals power. Through the group’s organizing, they build a tradition of civil disobedience dating back to Gandhi and the civil rights movement.

As the Milano example demonstrates, part of the importance of organizing is to help influence others to change their mind (Gramsci, 1971). “Sufficient power focused on a sufficiently narrow point will produce a reaction that will lead to a change,” notes Homan (2008, pp. 40–41). “Power is the capacity to move people in a desired direction to accomplish some desired end” (pp. 40–41).

Pyles (2009, p. 126) describes a number of types of power used in organizing, including legislative, consumer, legal, and disruptive forms of power. “By engaging in critical thinking and group dialogue,” Pyles suggests, “organizers can identify the types of power for change that may lie behind their issue and then consider the power mechanisms that are feasible to pursue” (p. 126). From here, they can make use of existing sources of power, build it through organization, or support those involved in developing personal power as well as awareness of their own strengths (Saleeby, 1996). Wonderful things happen when those in a group actually respect the different kinds of strengths people bring into group organizing practice.

“This is where the creativity of the people you are working with, it’s amazing how people come up with stuff,” notes ACT UP veteran Andy Velez. “One of the great things and essential things to learn is: no matter who you are, you have something to contribute. Your exact experience, whether you’ve had schooling, haven’t had it, no matter what you’ve done, if you’re willing to do some work, who you are is going to be valuable, just out of your life experience.”

In order to move on issues and influence policy, information is a tremendous resource. Through this command of the issues, organizers are able to persuade decision makers to change their minds. After all, organizing is about creating power to get what a community needs. To do so, organizers must be clear about what it is that they need and what is out there. Information is power.

While each of these case studies may seem impressive—or seem to involve the most extraordinary people—the fact remains that this kind of organizing is well within the reach of virtually everyone interested in helping effect social change. Further examination of the 7-step approach—your tool box, if you will—in subsequent chapters highlight a range of approaches most of you are already familiar with as organizers and leaders in your own communities. If they do not seem appropriate or useful, disregard them and remember you are the expert on your own community and its needs. Write your own chapter in the history of social change practice and teach it to others. What we are trying to build here is an approach to the intersection between theory and practice, in which organizers develop their own practice wisdom as reflective practitioners engaging in a dialogue about social change.