

Electoral Politics and The Movement

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THE MOST actively involved community members and most of the staff of the Newark Community Union Project (N-CUP) are presently involved in electoral politics. Thus, the primary questions that face us concern the possibilities of building a democratic and powerful movement within the context of that involvement. A discussion of these questions may be more meaningful after a brief description of the nature of N-CUP and the events that led to our ventures in electoral politics.

The original theoretical model on which N-CUP was based has undergone considerable re-evaluation as it has come in contact with the reality of the community in which we work. At first it was generally assumed that door-to-door canvassing and discussion by an organizer would begin to involve residents of a block in local action directed towards such goals as improved housing or a traffic light for a busy street corner. As groups developed, they would send their most active members into a program committee which would be the major decision-making body of the organization. This group would make major policy decisions—often involving collective action by members of the block groups—and would work with and give direction to the staff.

This model assumed that many people in the community would be in motion at any given time and also assumed a relatively institutionalized decision-making process. In practice the majority of our activity is staff activity and our decision-making usually involves staff people consulting with their “constituencies”—people on their blocks—and then making decisions that *represent* our estimate of the community’s feeling.

Despite the representative, rather than direct, nature of many of the decisions, the core group that makes those decisions is internally quite democratic. The staff is not an isolated group of middle-class students, but is composed of at least as many people from the community as students. (A student is a term used by the people in the neighborhood to describe middle-class staff, regardless of their race, age, or educational background.) At present 5 out of 13 staff people who are involved in block organizing are local residents. Two other community people work as full-time office managers and handle much of the project’s administration, including the finances. At least 9 others, although not

full-time staff, are involved in virtually every important decision and exert considerable influence on N-CUP policy. Thus, “staff” is used to describe the inner core of the N-CUP group, and does not always refer to full-time workers.

The development of a direct form of democracy—sometimes called participatory democracy—has been impeded by two factors: the ephemeral nature of block groups and the difficulty staff members have in “getting out on the block” to organize. The transient nature of block groups is due to many factors: lack of tangible successes on issues, personality conflicts among members, key people moving out of the neighborhood, the wearing off of the uniqueness of political involvement, and the lack of success in involving large numbers of people. The difficulty of organizing is often due to: the obvious racial and cultural barriers between middle-class organizers and people in the neighborhood; the difficulty in conveying exactly what N-CUP is and why one is knocking on the door; the analysis of many people in the neighborhood that things can’t change—or at least *they* can’t change them; the inordinate amount of self-confidence that is necessary to weather frequent rebuffs; and the attraction of other N-CUP activities that involve working with those members of the community who already know about N-CUP and are receptive to, or are members of, the staff. Another major obstacle concerns a dilemma that has become apparent: block groups are not winning victories. More often than not housing action on the block level does not win repairs, sometimes landlords retaliate against the tenants, and neither of the two block groups that picketed for a traffic light last summer was able to get one.

To say that N-CUP is primarily a staff operation is not to overlook two important considerations: the creation of a democratic, socially and racially integrated core of over twenty-five people in less than two years is a tremendous accomplishment; and in addition, there is a great degree of interaction with the community at large, or in other terms, a partially developed mass base. Despite the ephemeral nature of block groups these groups serve important functions. They have provided the initial contacts and sharing of experiences with the most radical and committed community people who have later become part of N-CUP. They have provided a larger number of people who have been

involved in N-CUP activity at one time or another and who retain some contact and loyalty. They provide "radicalizing" experiences for many people in the community who for the first time cross the important line that separates rhetoric from action. And finally, they create a reservoir of people who have heard of us and will be more amenable to being approached by an N-CUP organizer some time in the future.

Some of these individuals participate in the local area board of the war on poverty—a neighborhood "community action" group that is dominated by N-CUP people. Others are active in local block activities and speak to an organizer at least once a week. Others are involved in specific projects such as our soon-to-begin community radio station or our proposal through the local area board for a \$164,000 community center in the neighborhood. Some come out for a specific, one-shot activity, such as a police brutality demonstration or an election at the area board when N-CUP people are running for office. Others have little understanding about what N-CUP is all about, but have a friendly, though superficial relationship with an organizer and occasionally like to talk about "the crooks at city hall" or how Newark used to be "in the old days." Still others receive our bi-weekly newsletter and consider themselves friends of N-CUP, though not members.

It was this broad, amorphous following in the community that caused George Richardson to become interested in N-CUP. Richardson had formerly served a term as State Assemblyman and had developed a reputation as a rising young Negro militant. However, his militance and occasional spurts of independence antagonized the leader of the Essex County Democratic Committee, and Richardson was not renominated for office. He decided to run without the Democratic nomination, and formed a makeshift insurgent organization that was able to make a strong showing in a losing effort. Richardson emerged from the campaign with considerable prestige, and there was talk that his strong showing might bring about his re-acceptance in the Democratic party.

In 1965, amid rumors that he had turned down offers to run as a Democrat for matters of principle, Richardson began to plan another independent campaign. This time he tried to improve upon his previous attempt by running an integrated ticket with candidates and financial support from the white middle-class community, and working more closely with grass-roots groups in the Negro community. In line with the latter objective he approached several members of N-CUP about support for his newly formed United Freedom Ticket. In return for this support he later offered N-CUP three nominations for the state Assembly. N-CUP could choose its candidates according to its own procedures. This offer, and the general topic of the upcoming elections, was the subject of considerable discussion among the staff and the most active members of the community.

Those who were opposed to working actively with the Freedom Ticket argued that: 1. we would be "swallowed up" in the coalition; 2. our people would feel un-

comfortable at meetings with middle-class whites and Negroes and would not voice their opinions; 3. our organizing would suffer due to campaign responsibilities; 4. the nature of political campaigns stresses superficial contacts and immediate results, directly contrary to the essence of N-CUP organizing; and 5. as one group in a coalition we would have little control over the general direction of the campaign.

Those who advocated involvement argued: 1. Richardson had worked with N-CUP as one of the leaders of the protests against police brutality. How could we reject someone who supports many of our issues, quit the Democratic party, and needed our help? 2. The Freedom Ticket was more than the usual political coalition. It was composed of many white people who were against the war in Vietnam, and many Negro militants. Also, who had ever heard of 3 local people, all of them poor and without middle-class education or public images, being offered nominations for the state Assembly? 3. Electoral activity could be seen as another form of protest. We had no chance of winning so that the pressures for compromise would be few. The election would allow us to raise significant issues and reach large numbers of people. There is no inherent reason why elections have to stress superficiality. An N-CUP campaign could stress discussion and involvement of the poor in issues that were relevant to them. 4. We would not have to be swallowed up in the coalition if we concentrated on the campaigns of the N-CUP candidates and ran a self-contained, "insulated" type of organization. 5. Even if block organizing was neglected for a few months, the many contacts we could make during the campaign could serve as a nucleus for new block groups after the election.

Although the specific arguments advanced were important, the most significant factor that influenced our decision was that most of the negative opinions were voiced by the students while the most active community people were enthusiastic about the idea. Thus, "Let the people decide," a slogan on our N-CUP buttons, was the overriding consideration.

The results of the campaign were not particularly encouraging. With a full and integrated slate of candidates to bring in additional support, Richardson did not improve upon his showing in the previous election. The three N-CUP candidates did surprisingly well compared to the other Freedom Ticket candidates for state Assembly, but even their showing was disappointing. Most significantly, the N-CUP candidates did not do particularly well in Clinton Hill, the area in which we had been organizing for a year and a half. But the real disappointment was not the number of votes we polled as much as the type of campaign we ran.

In terms of simple mechanics our organization was quite poor. This was partially due to inexperience and partially due to an aversion, especially among the students, against engaging in any activity that smacked of mainstream American politics. The image of the well-run political organization is too closely associated with everything we are trying to uproot in our society,

and its form was rejected. This type of thought process, or more accurately this process of emotional associations, is one of the weaknesses of our movement.

Like the society at large, often we deal with images rather than substance. For example, the society attempts to create images of the peace movement, respectable Negroes, Communist China, Castro, and the state of domestic affairs. All of these images have one thing in common: they tend to obfuscate the need for real discussion and analysis. In discussions throughout the country one hears the same stereotyped phrases and arguments echoing government policy. Sometimes radicals create their own images, their own stereotypes. During the election many of us associated an efficient organization with capitalism, racism, corruption and manipulation thereby unwittingly accepting the "establishment" assertion that democracy and efficiency are incompatible in times of crisis, as during war time, or an election. On the contrary, one of the most important goals of projects such as ours should be to demonstrate that true democracy, public control, racial equality and honesty are compatible with efficiency.

This emotional set was reinforced by our lack of direction. The staff, like most people, operates best when we have a firm understanding of a given situation. Our involvement in politics was new, and we had a tendency to look to others for procedural cues. Often none were forthcoming, and other times the direction that was offered was unhelpful. For example, some of our best organizers ended up driving a sound truck for days on end—at the suggestion of non-N-CUP people on the Freedom Ticket—rather than talking to people on the streets. It was only after the election that we realized that the "expertise" of others was of limited value.

The results of our general lack of organization were profound. One major reason for our poor showing was that many of the most sympathetic people in the community were not registered. We did not run a registration drive, nor did we even have a system to check who was not registered and encourage them to register themselves. On election day there was no machinery for baby-sitting, and driving people to the polls.

More important, the lack of organization lessened the effects of an issue-oriented campaign. In the opinion of most of the staff the most important issue of our campaign was the question, "Who is qualified?" If poor people could run for state office, with a clear understanding of the problems of the community and give the impression that they could deal with those problems, this would begin to assault many of the other arbitrary barriers of qualification in our society. Workers could be shown that the scarcity of good jobs, rather than their lack of education, is the primary reason for their poverty. Social workers riding the crest of the anti-poverty fad could be pressured by poor people demanding their jobs. Large issues of social control could be raised by giving tangible evidence that the assumed qualifications in our society are not synonymous with competence, and, in fact, are sometimes erected to protect incompetence.

However, this cycle of conceptual relationships does not gain acceptance spontaneously. Link-ups between election qualifications and other qualifications in our society (or between Newark, Mississippi, and Vietnam) are far from obvious to many in the community, and can only come about through serious discussions between organizers and local residents. (Even then it assumes that the points the organizer is making prove relevant to the individual's life experience and are not mere constructions that he would like to see accepted.)

Very few of these serious discussions took place during the campaign. Those that did were with the hard-core community people who were closest to N-CUP. Our dialogue was internal, and the issue of "Who's qualified?" never reached the community. Among the few it did reach there was considerable skepticism. Many of our closest supporters, people who worked on the campaign, privately questioned the competence and qualifications of the N-CUP candidates. Among these people the dialogue was meaningful and valuable.

Those who had argued that our organizing would suffer during the campaign were proven correct, though their reasons were not entirely accurate. There had been very little block organizing taking place after the summer, and this trend continued during the campaign. Those who said that they would enter the campaign only marginally but would spend most of their time organizing on more local issues did very little organizing. Those who saw the campaign as a means of extending N-CUP's influence in the community did very little to convey specific issues to our many friendly, but superficial contacts in the neighborhood. In general, the shortcomings of our campaign reflected one of the shortcomings of the project: our ideological and strategic debates are often unreal because our decisions are not implemented.

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the campaign was the disparity of outlook between those closely involved in the Freedom Ticket and those who voted for it. The theoretical premise of the campaign was to poll enough votes to become a balance of power between the two major parties, and thereby defeat many of the incumbent Democrats. After the election the head of the Democratic County Committee, according to the theory, would be forced to enter negotiations with the leaders of the Freedom Ticket. There was considerable vagueness about the post-election strategy. Some hoped that the Freedom Ticket would become a permanent third party and would make plans to enter the upcoming May municipal elections. Others (perhaps Richardson himself, although I don't know), planned to re-enter the Democratic party with considerable influence. Whatever the long-range implications of this strategy, the short term goal of defeating moderate Democrats and thereby electing less-moderate Republicans was not communicated to the Negro community because they would not accept it. Many realized that the Freedom Ticket was more of a protest than a possible winner but very few were aware of the specific strategy of the protest. N-CUP was derelict in soliciting support with-

out engaging the community in political discussions to explain the strategy. To compound this confusing situation, there was very little understanding among the staff itself of such a strategy, and our participation was more because we didn't fully comprehend, or take an interest in, what was going to happen after the campaign. We were interested in making a strong showing. We would get involved in the post-election maneuvering only if it became impossible to avoid.

Despite this generally negative account of the campaign some definite benefits were derived from it. The political sophistication of the staff and the core people in the community has grown considerably. Before the campaign we distrusted everyone who wasn't in N-CUP. The exigencies of the campaign forced us into close working relationships, and later personal relationships, with a broad spectrum of liberal and even radical groups and personalities. We began to make allies among white middle-class radicals, and gain a much greater understanding of the middle-class Negro community. Our discussions of politics became less caricatured, our theories became less arbitrary.

There was a tendency, which we resisted, to alibi for the campaign. Many in the Freedom Ticket, and some in N-CUP, argued that much of our poor showing was due to the specific nature of the state-wide campaign. The Hughes-Dumont confrontation was seen as a re-run of the Johnson-Goldwater race and elicited a strong "vote straight Democratic" movement. I think on the contrary, that most of our potential support was among persons whose fear of Dumont was not as powerful as their disenchantment with the political process.

Many of them were not registered, or did not vote. We were the only political group that *could* have gotten their vote, and our inability carefully to develop and implement a relevant program was our primary downfall.

Once again N-CUP is involved in a political campaign, this time for the municipal elections that will be held on May 10. In light of our failures in the past campaign a detailed rationale for our involvement seems to be in order.

Since the primary shortcoming of our first campaign was our failure to implement our decisions, there was little reason to reject political involvement *per se*. Even if there are inherent pitfalls in politics, there are also compelling reasons why we must become involved.

N-CUP needs politics both to achieve certain goals and to protect what we have already built. We are now almost ready to begin broadcasting on our own radio station that will be run by people in the neighborhood and will reach an audience of 40,000 people. The possibilities of attempts by commercial radio interests or the city administration to close the station are far from minimal. Having a city councilman willing actively to defend our right to broadcast would be a great advantage.

N-CUP has dominated the most active area board of the Newark War on Poverty since its formation last summer. Area boards are local grass roots "community action" groups who can create and submit proposals for their area. Our area board has drawn up, submitted, and gained the approval of the trustees of the Newark Poverty Program for a \$164,000 community center to be built in our area. The proposal is pending approval by the Regional Office of Economic Opportunity and if it is accepted there will inevitably be a move to block any real control of the community center by poor people. If the incumbent mayor, Hugh Addonizio, and his selected candidate for councilman in our ward, Bill Payne, are elected, such a move would most likely come from them.

Also, there are growing indications both on the national level (the action against the DuBois clubs, a recent memorandum from Shriver to all local anti-poverty agencies barring participation by "subversives" in any aspect of the anti-poverty program), and on the local level as well, that a concerted program of harassment, if not repression, may be directed at N-CUP some time in the future. The most opportune time for such action would be on the heels of an Addonizio victory, coupled with the election of two "Addonizio" Negro councilmen in the two overwhelmingly Negro wards in which we are working.

Thus, N-CUP is involved in the municipal elections because we have something to protect, and a strategy of how to increase our strength through participating in the campaign. We are working with three candidates: Ken Gibson, a Negro engineer who works with the Newark housing authority and is running for mayor, Earl Harris, an incumbent Negro Republican county freeholder who is running for the city council in the South Ward, N-CUP's stronger ward, and George Richardson, who is running for city councilman against Irvine Turner, the first and only Negro councilman in Newark, and a close ally of the Mayor.

One of our greatest strengths is that with a staff of 15 full-time organizers and several other very active part-

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time people N-CUP is the major component of the Earl Harris and George Richardson campaign organizations. It will be our job to use this strength to maximize our influence over the three candidates. The primary way to maximize this influence is by proving that N-CUP is able to produce. In the Earl Harris campaign N-CUP is responsible for four election districts and since votes are tabulated by district there will be a means of tangibly measuring our performance. A high vote total is a prerequisite to being taken seriously by a candidate, but there are other variables that can determine one's influence. Most middle-class Negroes have fought quite hard to attain what little they now have. They have a natural antagonism to white radicals who are living in the neighborhoods *they* are glad to have left and who seem to be more militant than they. Although in the middle class, they are still not fully accepted. They see the civil-rights movement as a means of "helping their people," towards whom they often display possessiveness. Their only model for achieving power has been to construct carbon copies of the white model, and if the Northern civil-rights movement has been rather conservative in its outlook it is partially because it has not been challenged by a more radical movement that seems to be capable of change. Middle-class Negroes from the civil-rights movement are presently an important part of most left-liberal local coalitions, and in Newark we have found that we can best influence the most radical of them by convincing them that the white middle-class organizers: 1. are interested in building a serious movement and plan to remain for a long time; 2. conversely, do not see the ghetto as a mere escape from middle-class life, a life to which they plan to return when they get tired of "roughing it"; and 3. are concerned with power as well as democracy and have a blueprint for change that has some chance of success.

This process of influence can be applied to other groups in the community as well: poor Negroes who have depended on the Democratic party for a few crumbs and a vicarious sense of progress through identifying with elected and appointed Negro officials, old-left radicals who wonder if social security was worth McCarthyism, and middle-class students who have been brought up to "be realistic."

We have set many specific goals for the present campaign. We hope that in 1970 we will be ready to run our own candidate for at least one council seat. For this to be a feasible goal we must have an organization of people who will be familiar with and competent in the many mechanical aspects of a political campaign. We look to the forthcoming election to develop skills among our members.

We are placing a great emphasis on political discussion in the community rather than adopting the superficial style of campaigning as opposite, even contradictory. During the present campaign several organizers have already developed the beginnings of a block organization that will continue working on local activity after the campaign.

We have approached the campaign from the point of view of N-CUP rather than the point of view of the candidates. Most organizers identify themselves at the door by saying, "I'm so and so from N-CUP" and begin a discussion of the organization before they discuss the campaign. Rather than portraying a councilman as a saviour we have been fostering discussions about the values and limits of electoral politics and how poor people must be organized after the election to keep any politician responsive. This helps to combat the widespread distrust of politicians.

In line with these discussions N-CUP has pressed for the idea of a South Ward Congress. The congress would be composed of groups and individuals in the South Ward that would be interested in publicly influencing their councilman on any given issue. Congress meetings would take place two days before every city council meeting, at which time the councilman would report on his votes and statements at the past meeting and would be advised by his constituency about policies they would like to see him advocate at the next council meeting. Obviously any institution can become manipulated and undemocratic but we think that such an idea has the potential to involve relatively large numbers of people who have previously been excluded from the political process. The openness of such a procedure and the location of the meetings in the poorest Negro area would deprive a councilman of the insulation that is provided by the usually remote city hall. Our candidate, Earl Harris, is enthusiastic about the idea.

We are also setting up small meetings with four and five people in a given apartment so that they can talk to the candidates informally. This type of personal contact gives the people a chance to express grievances and discuss issues that couldn't be possible at a mass meeting, and also sets a style for the candidate's campaign. Mass meetings are conducive to generalities and platitudes; small meetings make a candidate less imposing and are more conducive to straight talk from voters who feel more confident in their own home.

We are working to influence the candidates to campaign openly for measures that will aid our organizing after the election. George Richardson has already agreed to encourage and, if desired, lead rent strikes of his constituents if he is elected.

Both of our council candidates are pledged to holding open hearings on issues of concern in the community. Some staff members feel that organizing individuals on several blocks with an interest in a common issue may be a successful way to encourage local action, rather than working with individuals who live on the same block but may have different concerns. Public hearings would be an excellent vehicle for approaching members of a neighborhood and getting involved in discussions about issues they are really interested in. The purpose of these hearings would not be to convince our councilmen that better housing, jobs, and police treatment are needed. He would already be in agreement. Instead,

these hearings could become mass meetings to plan local action on these issues.

We also hope that the campaign will serve as a laboratory for some needed theoretical discussions. Many of us are concerned about the reform nature of our politics yet find it hard to answer the questions, "What is a radical issue?" and "How does one make the transition from reform issues to radical issues?" The war in Vietnam and the issue of "Who's qualified?" seem radical to me, but we have only really been willing to raise the latter. How does one bring in foreign policy discussions to a local campaign in which most poor people are skeptical about the chances of controlling their own councilman, let alone the Federal war machine? All of the most active community people are against the war, but many would have strong reservations about campaigning on that issue.

Even more questions can be raised. Where can we find allies besides the poor and a few individuals from the middle-class community? Do we plan to begin a middle-class project in Newark to develop a radical force complementary to the poor? What are the limitations of electing our own radical councilman when the city will still be controlled by traditional power relationships? What could be accomplished if even by some great feat we controlled an entire city? What about the issue of suppression and how does one protect against it?

I think these questions can best be raised and given significant attention in a context of real political involvement. There is no objective reason why such discussions could not take place outside of such a context, but they are less likely to happen. The supposed antipathy to theory harbored by the "new left" is not a generalized

antipathy, but a reaction to the political environment into which we were born. Cries of reformism from non-activist radicals are not taken seriously because we have an emotional rejection of those unwilling to act, and an intellectual rejection of the perceptions of most non-activists. (Obviously there are exceptions: Mills, Marcuse, and William A. Williams come to mind.)

There is an aversion to discussions of mysterious radical proletariats or radical national coalitions which, in practice, evidence an antipathy to radicals. As an antidote we have tried to work out our theories on the basis of the realities we encounter in our day-to-day work, an approach which is in some ways limited but which has so far proved to be the best available.

It is interesting to note that in some ways we are accepting the tactics of the "coalition-oriented" critics of the New Left. We feel that some change can take place through a dialogue with those in power. We feel that loyalty, trust and other personal factors can be a source of influence for a radical group. Our primary distinction is that we see these measures as tactics, not basic strategy. We do not make personal relationships with those in power a cult, nor do we see them as a primary source of change. Our strategy is to develop an independent base among the poor, and out of this alliance between middle-class organizers and the poor to exert influence on the decisions of the society. Our primary allegiance—to the people in the neighborhood—is more conducive to principle, more conducive to change. Our mass base, no matter how small, is composed of real people who have power, if over no one else, over themselves and over us. This power keeps us honest. It also pushes us in search of more power and more leverage for change.

THE MYTH OF CHINESE AGGRESSION

(Continued from page 37)

asked the same question of an economics expert in the U.S. consulate-general in Hong Kong, who keeps an eye on China, and he made the same observation; there is just no comparison. American experts on China, monitoring it from Hong Kong, told me—to my great surprise—that no one has been executed for political reasons in China since about 1954. Political enemies are made to undergo psychological "rehabilitation," he said, and this is worse, he felt, than death in many instances, but actual killings have not taken place.

This image of China never gets into our press, which is carefully sanitized from the truth. Instead the constant blare of "aggression," the constant glee over crop failures, China's need to buy wheat and rice from abroad, and the references to the catastrophic "great leap" some years back, are the only fare an American gets in what is euphemistically called the "mass media."

Many intellectuals in Asia, Africa and Latin America—some of whom have visited China—know it from a dif-

ferent focal point. They are a large nation, with one fourth of the people of the world, actually solving problems that are the legacy of a century of imperialism. They see schools, factories, dams, clinics growing up where there were no schools, factories, dams, and clinics, and at a more rapid rate by far than in their own countries. To them China—undemocratic, dictatorial China—is nonetheless a beacon.

Can it be that our State Department is too myopic to see this? To understand it? Or, are we plagued with a guilty conscience on the one hand and a great fear, on the other, that this new, proud nation will by its example give hope to others and thus upset the world balance of power which our State Department strives so hard to preserve?

Admit as we must all the defects, faults, lack of humanism in Communist China, and we must still affirm some of its liberating features. Admit as we must its desire to aid national revolution whenever and wherever it rears its head, and we must still concede that it is not China which is aggressive against the United States, but the other way around.