

CHAPTER 7

Interview with Willie Baptist (IV): Lessons from the National Union of the Homeless: A Debate on Organizing

Jan Rehmman: From 1986 to 1991, you worked in the National Union of the Homeless, which became one of the largest networks of poor and homeless people in the United States at the time. That must have been a crucial experience for your development as an organizer of poor people.

Willie Baptist: Yes, it was a crucial experience. We were able to pull off these tremendous mobilizations of homeless people. By the 1980s, homelessness was no longer a skid row affair; it was structural. The shelter system was growing all over the country and was filled with dislocated families. We've come to accept the fact that every city has a shelter system, but that hasn't always been the case. Before this structural homelessness it was more of a transient affair, the skid row. But it has turned into a situation where today there are more homeless children than any other segment of the homeless population.

My involvement started in organizing against the workfare program I was on. In this context, I met some of the mothers who had been part of the old National Welfare Rights Organization but with its ending were now beginning to organize around workfare. These mothers, Marian Kramer, Annie Chambers, Annie Smart, Maureen Taylor, and others, taught me a whole lot about organizing among the poor. I also met Chris Sprowal, a homeless organizer in Philadelphia who was thinking about launching a nationwide organizing drive of homeless people. He was the lead organizer and eventually became the first president of the National Union of the Homeless. He was much older than me and had accumulated tremendous experience as part of the civil rights movement. He had led the Downtown CORE (Congress for Racial Equality) here in New York, led an election campaign in Long Island, ran the McGovern presidential campaign in Michigan, and

even ran for office himself. So he had accumulated a tremendous amount of tactical experience. I learned from him what it meant to organize among people who were dispossessed. No one can take away the huge contribution he made in the organizing of poor and homeless people. I had the great fortune and honor to learn from this well-experienced and extraordinary leader. My family and I lived with him and his family during this period.

At its height the Homeless Union had organized 25 local union chapters in 25 states with estimates as high as 15,000 homeless members of all races and genders. We had over 1,000 delegates from Los Angeles organized to form the L.A. chapter of the Union of the Homeless. In the Chicago-Gary (Indiana) area we had over 900 delegates. In 1987, we organized 1,200 homeless delegates representing all the shelters throughout the area to assemble at Riverside Church in New York City. That has to go down as the largest political gathering of homeless people in the United States thus far. We didn't know it at the time, but that was the same church, 20 years earlier in 1967, where Martin Luther King, Jr. first spoke out publicly against the Vietnam War, where he described the disproportionate deployment of the poor to the frontlines as a "cruel manipulation of the poor." I had heard the speech, but I didn't connect its important message with the founding convention of the New York Homeless Union.

That gathering was a tremendous experience. The mainstream press and large parts of academia at the time were talking about a "black underclass," saying that these miserable and demoralized folks were inept and incapable of doing anything. But here we were, a bunch of people who didn't have anything, successfully organizing ourselves. I played an educational role and also functioned as an outrider who would go into cities before the organizing team would arrive. Since I had developed connections with people from all over the country at workfare conferences held in Detroit and Chicago, I could connect up with these previous relationships and set up a support team ready to hit the ground running when the national team arrived. This effort would culminate in founding conventions like we had here in New York. It was a tremendous experience, but it was unprecedented, and we were very inexperienced in terms of dealing with an effort on that scale with that section of the population.

JR: But after the network's rise came the demise. In the early 1990s, the National Union of the Homeless collapsed and closed its doors. What happened?

WB: We were able to accomplish a lot when we reached a certain critical mass. We forced city councils in DC and Philadelphia to give homeless people the right to vote. No matter if you had a house or not, if you could

identify a corner or a shelter, you could vote. In a number of cities we won the right to shelter. We did all kinds of stuff that built up our sense of ourselves, our self-worth. The head, Chris Sprowal, was named in *USA Today* in 1987 as one of the top 10 leaders to watch for in that year.

But what happened was that our growth took place at the same time that the impoverished communities, starting with African American communities, were being inundated with crack cocaine. The drug epidemic took us in. It served like a chemical warfare waged against us. I literally cried when I would get phone calls in the national office and could hear the internal fights that people were having, people stealing from each other. Chapter after chapter just broke down.

We also had cases where people carried out actions like civil disobedience when they hadn't taken their arrest records into account. We lost key leaders that way. There are homeless organizers who are still in prison serving as much as 25-year terms.

The Union of the Homeless was also devastated by a certain amount of co-optation. We were able to achieve victories in a number of cities. For instance, we were able to establish the Dignity Housing Programs in Philadelphia. It was a multimillion-dollar homeless program run by homeless people. We were able to take advantage of Mayor Goode's political liability after he took responsibility for the MOVE bombing in May 1985, which ended in eleven deaths, including five children, because it happened on his watch. It was the only time I think when an American city bombed itself. Exploiting that situation, we expanded the housing takeovers and insisted on a housing program. He conceded it to us and, as a fig leaf to brush up his political reputation, supported us in developing this multimillion-dollar housing program run by homeless people. Then the local chapter of the Union of the Homeless copied that program in Oakland, Minneapolis, and other cities.

But certain people who were assigned to run the programs became more closely tied to the housing department than to the Union of the Homeless. Then the housing department began to make demands on our structure that weakened the relationship of the Union of the Homeless to those programs. At first, we were using it as a resource base. When a homeless person really did a lot of work and made a large commitment, we would make sure that person got a house through the process. They cut that out. We had been able to get jobs, too. The Dignity Housing program was divided up into property management, social work, and peer counseling. Peer counseling was another name for organizing. We would give our homeless members those jobs. As the Homeless Union went into decline and Dignity Housing became more of an adjunct to the housing department, they began to cut those parts out of the whole picture. That weakened our relationship to it and we lost

a number of leaders as a result of that development. It was a very devastating experience for me, having gone through that kind of militancy in getting actions and people to respond and then to losing it through drugs, prisons, and co-optation.

JR: It's a recurring phenomenon in social movements that when you finally achieve something in terms of concessions and certain electoral gains, these successes are often utilized by powers-that-be to destroy the movement. This is a painstaking dialectics. Is there no way out?

WB: Underneath all that, the main lesson for building an organization or a movement is that at its initial stage the question of finding committed leaders and developing their clarity and competence is key. We just didn't know that. We were inexperienced and couldn't deal with it. Not having a core of experienced and clear leaders left us unprepared to deal with the maneuvers of the powers-that-be and the all-around assault of the drug epidemic and then one chapter folded after another. The key lesson we learned from this was to focus on developing leaders so the movement doesn't have to be compromised by any individual who gets compromised.

JR: Wouldn't this experience of co-optation and demise validate the argument of Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, who came out explicitly against any mass organization of the poor, because such an organization would necessarily end up as one of the usual bureaucratic lobby organizations in Washington? They proposed instead a national network of "cadre organizations" composed of clergy, students, civil rights activists, antipoverty workers, et cetera, that mobilize the poor to demand relief on a mass scale and thereby set off a fiscal crisis. Their argument was basically that the poor should disrupt the welfare system, but they should not organize themselves. Doing so would mean they would become caught in the system of co-optation. I suppose this is not the conclusion you would draw from your experience at the Union of the Homeless.

WB: Fox Piven and Cloward were influential figures in the National Welfare Rights Organization, which was formed in 1966. But there were two strands of thought. On the one side, you had the welfare recipients who were arguing that they themselves should assume leadership of this process—determining the allocation of money, targets, tactics, and so on. They argued that those decisions should come from the women who were facing the problems and were directly affected. This was the position of Johnnie Tillman, the first president of the National Welfare Rights Organization.

She had been part of a group of welfare recipients—poor mothers—who came together and organized themselves out of the Watts uprising to form the Anonymous Mothers of Watts.

On the other side, Cloward and Fox Piven argued that the poor were too poor to organize. Poor people's organizations could never get the clout necessary to offer economic benefits for their members, like the unions. To devote their energies and meager resources for organizing efforts was to forfeit energies that should have gone into disruption. In my reading of them, Cloward and Fox Piven relegated the poor, for the most part, to the role and function of disrupters, while the leadership of that process would be passed on to the middle-class intellectuals through which the interests of the upper class and their two-party system would dominate.

I know a number of those leaders who were welfare recipients that would later form the National Welfare Rights Union, in 1987, almost the same name as the older group, except with *union* instead of *organization*. I became a member of the board of the National Welfare Rights Union. They were definitely opposed to Fox Piven and Cloward's position. I think, if you look at history, you can see that Fox Piven and Cloward's equation of organizing and co-optation is overly simplistic. Look, for example, at the struggle of the runaway slaves. The Underground Railroad was largely the efforts of slaves and freed slaves who organized themselves and were able to have an impact on the situation. And certainly you can't get any poorer than slaves. How can Fox Piven and Cloward establish such a general assumption about the detrimental consequences of organizing without taking into account the freedom struggles of slaves? They construe an abstract dichotomy of mobilization and organization and overlook the reality that an organization can also be supportive for creative movements from below. Rosa Parks was not just a seamstress in a local department store, but she was a secretary in the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Her allegedly spontaneous act of resistance on the bus was carefully prepared in this organization. The history I've studied and my own experience refute the position that the poor have no agency, and that they can't exhibit the qualities of leadership or sustain in a movement. It all depends on what kind of organization you build up.

For instance, Cloward and Fox Piven developed their argument largely against Saul Alinsky's type of "poor people's organization," which limited the agency of the poor to that of local community concerns (Fig. 7.1). It precluded the organizing of the poor as a leading social force in a broader mass movement to end poverty in the country. So both sides of this argument were predicated ultimately on the same basic assumption—that the poor cannot be a leading force in relation to all of society.

Figure 7.1. Mobilizing Versus Organizing?

We argued against the traditional organizing notion that poor people can become an effective political force by coming together in mass-based organizations. We did not think the political system would be responsive to such organizations, even if large numbers of the poor could be involved on a continuing basis. . . . To mobilize a crisis, we thought it would be necessary to develop a national network of cadre organizations rather than a national federation of welfare recipients. *This organization of organizers*—composed of students, churchmen, civil rights activists, antipoverty workers, and militant AFDC recipients—would in turn seek to energize a broad, loosely coordinated movement of variegated groups to arouse hundreds of thousands of poor people to demand aid. Rather than build organizational membership rolls, the purpose would be to build the welfare rolls. . . . Our emphasis on mass mobilization with cadre organizations as the vehicle struck organizers as exceedingly manipulative.

Source: Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 278–279, 284.

JR: This reminds me of the young Marx at the age of 26, when he first used the concept of the *proletariat* and defined it as a class “with radical chains,” which has a universalist character because its sufferings are universal. It can only redeem itself by a total redemption of humanity. He uses here the original meaning of *proletariat*, derived from the Latin word *proles*, meaning “offspring,” more specifically those who have no wealth other than their offspring. But most people only know Marx’s later remarks on the “lumpenproletariat” as the “dead weight” of the working class, which has often been used by trade unionists to pit the industrial working class and its organizations against the poor. In my view, this is contradicted by the more substantial parts of Marx’s class analysis, where he clearly shows that the proletariat is composed of different sections, comprising those employed and those permanently or intermittently thrown into unemployment. You have certainly struggled a lot with this kind of derogatory attitude toward poor people’s movements.

WB: In both my studies and in my organizing experience among the homeless and the poor we’ve always encountered this argument from different kinds of leftists who instrumentalized Marx against the poor. I could also observe how the notion of a “lumpenproletariat” merged with or morphed into the notion of the “underclass” that was then used by neoliberal politicians to cut welfare programs. All those concepts and the reference

to Marx's notion of lumpenproletariat serve to stigmatize the poor. Those people who were laid off and trying to grapple with the circumstances somehow were put into a definition that says that they were criminals, they were inert, they were lazy, and that they were incapable of exhibiting any kind of leadership in the process.

Marx's theory was worked out during the period of the steam engine. Later on you had a second industrial revolution that involved the massive assembly lines with the massive application of electricity. Today you've got a kind of transnational high-tech capitalism that, through the introduction of computer technologies, creates systemic unemployment and underemployment on a global scale. The point I want to convey is that when you're in a new day, you gotta do things in a new way. The first thing you have to determine is whether what you're dealing with is new or old, because if you try to apply old solutions to new problems you're always going to fail. The poor today is not the poor of yesterday. It's not the traditional agrarian poor, not the slave poor, and not the pauper of the classic industrial age. It is a poor that has a global character, that is being pushed increasingly outside the core production process, and that is currently involved in underemployment, taking on three or four SLJs (shitty little jobs) to barely make ends meet. Making this new analysis is very important.

Those who keep on using the notions of "lumpenproletariat" or "underclass" show that they have very little, if any, appreciation of the new social consequences of the unfolding tremendous technological revolution and globalization process that is presently transforming the world. The abilities of this growing segment of the population are being neglected like industrial waste, but represent a tremendous resource of intellectual genius. You can't talk about the problems of poverty—the pain of it, the daily struggles to survive, the plight, the fight, and the insight—without involving the newly emerging leaders from the growing ranks of the poor.