E.R.A.P.
and how It Grew

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ERAP and how It Grew

by Richie Rothstein

When SDS set up its Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) two days after the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, it was with a clear notion of how indigenous democratic organizations of the poor and the unemployed would contribute to major social change in America and the world.

SDS still believed in the possibility of change within the framework of the formally representative institutions of American government. ERAP's goal was to goose those institutions a bit; to set up currents in American political life which would reverse the corruption of established liberal and trade-union forces. These forces, with pressure and inspiration from ERAP and other 'new insurgencies', would demand that resources be transferred from the cold war arms race to the creation of a decentralized, democratic, interracial welfare state at home.

Those of us involved in ERAP at that time have come a long way since. We no longer focus on the arms expenditures of what we then regarded as an 'equal blame' cold war -- Vietnam and the Dominican Republic unmasked for us what now seems an obvious aggressive economic imperialism. We are now enemies of welfare-state capitalism, with little faith or desire that the liberal-labor forces which might father such a system be strengthened vis-a-vis their corporatist and reactionary allies. We view these forces - and the system they might have espoused - as being incompatible with a non-interventionist world policy and as no more than a manipulative fraud perpetrated upon the dignity and humane aspirations of the American people.

This last conclusion we owe in large measure to four years of ERAP experience. In a healthy pragmatic style we tested an optimistic hypothesis about the limits of American pluralism. But after ERAP's first year and a half, when these conclusions began to become clear, we had no organizational structure

for formulating and implementing subsequent hypotheses about America and building a movement to revolutionize it.

New Insurgencies

The hypothesis of 'new insurgencies' on which ERAP was originally based was set out in "America and the New Era", a document adopted as policy by the 1963 SDS national convention.

This document assumed many of the arguments of two other 1963 statements. One, The Triple Revolution, was promulgated that winter by a coalition of liberals and radicals (including some SDS leaders). It argued that the 'cybernation revolution', resulting in previously unimagined employment and leisure time; the 'weaponry revolution', which threatened to obliterate the world after wasting resources worth billions of dollars' and the 'human rights revolution', encompassing both Third World liberation movements and the domestic civil rights movement, were all interrelated. Only by a curtailment of the arms race could funds become available for construction of equalitarian societies at home and abroad; only by a recognition of new opportunities presented by automation could America meet the demands of its civil rights movement. Equal opportunity was meaningless in a shrinking job market; the racial problem could not be dealt with unless obsolete economic arrangements were replaced. (Today's 'guaranteed annual income' movement is the project of those who still accept the essentials of the Triple Revolution argument.)

The second analysis was contained in the papers of the Nyack Conference, held only a few days after the SDS adoption of America and the New Era. Ray Brown, an economist now teaching at Swarthmore, predicted that even if new job opportunities were increased at twice the 1963 rate, by 1970 unemployment would be about 13% -- and astronomically higher for the young and non-white. 'None of the present or proposed (Kennedy Administration) programs,' Brown concluded, 'amounts to more than economic tokenism.' (The Nyack Conference led directly to the establishment of an organizing project

among unemployed Hazard, Kentucky coal miners, a project which affiliated with ERAP when it was created some months later.)

America and the New Era added to these analyses a condemnation of the 'corporatist' makeup of the Kennedy Administration and of the anti-democratic managerial solutions which it proposed. SDS described the 'dilemma of labor and liberal forces' as a tendency to identify with this managerialism and a loss of the American populist tradition:

> Organized liberalism, however, must take at least part of the credit for America's political stalemate. A style of politics which emphasizes cocktail parties and seminars rather than protest marches, local reform movements, and independent bases of power cannot achieve leverage with respect to an establishment-oriented administration and a fundamentally reactionary Congressional oligarchy.

SDS felt that within these liberal organizations (below the 'middle levels of leadership') there were still people who would support more militant action and more far-reaching solutions than those proposed by the liberal leadership in bed with Kennedy. In part, rank-and-file sentiment would be galvanized by the obviously worsening economic crisis.

> But just as important, the populist impulse in labor and organizations of liberalism can be reinforced by the emergence of new popular movements... It...seems likely that popular upsurge in many communities...could provide a stimulus which would move labor to become an important center of power and leadership... A democratic insurgency could (also) provide for many (middle-class) people a revived and inspiring vision of a humane society order -- a vision that might stir them out of privatism.

JOIN

Consequently, one of the chief goals of ERAP was to galvanize the quiescent populists in the ranks of labor and liberalism. The organization of the poor

was, at least in part, a political public relations maneuver designed to speak to the imagination of stable America. The first two actions of JOIN (Jobs or Income Now), the original ERAP project in Chicago, was to sell apples, a symbol of Depression unemployment. JOIN members, recruited at an Unemployment Compensation center, sold apples first in Chicago's Loop, the center of white-collar lower-middle-class employment; and second outside a Pete Seeger concert where JOIN could be expected to reach the membership of most of the liberal organizations we were trying to galvanize.

Joe Chabot, the first ERAP organizer in Chicago, spent much of his time speaking to trade unionists and other liberals about JOIN's activity. Fund-raising was, of course, a chief motive, but the political purpose was not overlooked. A JOIN advisory committee, made up largely of Leftist trade union staff members, was put together. The chief achievement, however, wasthe commitment of the United Packinghouse Workers Union to set up a recruiting office next to a South Side unemployment compensation center while Chabot established an office next to a North Side center.

Richard Flacks, writing the prospectus for the Chicago ERAP project, expressed this purpose by proposing that

> leafleting and sales of apples at plant gates on pay day will be an effective way of reminding employed workers of threats to their own job security, of arousing interest in JOIN, and of raising money. This effort will be considerably enhanced if local union leaders and shop stewards visibly assist the JOIN workers.

Flacks went on to argue that the JOIN advisory committee

> can become a kind of representative body of those forces and groups within the city which can be mobilized for effective political action. Thus, the members of this group, although acting as individuals, become centers of initiative within their own organizations and institutions. In this way, a city-wide political movement for full employment and a better Chi-

> cago may develop... JOIN by itself cannot mobilize sufficient power to achieve social change; only a new alignment of forces in Chicago can bring this about.

Flacks was overly optimistic about the power of JOIN's example to create success for solitary Leftists who had been struggling for years to fire their labor unions with a new commitment to popular struggle. Rank-and-file assistance for plant gate apple sales never materialized; and the JOIN advisory committee was disbanded after a year -- partly because of lack of interest, but partly also because the new Vietnam peace movement was beginning to absorb some of the advisory committee members' energies.

Impact on Lib/Labs

Nonetheless, speaking truth to liberals remained a key part of ERAP organizers' program. JOIN organizers never turned down speaking engagements before liberal or church organizations (fund-raising was a key, but not the sole, rationale), and made frequent attempts to involve liberals in JOIN's program -- collecting clothing in the suburbs for a JOIN Christmas party, inviting the Fellowship of Reconciliation membership to do a door-to-door survey with JOIN members, accepting the most inefficient part-time volunteer arrangements from students who did not yet have a campus movement with which they could become active.

In many cases, the students who did short-term tours of duty on ERAP staffs returned to their campuses to lead university reform and Vietnam protest movements. They were, as a result of their contact with ERAP, 'reinforced in their populist impulses'. The democratic, 'participatory' tone of all ERAP projects has, in this respect, contributed to the emergence of a new popular movement (SNCC veterans returning to campus were, in the same fashion, much more important). But with respect to the labor movement and liberal membership organizations, no such success could be claimed. Before too long, the attitude of most ERAP organizers toward the organizations of labor and the liberal middle class changed from one of hope to one of the deepest hostility and contempt.

In one respect, ERAP projects and rhetoric had a very deep impact on labor and liberal organizations. It is certainly true that the new liberal-labor programs of community development and 'community action projects' were influenced very heavily by SDS and ERAP. The rhetoric of participatory democracy (in ERAP, 'let the people decide') has transformed the War on Poverty, the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty, the Peace Corps, and the curricula of some of the major academic social work schools. ERAP organizers are still quoted and used by VISTA, for example, for highly-paid consultant work, which ERAP organizers occasionally undertake both for the money and for the opportunity to reach VISTA volunteers who might, unlike their superiors, take the rhetoric seriously.

Thus, one of the lasting results of ERAP might have been to provide liberalism with a more sophisticated rhetoric of co-optation. This may not be an insignificant or negative achievement. Historically, one of the dangers for the American ruling class involved in the use of democratic rhetoric is that the ruled sometimes decide to take that rhetoric seriously. The Declaration of Independence, the Versailles Peace Conference, and the Atlantic Charter are but the three most obvious examples.

Nonetheless, the provision of liberalism with a new rhetoric of co-optation was never a conscious goal of ERAP organizers. The use of ERAP rhetoric by the United Auto Workers elite in the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty is a far cry from the galvanization of the UAW rank-and-file to mass protest.

Local Reform Issues

In addition to an effort as missionary to liberal-labor forces, the achievement of actual social change was a second goal of early ERAP. America and the New Era made a special point of this:

> ...by concentrating attention on domestic problems, and by demanding the concentration of resources on their solution, the poor and dispossessed of the United States (and every other country) could force a cessation of the arms race. The objective meaning of their demands for goods and social services would be to make continued support for massive military programs untenable.

'The creation of a series of short-run social reforms' was one of the priorities to be used by ERAP director Rennie Davis in choosing localities for projects, according to a resolution of the December 1963 SDS national council.

When it soon became obvious that full employment could not become such a short-range reform achieved by ERAP, a new conception of organizing projects began to develop. At first, ERAP organizers defensively described this approach as GROIN -- 'garbage removal or income now'. But by the end of 1964, the GROIN approach was unanimous -- even the Chicago project changed its name to JOIN Community Union and moved its office from next to the unemployment center to the poorest of the Chicago North Side neighborhoods.

The issues shifted from national full employment to more local issues -- welfare administration, housing conditions, local city housekeeping issues. The original rationale was soon lost, however, as ERAP found local political structures to be so rigid that not even petty reforms, completely unthreatening to the national economic structure and distribution of resources, could be won. A film, "The Troublemakers", details the tragic story of the Newark ERAP project's inability even to win a traffic light at a dangerous intersection. Although ERAP projects developed a facility for winning specific welfare (public aid) grievance cases and for forcing, by rent strike, an occasional landlord to fix up, in all ten ERAP projects only two concessions were gained from the 'power structure'. In Cleveland, a free lunch program was granted to the children of aid recipients who attended public school; and in Newark, a locally elected war on poverty board was able to appropriate some funds for a recreation center.

ERAP organizers soon began to look at local issues as an opportunity for better education rather than for substantive reform which would begin to chip away at the defense budget and reinforce the ERAP organization with a reputation for success. Rennie Davis, in proposing a program for JOIN in October 1964, stated that an essential ingredient was a demand which would probably be denied by local officials, but which those officials clearly could meet if they so desired. Such a demand 'will involve

people in experiences which develop a new understanding of the society which denies them opportunities and rights, and which will open possibilities for more insurgent activity in the future.'

JOIN adopted the suggestion. It took an informal survey of its community and established that a day-care center and public spot-labor hiring agency were the two most appropriate needs. JOIN proposed these to the local war on poverty office and picketed that office in their behalf. Neither has been granted to this day.

Interracial Movement of the Poor

The third area of ERAP objectives concerned our relationship to the civil rights movement, in which we had all worked. For it had become clear, as a result of the experiences of some SDS leaders within the Northern Student Movement, that the role of white radicals could no longer be as organizers in black communities and in black organizations -- the fact that most ERAP projects were eventually placed in such communities was not originally intended: the site of the Newark project, for example, was believed to have been inhabited much more by working class whites than was in fact the case.

In the long run, ERAP's purpose grew out of a concern that the objectives of the civil rights movement would be frustrated by working class white reaction. In part, therefore, our goal was to form organizations in white communities which could counter the backlash ('civilizing committees', in the recent words of the NCNP convention). But also in part, SDS had concluded that the job of white radicals was to provide the civil rights movement with white allies who would positively reinforce the power of Negro demands. And what better allies are there than those organized around their own needs and demands, a functional and not merely charitable alliance? The dream of a new interracial Populism was hard to resist.

In an influential paper written in the spring of 1964 (An Inter-racial Movement of the Poor?), Tom Hayden and Carl Wittman surveyed the civil rights movement's lack of substantive achievement and the

backlash mood developing in the white community. Hayden and Wittman categorized four types of civil rights demands: demands to eliminate segregation (but 'the lower class Negro prefers improved schools over integrated schools, and generally improved living conditions over integrated living conditions'); demands which symbolically assert Negro dignity but neither achieve change nor alienate whites very much; demands which are specifically racial, do not achieve very much, and potentially alienate large numbers of whites (such as a demand to replace white workers with black ones in a situation of chronic unemployment); and finally, demands for political and economic changes of substantial benefit to Negroes and white poor.

Hayden and Wittman clearly favored the fourth type, and argued for the organization of poor whites as well as blacks to make such demands:

> The alternative (to an inter-racial movement) is more likely to be fascism than freedom. We are not convinced that violent conflict between Negroes and lower class whites will force the American establishment to even make significant concessions, much less dissolve itself. The Establishment might merely ignore the trouble and leave it to the local police, or it might use troops to enforce order. In either case, poor Negroes and poor whites will continue to struggle against each other instead of against the power structure that properly deserves their malice.

The feared violence was not, of course, the then-unpredicted mass violence of the black community against ghetto institutions, the then-common violence of working class whites against Negroes moving into new communities or attending previously all-white schools. The mass organization of whites around issues of their own oppression, ERAP hoped, would help blunt their violence.

And our hopes were that this organization of poor whites would have a second effect in the short run. It was hoped that the organization of poor whites would influence the program of the activist civil rights movement, particularly SNCC, NSM, and to some extent CORE.

It seemed clear to SDS that the civil rights movement was erring in not focusing on economic issues. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom made the connection between racial oppression and national economic crisis explicit. But the targets of SNCC, for example, still remained primarily symbolic: the integration of lunch counters, movie theatres, and so on.

ERAP would make its radical economic analysis of American problems available to the civil rights movement in two forms: first, by focusing attention on economic targets and by organizing the poor around economic issues - unemployment, housing, welfare, poverty. But second, it was felt that the organization of the white poor would of itself be a step forward in the Movement's radical consciousness: an interracial movement of the poor, in which whites too were demanding decent homes and incomes, could not help but demonstrate that civil rights acts which merely outlawed segregation of accommodation facilities missed the essential point. Rent strikers' demands could not be met by non-economic integrationist concessions.

It seems clear in retrospect that ERAP played a significant (though not by any means the sole) role in the subsequent re-direction of the civil rights movement. In particular, ERAP's emphasis on urban organization around issues of poverty played a part in influencing the program development of CORE and SNCC since 1963. Much more important, of course, was the civil rights movement's own dynamic, which, inspired by its own failures, created an economically oriented Black Power movement which swept over and passed whatever marginal influence ERAP might have had. But ERAP's role was complementary and, in this respect, should be considered a success.

Not nearly so successful was ERAP's attempt to produce massive white alliances in the struggle against white reaction. We clearly demonstrated that racism could be overcome by poor whites genuinely in motion around their own demands. JOIN in Chicago worked closely with black community groups elsewhere in the city, and the indigenous JOIN leadership, while Southern, was clearly committed to the abolition of racism as a political goal. JOIN rent

strikes were coordinated with rent strikes in black communities; coordinated demonstrations of black and white welfare recipients occurred more than once at public aid offices.

But the desperately slow pace with which JOIN grew, the inability of ERAP ultimately to commit itself to more than a few white communities, and a national war economy which temporarily reserved poverty for the black masses belied the earlier promises of white allies.

An Impasse

By the winter of 1965, ERAP organizers found themselves at a difficult juncture. The three major original purposes of ERAP -- the inspiration of mass protest from the ranks of labor and liberalism; the achievement of specific, though minor, concessions to social reform; and the addition of significant numbers of poor whites to the ranks of the movement for Negro freedom -- had been abandoned by most ERAP organizers. JOIN organizers, of course, retained the third.

Whether ERAP was justified in concluding after so short a trial that the ranks of labor and liberalism could not be galvanized by the power of our example, and that the power structure was totally inflexible and unresponsive to demands from below, is a question that must remain unanswered. Certainly these are conclusions now shared by most of the 'New Left'.

The more significant question is: What new hypotheses replaced the old in the minds of ERAP organizers, and what effect did these new hypotheses have on the structure of those ERAP projects which continued to exist?

The question is revealingly difficult, because the shift from old premises to new was barely conscious and hardly ever discussed. But by the winter of 1965, if you asked most ERAP organizers what they were about, they would simply have answered: 'building a movement'.

There would have been little ideological disagreement

about what this movement would do, once built. SDS people were rapidly coming to the conclusion that their movement must be one that could end racist exploitation and imperialism, collectivize economic decision-making, and democratize and decentralize every political, economic, and social institution in America.

These goals, however, were long-run -- and quite appropriately not a problem of concern to ERAP organizers. The short-run problems of beginning to build a movement which could some day achieve the power and skill to organize society in a humane, collective, decentralist, and democratic fashion were much more difficult.

The short-run problems were these: how to develop leadership in a genuine, non-manipulative fashion; how to balance the Movement's needs to create leadership, awaken the country's (or the community's) sense of crisis, polarize by conflict, or create institutions of local control which give people a living vision of the democracy to be; and how to choose the issues around which any of these tasks could be attempted.

Because ERAP organizers had no idea of how to make such decisions, the ERAP structure dissolved in the spring of 1965. The rationale for dissolution was that deciding whether a given project should attempt to emphasize rent strikes or leadership training classes, community newspapers or democratic day-care centers, community issues or the War in Vietnam, depended too much on specific local information which organizers from other projects could not hope to have. In fact, however, nobody had any experience in making such decisions even within a project; and not since March 1965 had any two ERAP organizing staffs sat down together to evaluate and discuss their work.

Structure and Strategy

It was probably true that a national organization of half a dozen local organizing staffs could not be a forum for working out such difficult problems of movement-building. Those local ERAP staffs which continued to survive had to look to the future for the eventual creation of regional unions of organizers which could enable individual projects to deal

with these decisions. But in the three years that we have thusfar awaited such regional organizations, organizing projects have floundered and achieved, at best, unanticipated success.

One characteristic of projects in the last three years has been a regular re-evaluation and shifting of direction. JOIN, for example, engaged in a rent strike campaign which had the potential of developing new institutions of local democratic control (tenant councils) through tenant-landlord collective bargaining agreements won after the most dramatic conflicts. But instead of seeing the implementation of these agreements through, and instead of nurturing the tenant councils into genuine democratic bodies, JOIN organizers adopted new organizing principles soon after the rent strike movement had begun. They began to emphasize ideological training for the handful of potential leaders in JOIN, the creation of a newspaper to increase community consciousness of conflict, and the development of democratic block clubs. The rent strike campaign was abandoned.

Around any given activity, there would also be uncertainty about organizing purposes. Was welfare grievance activity undertaken to maximize the number of grievances actually alleviated for public aid recipients in order to expose (and, in part, obligate) these recipients to a radical, inter-racial, anti-war organization? Or was its purpose to develop a core of recipient leadership skilled in the administration of a democratic group or in the processing of grievances for other recipients? Since the development of such an indigenous leadership group could only proceed very slowly, it was in conflict with the first purpose, which permitted staff officers themselves to handle a large number of grievances rapidly and efficiently.

A third purpose might be to dramatize actual conflict at welfare offices -- getting in public fights with case workers, belittling the officers' authority, picketing and screaming in front of public aid headquarters. Such tactics, through newspaper publicity or the impact they made on recipients who were present, might prepare fertile ground for future organizing and consciousness; but it also might sometimes conflict with the efficient handling of grievances or the quiet development of indigenous recipient leadership.

Because ERAP organizers were generally confused about the meaning of these alternatives, they often shifted their emphasis from one to another, and then back again. The result was a failure to accomplish any of the possible movement-building purposes; if one was accomplished, it was usually inadvertent.

Lack of clarity about tactical alternatives was only one reason for the constant shift of direction on the part of community organizing projects. Another was frustration. If rent strike and tenant council organizing was difficult and frustrating, it was always possible to develop a political rationale for abandoning it. It was decided, for example, that the ideological training of potential leadership was more essential at this time to the building of a movement (which is what we were chiefly about) than the development of conflict-stimulated tenant councils.

A good political analysis could always be made for such a shift -- complete with showing how the shift remedied the historical errors of the Movement since the 19th century. But soon frustration with the new direction would give birth to another equally cogent political rationale -- and yet another direction would be embarked upon.

If organizing staffs had been responsible to any group or organizers larger than themselves, such shifts would have become much more difficult. For example, if the JOIN staff had been responsible to the radical movement in Chicago (or earlier, to ERAP) for the development of tenant councils in Uptown, a change in that responsibility would have required a more detached and delaying debate within the Chicago movement (or ERAP). But in the absence of such an organizational context, political programs could change as quickly and irresponsibly as the whims of the organizers. And since the success of any program - whether leadership training program or rent strike development program or massive welfare grievance campaign - takes longer than the development of an organizer's frustration, often no program was given a chance to succeed.

Finally, a third reason for the constant shift in organizing priorities was the fact that, in the absence of a broader Movement structure from which organizers could take direction, each organizing project had to bear the burden of history on its shoulders. Even when the perception of new political imperatives was not the product of frustration, such perception

had to result in new directions, leaving unfinished business behind. A project could not decide that a given task was important without itself dropping everything else to effect that task. Thus, if JOIN was involved in the training of welfare recipient leadership and suddenly decided that it was politically important to focus public attention on the arbitrariness of case workers, it could not propose that a different organizing project assume responsibility for attention-getting welfare demonstrations while JOIN continued in the quiet task of creating indigenous leadership. In the absence of any multi-project structure, a division of political labor was inconceivable. Any project had to sacrifice its on-going activities to whatever was the highest priority of the moment. With each project responsible only to itself, not to focus on the highest priority for the Movement as a whole was to betray the historical task of building that movement.

A corollary of this problem was the impossibility of experimental work. How could a project experiment with factory organizing, or consumer organizing, or draft-resistance organizing, in such a context? Experiments produce information for organizers, not necessarily mass movements. But in the absence of a broader structure, with the burden of movement-building borne entirely by each project, experiments could not be risked. Each organizer judged his own worth and value by the extent to which he built a section of that movement. If a project experimented with draft resistance, failed, and was run out of a community, to whom could the organizers give the benefit of their experience? From whom could they hear: 'You are worthy in our eyes; you have done us an invaluable service in providing us with knowledge about the possibility of working-class draft resistance.' In the absence of a mandate from such a group, experiments are much too risky.

One crucial problem encountered by ERAP projects with which this paper has not dealt is the problem of dealing with personality differences on organizing staffs in a humane, firm, and political manner. A structure which the Movement will soon have to develop in addition to the structures indicated by this paper is an appropriate technique of criticism and self-criticism.

The ERAP structure was set up to test particular hypotheses about American society. When these hypotheses were abandoned, the structure suffered a similar fate. It probably could not have dealt with the new problems that organizers committed to building a revolutionary movement faced. If structure should follow function, then the demise of ERAP was as it should be.

But new problems demand new forms; Movement organizers in many kinds of work - community organizing, professionals organizing, student organizing, shop organizing - have faced similar problems in the last three years. It would be surprising and tragic if new Movement structures (probably on a regional basis) were not developed to deal with these new problems.