Disruption vs Organisation

A review article by Brian Martin

How effective are social activists? And what activist strategies are most effective?

Typical aims of feminists, environmentalists and other activists are building involvement in movement organisations, influencing public attitudes, affecting government and corporate policies and practices, and laying the basis for a non-hierarchical, environmentally sound, democratic, equitable, self-managed society. Activities undertaken include holding meetings, distributing information, lobbying governments, organising rallies and taking direct action. Which activities have been most effective in achieving activist aims?

The book *Poor People's Movements* by Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward provides a provocative analysis with implications for social action in Australia. Piven and Cloward analyse four major poor people's movements in the United States: the unemployed workers' movement during the 1930s, the industrial workers' movement during the 1930s, the black civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the welfare rights movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their analysis of the welfare rights movement is especially good because they were active participants in debates over movement directions.

The conclusions of Piven and Cloward may come as a surprise, especially to those with a traditional 'left' perspective on the achievement of social change.

Piven and Cloward argue that the four movements achieved their greatest influence and extracted the greatest concessions from the powers that be *before* they became organised. Gains were attained primarily as a result of disruptive protest, for example through strikes, demonstrations and sit-ins. After mass organisations were formed uniting the poor groups—unions, welfare rights organisations and so forth—protest waned and gains faded. And the mass organisations were the *cause* of this process.

The mass organisations faced several problems in trying to survive while maintaining and extending gains for their constituencies. They drew people off the street into meeting rooms. They were preoccupied with internal leadership prerogatives. And they looked to elite groups for tangible and symbolic organisational support. The net result was a damping of unrest and a reduction in disruption and gains. In addition, the mass organisaions often then collapsed in the succeeding period of quiescence, unless they were especially useful to establishment groups. For example, once the right of unions to exist was recognised by the US government in 1937, and union dues were collected by employers, agitation and worker gains declined rapidly.

The basic flaw in the mass organisation model, argue Piven and Cloward, is that oppositional organisations cannot be sustained by resources gained by compelling concessions from elites. They therefore strongly advocate the use of disruptive protest rather than organisation-building. They note that mass membership bureaucracies were not invented by the left!

Piven and Cloward's thesis has been criticised by a number of reviewers. In a 1979 introduction to their books, Piven and Cloward reply to some of the criticisms. But in any case, their ideas are useful in re-examining Australian social struggles. Here I'll use the example of the anti-uranium movement.

Activity by community groups on the uranium issue in Australia peaked in 1977 and 1978, during and after the period of the Ranger Reports (October 1976 and May 1977), the so-called period of 'public debate', the announcement of the government's decision in August 1977, the federal election in December 1977 and the signing of the Ranger agreement at the end of 1978. During this time there was much activity on a local level in organising forums, distributing information and holding protests and demonstrations. Also during this time a national anti-uranium organisational framework was formed.

Since about 1979 the government and corporations seem to have adopted what Tom Uren calls a 'strategy of silence'. Media coverage and public

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interest have declined.

Plans for action in 1979 included national demonstrations, a locally promoted nuclear-free zones campaign, a nationally coordinated statement of defiance campaign, and a nationally coordinated boycott of the ANZ Bank. The latter two campaigns did not eventuate, partly due to holdups at key points. The nuclear-free zones campaign has achieved a considerable measure of success. But the anti-uranium movement has not been very successful in countering the 'strategy of silence'. In addition, many local groups have become less active or defunct.

A person looking at the situation from Piven and Cloward's perspective in early 1979 might have suggested the following sorts of initiatives:

- use of local statements of defiance and other more serious challenges to the uranium laws such as publishing 'restricted information';
- launching of individual boycotts of local branches of the ANZ Bank (rather than relying on central coordination);
- nuclear-free zones campaign;
- a continuation of national demonstrations, but supplemented by many smaller, innovative protests;
- strong encouragement for unions and workers to hold work stoppages, protest strikes and other actions against mining companies and the government;
- local protest initiatives of all sorts, such as disruption of stockholders meetings, of government departments and of mining operations.

These and other actions might have caused enough disruption to create political problems for the government and also sustain anti-uranium activity. One of the most significant direct actions against uranium export since 1979 was the refusal in late 1981 by the Waterside Workers Federation in Darwin—supported by the Seamen's Union and the Transport Workers Union— to handle containers of yellowcake from the Ranger mine. Loading of the yellowcake eventually proceeded following a recommendation by the Australian Council of Trade Unions. The Darwin workers might have been able to maintain an even stronger position had their action been accompanied by many other disruptive protests throughout the country.

Of course with hindsight it is easy to criticise or suggest alternative strategies. Here I have only tried to outline some possible implications of Piven and Cloward's analysis for a particular campaign. In any case, the anti-uranium campaign, while not fully successful, has been far from a failure in slowing Australia's involvement in the nuclear fuel cycle. Nor is the struggle yet over. In addition, many who became activists because of the uranium issue have taken their skills and experience into other campaigns.

Disruptive protest cannot be created by leaders or organisers, nor can it develop unless the social conditions are right. Nor should organisation be ignored in pursuit of 'spontaneity'. The message of Piven and Cloward is this: when changes in the social order create the potential for gains resulting from disruptive protest, activists should try to encourage and stimulate the protest rather than inhibiting it by channelling it into organisation-building.

Since Piven and Cloward's prescription of disruptive protest is aimed at extracting concessions from elites, its relevance to long-term efforts and campaigns aiming towards structural change in society is less clear. But their critique of the mass organisation approach should remind us of the importance at all times of a careful and open-minded assessment of means and ends in social change. □

REFERENCE

Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1979).