Organizing the Unemployed in the Bronx in the 1930s

The things we take for granted now, part of the American way of life, these were revolutionary ideas when we began to demand them in the thirties. We wanted unemployment insurance; we wanted home relief, hot meals for children in schools, and housing for the destitute people living in the city dumps.

In that time, who heard of the eight-hour day? If a man would be hurt on the job, you think the employer would pay a cent to him? Why should he care? There was always another poor man to take his place. Even the idea of a union was in this time a new concept in the world. No one expected decent wages. The others, with the privilege, were born up there. But we were on the bottom. To us, the idea that we had the right to strike was something hard even to imagine.

So what could be done about all this? How could a person, a woman not even five feet tall, change the world?

I'll tell you. It's a good story, because in those days we began to organize. We formed Unemployed Councils. They were spontaneous peoples' organizations and I want you to know about them because I helped to organize them from the first days. In this activity I was already involved before I joined the Communist Party.

We would open an office in the middle of a neighborhood. We'd come in during the morning, make coffee, people would bring doughnuts and we would talk. Suddenly another person would come in and we'd say, "Hi, who are you?"

"I was just laid off."

And you should have heard the shout: "Hooray! Another one laid off. Wonderful."

He would look at us as though we were crazy. Why should we celebrate that he was laid off? For him it meant no wages, no rent, no place to sleep, nothing to eat. So why were we excited? We said, "We're glad you're here. We'll have one more person to distribute leaflets."

This was the way we changed the terrible thing that was happening to this man, and to all of us, into productive action. We got into control of our lives. We were no longer victims.

It's so simple. I used to wonder why other people didn't see it, too. You cannot fail. Basically, failure is impossible; already, just in being together, you have changed the personal tragedy, this despair, this hopelessness, into a collective endeavor.

Our main task was to try to get a congressman to introduce a bill for unemployment insurance. We circulated a petition, house to house, in the tenements of the Bronx.

A typical encounter would go like this: I and another person would enter the building and knock on the first door we came to. Someone, usually a man, would open the door. Just a crack at first. Then, when he saw we were not the landlord, he'd open it wider. I'd say, "We're here circulating a petition asking a congressman to introduce a bill in Congress. We want unemployment insurance and we think we can get the government to give it to us. Is there anybody unemployed \ in this family?"

"Are you kidding? Everybody is unemployed in this family." Or they'd say, "Most of us are unemployed, one is working but he expects to be laid off by the end of the week."

We told them, "We, too, are unemployed workers and we want Congress to pass a bill giving us either jobs or wages." So they'd say, not believing, "You're asking the government to give us money \ without working?" People just couldn't believe we were asking for this.

And we'd answer, "Yes, we're asking the government to give us jobs. If they can't give us jobs, they have to support us." "But you're asking for socialism." "We're asking for jobs or money."

We organized around our basic needs. We could speak very easily to people because we also were working people. I always found it strange when people didn't join us. I used to think about this because to me organization seemed so essential. You wonder, maybe, why I became a Communist. But I used to wonder why everyone did not. Basically, I felt that those who failed to join us had no confidence in themselves or in the fact that we could change the system. They are the ones who say, "We're just poor people. What can we do?" We would hear this when we went about knocking on the doors.

I, on the other hand, when I talked to people, could convince them to struggle against their conditions. I believed in this struggle. That is all it takes to be an organizer. Belief in our power.

Take an example: We felt the one thing the system feared was angry women. We wanted milk for the children. So, we would get twenty or thirty women together. We'd go out early in the morning. We would come into the borough hall. We would demand to speak to an alderman. Each one of us came with a child in the carriage. Nina was three or four years old; she always came with me.

Who could forget it, a sight like this? There was a woman in a red sweater, rolled up at the sleeves. Another one with a kerchief on the head. The faces with a look of determination. And the children, this one in a blue cap the grandma knitted. Nina had a little open face with merry eyes. And we would go stepping together, all the women on the left foot, then all on the right. Singing, chanting: "We want milk. Milk for the children."

We would go about the streets advertising the neighborhood councils. We'd ask people to come and told them to bring whatever they could spare. There was always something to eat in the councils. People would drop in, we'd get them to work on a pamphlet, we would involve them in a conversation. Coming off the street in those days, out of that despair, you can imagine the impact the council made upon them.

The women were organized to monitor the prices of food all the time. If an item became too expensive in a particular store, we immediately went on strike. Again, we came with the children in the carriage. We picketed with the sign: DON'T PATRONIZE THIS GROCERY. THEY ARE CHARGING TOO MUCH FOR BREAD.

These strikes were very successful. Nobody would cross our picket lines.

The same things were happening in Brooklyn, in Manhattan, in Harlem. In Harlem the starvation was legion and soup kitchens couldn't supply the people with enough food. We used to move whatever we could from the council to Harlem.

This struggle of people against their conditions, that is where you find the meaning in life. In the worst situations, you are together with people. If there were five apples, we cut them ten ways and everybody ate. If somebody had a quarter, he went down to the corner and bought some bread and brought it back into the council.

Life changes when you are together in this way, when you are united. You lose the fear of being alone. You cannot solve these problems when you are alone. They become overwhelming. When you are standing, one to one, with an employer, he has all the power and you have none. But together, we felt our strength, and we could laugh. Someone who knew how to sing would start singing. Others would know how to dance. There we were, unemployed people, but we were dancing.

In those years I was happy. Happy, you say? With the unemployment, the evictions, the high prices of food? But that's how it was. And why? In those years I became what I have been all my life since then. And from this maybe comes happiness, what else?

If you're an organizer and you see how successfully people are coming together you feel fulfilled. We were very successful in our activities. We kept prices down, we kept pressure on the congressmen, we were making people conscious of their identity as workers, and we were winning rent strikes....

By that time the Unemployed Councils were well known: our workers were everywhere, leading demonstrations, circulating petitions, speaking on street corners. So we would go into a building, introduce ourselves, and ask the people to organize. We said, "As long as we strike we certainly don't pay rent. Let's say we're striking for three months. That rent will never be paid."

The people listened, the idea appealed to them. We promised that we would fight the evictions and help take care of the people who were thrown out. In those days you would walk down the street and see whole families with their children sitting on the sidewalk surrounded by furniture.

When an entire building was organized and willing to participate in a strike, we formed negotiating committees for the tenants, put up large signs in every window facing the street, and picketed the house. The signs read: RENT STRIKE. DON'T RENT APARTMENTS IN THIS BUILDING.

The landlord, of course, would rather die than give in to the tenants' demands. So the strike began. We knew that one day he would give some eviction notices. But he could never evict everyone. It cost too much.

On the day of the eviction we would tell all the men to leave the building. We knew that the police were rough and would beat them up. It was the women who remained in the apartments, in order to resist. We went out onto the fire escapes and spoke through bullhorns to the crowd that gathered below.

In the Bronx you could get two hundred people together if you just looked up at the sky. As soon as the police came to begin the eviction, we roped off the street and people gathered. The police put machine guns on the roofs, they pointed them down at the people in the street.

We, meanwhile, were standing out on the balcony. I would address the crowd gathered in the street below: "People, fellow workers. We are the wives of unemployed men and the police are evicting us. Today we are being evicted. Tomorrow it will be you. So stand by and watch. What is happening to us will happen to you. We have no jobs. We can't afford food. Our rents are too high. The marshal has brought the police to carry out our furniture. Are you going to let it happen?"

Or sometimes we would address the workers who had been brought to take the furniture: "We are talking to you, you men who have come here to throw out the furniture of unemployed workers. Who are you? You, too, are unemployed men who have had to take this job in order to eat. We don't blame you. You are one of us. We represent the Unemployed Council and last night we made a collection among the unemployed. We have enough money to pay you off. How much are you going to get for evicting an unemployed worker? Five dollars? Six dollars? We have the money for you. Come up here without the police and without the marshal and we will pay you off. Look at the marshal standing there. Is he working? Let him do the work."

And so we would harangue. We could see the men hesitating. We would continue: "We women are standing here with the furniture that is to be evicted. The water is hot in our kettles. The doors are locked. We're not letting you in."

Often, the hired men would come up anyway. Our doors were locked but they would break them in. We were behind those doors, with our kettles. They would grab a piece of furniture on one side and we would grab it on the other. And both would start pulling. Meanwhile we would say: "Here, here is the money. Leave the furniture."

Some would take the money and go. Sometimes we poured the hot water on the men. Sometimes they would hit us. And then we would run out onto the fire escape, grab the bullhorn, and shout to the crowd: "They're hitting us. They're big men and they're hitting us. But we're not going to let them move the furniture. They can't overcome us. We shall win."

Sometimes, they'd get so disgusted with all this fighting and hollering they'd take the furniture from the apartment but leave it on the landing. That was a victory. We'd stay there and wait for the husbands to return and then we'd put the furniture back into the apartment. We'd put a new lock on the door and the

landlord would have to get a new eviction notice. He'd call the marshal and the whole thing would start all over again.

Our fight was successful. The rents came down, the evicted families returned to their apartments, the landlord would stop fighting us. Sometimes we failed and the furniture was carried into the street. Immediately we would cover it with a tarpaulin so it wouldn't get spoiled, and then we'd hold a mass meeting on the furniture, using it as a platform. We were only waiting for the police to leave. As soon as they were gone, the people standing around would pick up the furniture and carry it right back into the building. We'd break the lock, put back the furniture, install a new lock, and the landlord would have to go through the whole procedure another time.

Within two years we had rent control in the Bronx. That's the way it was in those days.