

not be the expert, but more of a collaborator. My real focus right now is on how we build power. What does it mean to build power, and how do we use issues as a tool, and not just as ends in themselves?

I facilitated a meeting recently where we were talking about the political climate and how do you really build power over the long term? And this woman had this to say, "Well, it seems to me we have to learn to realize that a loss can be a victory." And we're so accustomed to saying that we passed a piece of legislation, or we won a campaign, and sometimes losing it can actually be the best thing. But that's hard, because especially when you're fresh at organizing, you want that win. That's why I think the mentoring is so important. And the other piece of it is, if you're really organizing for systemic change, then what you're asking for is probably not going to be winnable on a short-term basis. You may figure out short-term wins that are building towards that, but ultimately—I mean, we can learn from the Right: how many times have they put stuff out there and we said, "You guys are crazy," and ten years later, it was law?



Disappointments Are Inevitable

We asked the organizers to recall their moments of greatest disappointment. What failures or defeats were the hardest to take?

Disappointment comes from a variety of sources

Part of being in organizing is that you lose a lot. Early on I remember an article, "What do you do when you win?" Organizations are so used to losing that when they win they're kind of caught off guard. "Oh my God, what do we do now?"

—Steve Bradberry

Some disappointments come from the nature of the work—organizing doesn't always lead to the kind of change we had hoped for.

Kind of a big, general frustration is that work at the grassroots level is intense and involved, and it can be so painstakingly slow to achieve what seem like really small victories, when people with a lot of power, money and influence can walk into an office and pretty much get exactly what they want in one visit. It seems like a real uphill battle for the purpose of a positive change.

—Brett Kelter

These are not easy fights. Certainly, I think the mood of this country over the past couple of years has become much more anti-democratic and more greedy. I'm finding that the work is becoming more difficult. That's not easy work and you do run into defeats. You get knocked down, and the wind knocked out of you, and you let that disappointment turn to defeat. Then you figure out, "Okay, that's the reaction. They're making us react. What are we going to do next?"

—Paul Cromwell

*Some frustrations are with the organizers themselves:
if only I had done a better job. . . .*

Most of my disappointments are stuff that I've failed to do. I put on an energy conference and didn't do follow-through. And then it's too late, and you've got to start all over again because the follow-through wasn't done. I had excuses of being too busy or whatever, but that's always a threat, that you're not going to follow through. That was huge.

—DeAnna Woolston

My biggest disappointment was not building an organization in West Virginia. I basically spent three years being a campaign director, pulling people together and running a series of campaigns. But then realizing that in fact, I had pulled together a group of people and we'd won some things, and we'd raised some money, but I'd not built an organization. There wasn't a group of leaders at the center of the organization.

—Allen Cooper

In the very beginning, I had a bad experience, which we all had to learn from. This was in regard to the tailings pit nearby the wild and scenic Rio Grande [in New Mexico]. We started proposing some solutions to the issue. One of the solutions we [Amigos Bravos] proposed was to increase the size of the existing tailings facility. Quite a number of the activists in the community didn't like that solution. They were the very people who we needed to be in alliance with in order to win the fight. Although we managed to work through our differences and ended up winning the larger fight, which is to say we saved the Guadalupe Mountains, the incident really wounded us as an organization in that community.

We had to admit that we'd made a mistake. About five years later we had a strategic planning session for the organization and some representatives from that community came back and said, "Look, we need your help, we want you to come back." We had done a great deal of outreach work in the interim years. We respectfully avoided the community where we'd run into trouble but slowly made friends with some of the individuals and sought out their counsel and advice on other issues, and provided them with public opportunities to speak about the issues that mattered to them. When the community came to us asking for assistance, it was tremendously gratifying. We came back a lot wiser and able to be a lot more effective.

—Brian Shields

And sometimes you just plain get beat.

This is tough work. We have been pushing for a living wage ordinance here in Jacksonville [Florida] to ensure that city workers and workers contracted with the city are paid—not a minimum wage—but a living wage, which

the Living Wage Coalition here in Jacksonville determined would be an hour with health insurance, \$10.19 an hour without health insurance. We have a city that is in a frenzy right now of greed and deal-making, city incentives in order to get ready for the 2005 Super Bowl. Politicians are stepping all over themselves to make sure that businesses in town are getting tax breaks and government handouts. And yet they are ignoring my mind, the lowest paid workers.

On Friday, there was a special subcommittee that had been set up to examine this living wage ordinance. They had heard from not only people who were extremely familiar with all the research but we also had people testify on behalf of the ordinance, representing over twenty organizations in town. Only five people spoke against it. The research, including the city council's own researcher, brought in reports that the post-studies have shown none of the dire predictions about living wage ordinances around the country before they were passed have come true. Not only have these living wage ordinances directly benefited the



Living wage campaigns across the country face obstacles, yet keep rising up.

involved, but they have also made very good business sense in terms of increased worker productivity and morale. It's good business sense in terms of worker absenteeism and turnover.

We had all of those testimonials and the City Council committee voted three to one not to recommend it [the living wage ordinance]. It has to do with ideology, certainly not with a price tag.

—Paul Cromwell

In Alabama, the failure of the tax reform plan in 1992 was devastating. I mean it was one of those where the members had to pick me back up and say, "Look, we knew we were in this for the long haul." I still had hopes on the last night of the legislature up until 8:00. I thought we were still going to be able to get it through the Senate. And it ultimately fell apart. We had a lot invested in that. I was the only staffer at the time. I had driven 4,000 miles in January doing workshops. I did twenty-eight workshops on tax reform that winter in church basements and such.

Our role in that effort was to address how this comprehensive tax-reform package was going to affect poor people. Business had its reasons for being at the table, and education had its reasons for being at the table, but that was our role. Nobody below the poverty line was going to pay income taxes, if that plan had passed. And to this day we have the highest income tax burden in the country on a family of three at the poverty line. It's about \$333 a year. You multiply that by the number of years since 1992 and that's how much money we've taken out of the pockets of low-income people because it didn't pass. So it's going to be hard to rest until we pass something to fix that.

—Kimble Forrister

The Living Wage Campaign got struck down by the state supreme court [in Louisiana]. Certainly that was a disappointment, because it was a great campaign. What happened was we had an election in the city of New Orleans to raise the minimum wage because we are home-rule chartered. People have the right to vote this type of thing into being.

We had a coalition that was really great. We got all these organizations for a meeting we were having. We had people come out and they were speaking out on behalf of the minimum wage. "Why is the minimum wage a good thing?" You had labor, community people, and churches. We split everybody up in small groups; there were people who wanted to work strictly with the churches and people who wanted to work strictly with the students. The members led the conversations. Then the people came back and said, "This is what we're going to do." They had the whole list with names. That was a tremendous thing.

The Living Wage Campaign, as a whole, just had so many pieces to it. You couldn't open your mouth without us shoving living wage down it. When the electoral thing started out we had one city council person,

one mayoral candidate, and everyone else who was running for office was against the living wage. By the time it was over all the city council candidates were for the living wage and there was only one mayoral candidate who was against it. We turned that whole thing around.

So we won at the election almost two to one, an overwhelming Then it went to court because businesses were saying, "It's unconstitutional because there was a law that had been passed saying local municipalities could not raise their minimum wage above the federal level."

The first judge agreed with us, that we had the right to vote into a higher minimum wage. Then it went to the state supreme court. A state supreme court one judge ruled in our favor. The rest of the judges all over the board. They were not in unison. They had various reasons to overturn it. So that was a disappointment.

—Steve Bradberry

The issue that I worked the hardest on and was probably the most passionate about was trying to change the makeup of our Oil and Gas Commission. In Colorado, our Oil and Gas Commission is made up of seven members appointed by the governor, and six of them are currently working for the industry they're regulating. And so their mandate to public health, safety, welfare, and the environment is often times overruled because they want to benefit the industry and get the resources out of the ground as quickly as possible, as economically as possible.

We've been trying to pass this conflict-of-interest legislation that takes them from working for the industry they're regulating. It was exciting this year just because the speaker of the house happened to be the representative from the area that was being most impacted. We had a person to introduce the bill, high profile. And we made it more high profile by going to Denver, which, for us, is a little bit of a hike—it's a four-hour drive. We did some events on the capitol steps to bring attention to the fact that gas and oil drilling wasn't without impact and was truly affecting people in their homes. Wells can be built 150 feet from your house, so we set up a mock rig 150 feet from the State House, big fanfare, big signs. How do you enjoy having a well 150 feet from your house? Got a lot to do around that!

We also did some other things like had a tour with some street theater with a hen-house theme to it. I was running around in a chicken suit telling people that I care about and that are passionate but still laughing a lot. I combined pretty much most of the things that I love: humor and passion and friendship and working for something you believe in.

We ended up getting it passed through the House on first and second reading and they decided somehow to do a third reading. In the meantime the oil and gas industry flew in thirteen different people who were lobbyists and had a lot of influence and money, and hired an additional nine lobbyists. So pretty soon you couldn't even walk in the hallways because

it was so filled with suits. They defeated it by one vote. They were able to turn just enough people. It was disheartening to have our democracy so easily sold out and have what was clearly an issue of public interest so easily manipulated by money.

But that was also a victory because we really did get a huge amount of media and really pushed the issue from something that a handful of folks understood to something that people had at least heard about.

—Matt Sura

One of the first campaigns that I was involved in taking the lead on was a campaign that we were working with our young people on. I had just started at SWOP [Southwest Organizing Project in New Mexico]. It was about getting a policy changed, but the bigger issue was about how young people—particularly young people of color—are being criminalized and stereotyped and scapegoated.

One of the ways that we were addressing this was to get this policy changed at the local mall that said that young people aged twenty-one and under could not walk in groups of five or more during the week or three or more during the weekends. So we thought, that's something that we ought to be able to get changed. We did all this research, and we had actions, and we got cards signed, and we did a boycott. We did all this stuff, and at some point we filed a lawsuit, because our feeling was that it was being enforced in a discriminatory manner. Only young people of color were being targeted by this particular policy—like ninety-five percent. What would happen was they'd get taken into the hallways of the mall, back into the offices that they have kind of hidden. They'd get photographed, and patted down, and often cited with criminal trespassing, and all this kind of stuff. So ninety-five percent of the people who had that done to them were Hispanic.

We filed the suit in federal court, lost, and then appealed, and the court of appeals basically said that Hispanics don't exist as a class. We were at the point where we could go to the Supreme Court, where the chances aren't good and we could get our case hurt. And then I got a letter from the mall, and it was like, "Okay, we're about to sue *you* for all this money. But we won't, if you agree that you won't appeal this." So we had to agree not to. That was a tough one.

Well, the policy didn't end up getting changed with regards to the mall thing, but the practice of detaining young people and photographing them and citing them with criminal trespassing has stopped. That was part of the settlement. So that was a victory.

—Robby Rodriguez

Sometimes failure comes when victory seems closest.

There've been a lot of disappointments, of course, and most of the disappointments have to do with the inability to gain enough power to

push an issue over the top. And it seems like they are more bitter w actually come close, because if you really get nowhere, you don't rai hope within yourself that you're actually going to win.

I remember the first year I was here, out-of-state waste was a bi because North Dakota had a number of proposals for out-of-state v landfills that had surfaced. And we were trying to get a federal bill t would give our states and communities the ability to regulate out-o waste. A federal judge had decided that this is interstate commerce, that states can't regulate it unless Congress gives them the authority a pretty big issue in the '93-'94 Congress.

The first time I went to Washington to lobby, in the spring of 19 was on this issue with a bunch of wonderful people from all over wi Western Organization of Resource Councils, including two of my o members. And we managed, by the end of 1994, to get bills passed i the House and the Senate, but it was late in the session, the bills wer quite different, and we couldn't get a concurrence, and at the last mi we failed to get that bill passed. That fall, then, leadership of both hc changed. The new chair of the House committee which would deal v had something like thirteen out-of-state waste dumps in his district, we've never been able to get anywhere with this bill since then. So, i very bitter disappointment that we could get a bill through both hou Congress, but not get it passed.

—Mark Trechock

One of the frustrations with organizing and trying to create long-ter change is that many people come with this impression that the gover somehow is going to solve the problem. That if we just either ask the: we pass a law that somehow that will be enough to make it better. I h long-term frustration with the fact that we passed the national Surfa Mining and Reclamation Act. Citizens from all over the country, incl out here in the West, came together and lobbied their Congressional and others to try to control the coal industry and the damage they ha created both in Appalachia and the Midwest and other states, and we attempting to do it out here in the West. That was an incredible effor you think about citizens taking on a powerful industry like that, to ac get the Congress to pass an act to regulate it. It took many, many yea get that done and a lot of perseverance—our members working in coi with people from Kentucky and Tennessee and West Virginia, Indian Pennsylvania, all these other states.

I think it was an incredible experience for our folks. When Presid Carter signed the Surface Mining Act in 1977, people were very prou of that. But it's not over with when you pass this law that says, "You w reclaim; you will not leave high walls; you will not have acid mine dra Well, guess what? Twenty-five, thirty years later we have mountain-to removal, which is one of the most disgusting practices on the face of t

earth, and you still have acid mine drainage, and you still have companies that are not complying with the law. People have to recognize that in order to make this happen you have to stay at it, which is one of the reasons why I think community organizations are so important, because it's not just passing a law, it's implementing it. It's the demand that they enforce this with the companies—and that goes on to this day in terms of the frustration of enforcement of the Surface Mining Act. It also reminds me that for long-term change we must work to build power to the point of governance. That is, until our leaders who remain accountable to their communities are part of the governance of their communities, we will not completely succeed.

—Patrick Sweeney

*And other times, opportunities can be snatched from the jaws of defeat.
That's where real organizing comes in.*

Losing is always disappointing. We just lost a huge campaign yesterday. But I think I learn the most from losing, so I am actually excited. I'm like, "Now we have an opportunity, especially because our members are upset, to take that energy and focus it into something constructive—into a more aggressive and more assertive campaign that challenges people a little bit more than we have in the past." Because, as you know, it's really hard to get people to hold a sign, even, and to become a little more radical in their thinking about strategy. And when they're dealt a blow like this, I think it presents us with a window of opportunity to help people think about some strategies that they normally wouldn't think about that will help us win. So I'm excited about that.

—Aaron Browning

Profile: Jerome Scott

Educating a Movement



Jerome Scott is the Executive Director of Project South in Atlanta. He was interviewed in May 2003.

I grew up in Detroit, Michigan. Soon after graduating from high school, I enlisted in the military. Soon after that I found myself in Vietnam.

Vietnam was the place that totally changed my life. Before going to Vietnam I was basically just a person that didn't really think. But when I was in Vietnam someone asked me, "Why are you here?" And I couldn't answer that question. Ever since that point, I determined that no matter where I was doing or where I was, if anybody ever asked me what I was doing there, I would have a reason for it. It was that situation in Vietnam that sent me on the course of becoming an activist.

When I got back I worked in the auto plant for Chrysler and was a founding member of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. The League started in the middle '60s and lasted to 1974. During that period of time we used to have workers come to a Sunday meeting. Up to 400 workers would come to a Sunday meeting. We had to meet on Sunday because back then everyone was working at least six days a week. So only when it was a Sunday, it was their only day off.

Just about everybody in the League had to learn how to organize and how to emerge as a leader or what good are you? So I think that process forced me to learn how to organize and how to develop other leaders.

I was involved in a wildcat strike in the early '70s, and was fired as a result of that wildcat strike. I was basically blacklisted from the auto industry.

Then I moved to Chicago for three years, working on some house stuff on the west side of Chicago. Then I got an opportunity to move because I was working for a printing company in Chicago that opened an office here in Atlanta. I'd always wanted to move south. I'd never lived