

Bridging
THE
Class Divide

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*And Other Lessons for
Grassroots Organizing*
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With a Foreword by Howard Zinn

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PPP: Creating Our Own Model for Social Change

THE STORY OF the Piedmont Peace Project is the story of people creating a new model for social change based on the perspective of low-income and working-class folks. It's a story of mill workers, farmers, service workers, and others finding their voices and becoming leaders in their own communities. It's the story of a vision—the vision I had when I first knew I wanted to be an organizer—becoming a reality. It's the story of going from “I” to “we” as my vision would become a shared reality built on the ideas, work, and inspiration of the people of the Piedmont. I begin here with *my* experiences, but soon I will talk about *our* work. “We” are Denise, Susan, George, Jesse, Joan, Laura, and Connie, Tatia, and other PPP staff who have done the organizing work. “We” are the folks in the communities that PPP serves. The lessons learned during PPP's early years became the organizing principles for “our” model.

When I moved back to North Carolina in 1984, I was already thinking about how to start building a local peace and

justice group. Because of my personal experiences, I wanted to create something different, a group that honored low-income people and low-income leaders. In Charleston, I had thought I would discover the something different I was looking for by working with community organizations that worked with low-income people. I had learned a lot from that experience, but still I'd found it disempowering at times and was constantly trying to figure out what was the difference I needed.

As soon as I'd moved back to North Carolina, I called the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in Greensboro. They offered me \$600 to pay for a peace conference in my home area, which seemed a good way to start. In February of 1984 I put together a list of ministers in the area who might be sympathetic to what I wanted to do and sat down to call them.

I asked the ministers if they would play a role in organizing a conference on issues of the nuclear arms race and the military budget. The first ten I called were not interested. I finally reached one minister who said he had had very negative reactions when he had tried to do something similar in the area and in his church. He told me to forget it—that what I wanted to do was impossible. But I kept calling, and after speaking to fifty or sixty people, I found eight ministers who were willing to meet to talk about putting on some kind of program that looked at these issues. The minister who had told me to forget it called me back and said, “Well, did you ever get anything going?” I said, “Well, yes, we are going to have a meeting. Would you like to come?” So he ended up coming too. We held the first meeting in Kannapolis with ministers from about four different denominations. We made up a temporary name for our group: the “Southern Piedmont Interfaith Peacemakers.” We set the conference date for early summer.

By connecting with these ministers, all of whom were white, I really hoped to meet the lay people in their churches. I wanted a diverse group of people—not just ministers—but I knew the best way to get to these folks would be through churches since we live in such a religious area (sometimes referred to as the “Buckle of the Bible Belt”). I wanted to connect with folks who were interested in peace and justice issues, so I worked to find them by doing programs within the churches. Through the networks of ministers I taught Sunday School classes, did presentations for adult education programs, and spoke to women’s church groups. Slowly, I began to connect with people who had an interest in and wanted to understand more about the nuclear arms race, the military budget, U.S. military involvement in Central America, and the economic justice questions raised by the slashing of funds for social programs. One of these people was Susan Plyler, who would later become one of the first PPP staff members. Like myself, Susan had grown up in the Piedmont, the daughter of mill workers. She had been interested in peace and economic justice for years and had tried to bring discussions into her church, but she had never before had the chance to connect her beliefs with her own community. Susan came to the first conference, and as soon as we met we knew we shared a vision.

I also began to set up “house meetings” based on the Tupperware party model. After I made a presentation at a church, I would tell folks that I was interested in coming to people’s homes to talk more. In their homes, I would usually show a video, talk about cuts in social programs and the increasing military budget, and give people a chance to write letters to our representatives and make commitments to future work. Many people would take the first step of writing a letter

and agreeing to be part of a telephone network for lobbying. A few people made a bigger commitment to become part of a group.

While I was beginning to build this Southern Piedmont peace organization, I was also working as a paid organizer. I had learned about the Carolina Community Project, a statewide community organizing effort, and that they had some job openings. I had applied and was hired as an organizer with a voter registration project. My job was to organize coalitions in several cities to register and to get people out to vote who had traditionally not been involved in the democratic process. Through this work, I began to meet and work with folks from the black community in my local area. Voter registration became a way to enter into the black community and begin to build connections to peace and justice issues. I went to the Black Caucus and NAACP meetings to organize coalitions to work on voter registration in the local communities. I was able to connect with individuals, mostly women, within these groups, who were willing to work together with the small group of white people that I had begun to form.

In the beginning it was difficult. Black people didn’t necessarily want me there and didn’t trust me as a white person. I remembered what I had learned from Septima Clark and I worked to build relationships, just going back and talking to people and going to meetings until I made connections with individuals who trusted me enough to try to work together. I think the trust was built through the sharing of our similar backgrounds and helped by the fact that I talked from the very beginning about the difficulties of trying to make a multiracial group work and acknowledged my ignorance of how to do this but also expressed my desire to work at it.

By the end of 1984, we had built a small network of white

people who were interested in issues of peace and justice, and approximately one hundred people turned out for the first public meeting that we held. I had also begun to organize a network and base in the black community. We had already begun lobbying and drawing connections between the military budget and issues of health care and housing. I began to imagine building a broader coalition in the area but felt I didn't have the necessary funding or other support.

By the middle of 1984, I was contacted by peace activists in the Boston area. They were frustrated at not being able to have an impact on peace issues at the national level. Their U.S. senators and representatives were already voting right on peace issues; they wanted to find a way to influence congresspeople whose votes could be changed. The eighth congressional district of North Carolina was on their target list. When they found out about my work through one of the national peace organizations, they called to ask me to get folks in North Carolina to lobby our senators and representatives on peace issues. I began to travel to Boston to give talks. As people there got to know me and heard about how successful our lobbying work was, a few individuals began to host fund-raising parties for our Piedmont peace group. The relationship that sprang up between us North Carolinians and the middle- and upper-income folks in the Boston suburbs would become one of the most unusual parts of our new organizing model. We developed our own approach to fund-raising, one that challenged middle-class progressive folks (and donors) on their own classism and racism.

Our new supporters in Boston encouraged me to apply for foundation funding. In November of 1984, I wrote a proposal (actually, I wrote an outline and got help writing a proposal)

describing the organizing base I'd built in North Carolina and my plans to expand on it. The foundations needed a name, so I called the group the Piedmont Peace Project. Piedmont was the region we lived in, and I called it a peace project because, even though it wasn't like a traditional peace group, I defined peace to include peace and justice within our own communities. Foundations also wanted the group to have a board of directors, but I stood my ground against this requirement. It was way too early for us to have a formal board. I had decided that when we did have a board it would need to be at least two-thirds low-income and two-thirds people of color and two-thirds women. We didn't have enough active folks to make this possible. Also, our folks were still new to this work; asking them to take on the responsibility of a board member was just pushing too fast. I convinced the foundations that it was okay for us to have an informal steering committee structure. At the same time, we had a sponsor organization, Carolina Community Project, which I'd worked for previously and whose board oversaw our finances and staff. This was the beginning of an ongoing process of PPP working with foundations to clarify the ways that they can be more helpful in organizing low-income and working-class folks.

As our steering committee worked together building PPP, we brought to our folks' attention the national issues which had an effect on our area. One of these issues was military intervention in El Salvador. In those early years of PPP, one of the things we did when we were talking to folks was to carry around a little brown towel that I bought in Kannapolis village. When people started to talk about those "damn foreigners," we pulled out this towel and said, "You know, you're right. We bought this towel in the local store in Kannapolis

and, you're right, it's made by a foreigner. But, you know what? That worker only makes a couple dollars a day and that worker's children are going hungry. There is no money to keep his children in school and no grievance process for protesting terrible working conditions." And we'd say, "Workers can't protest because the military would be sent in by the government to stop them from trying to get better working conditions and better pay. And the worker who made this towel works for an American textile mill that closed down here and moved to El Salvador." Then we would point out that the U.S. government was supporting the military in El Salvador for the sake of American businesses. People really understood that. In ten minutes, we could have them moving from cussing the foreigners who they believed had taken their jobs to understanding that the U.S. government was responsible for protecting U.S. investments in those countries and giving the U.S. companies tax breaks to move there. We used that towel as a way to begin to get people to see that the issue was not about working people taking each other's jobs, but it was about capitalism and the U.S. government. Then we would get people to write letters to their congresspeople asking the U.S. government not to support the government of El Salvador. We learned that it was easy for working folks to make the connections between local, national, and international issues once they got information in language that made sense to them.

Those first two years of Piedmont Peace Project were really about working in both the black and white communities and beginning to figure out ways to link the two together. It was a period of learning how to talk to low-income white folks about issues of peace and justice and finding ways to connect

them in. The way that we began to reach folks—black and white—was going door to door: going out in the community and just talking to people. We would go into people's homes and ask them what issues they were concerned about. For some people it was farm issues, for some it was social security and disability cuts. For some it was problems like the lack of roads and sewer systems. We would talk about what they were concerned about, and then we would begin to talk about the U.S. military budget—about how our tax dollars were going to support unnecessary weapons while critical programs were being cut. This door-to-door work became our method of doing community outreach whenever we began organizing in a new community. Later on it also gave us a way to develop written materials using the actual words of people in our communities.

As our small nucleus of low-income people grew, we were also able to bring in middle-class people. Most of these folks came in through the churches where I spoke. Some had an interest in peace work and wanted to be a part of a group. This was new information to others, and they wanted to learn more. We began to talk to them about the broader connections between peace and justice, pointing to the problems that were going on in our community. That is how we first began to connect peace and the military budget to economic and social justice.

As our organization grew in size, we began to have more of an impact. When we started PPP, our congressman, Bill Hefner, had a zero percent voting record on peace issues and only about a 30 percent voting record on social justice issues (as rated by the Council for a Livable World and the AFL-CIO). We lobbied him from the very beginning on the issues

we were concerned about—housing, health care, child care, education—and we talked to him about the military budget.

For instance, in 1985, we lobbied against severe cuts recommended to social security and disability and health care funds. We organized four different groups to visit Congressman Bill Hefner, all on the same day. The first group was the peace group. They went in and talked to Hefner about the military budget and urged him not to cut social security disability. They specifically mentioned the MX missile and recommended cutting money for it in order to fund social security and other programs. Then a group of low-income white folks that we had worked with, mostly farmers, went to Hefner's office to talk about issues they were concerned about, including social security, farm subsidies, and the military budget. They also recommended cutting funds for the MX missile. The third group that went in to see the congressman was an African American group. They talked about housing, health care, and educational opportunities for the youth in their communities and concluded by saying, "We don't want you to vote for the MX missile. Use the money to invest in our communities." Finally, in came a group of disabled folks who wanted to talk to Hefner specifically about cuts in the social security disability program. When Hefner said there wasn't enough money for this program, the group said, "Well you are voting to spend money on the MX missile, why don't you cut that?" This was the fourth time the MX missile had been criticized by voters in one day. Hefner just put his head down on the table. He couldn't believe that all these voters were complaining to him about the MX missile. When the vote to cut funds to the MX missile came up a few weeks later, Hefner, who had previously supported the missile, voted against it. As

we learned to lobby in new and creative ways, Congressman Hefner began to change his voting patterns. In PPP's second year, the number of people we registered and got to vote exceeded the congressman's winning margin—and believe me, we never let him forget it. Congressman Hefner's voting record has moved to as high as 83 percent on peace issues and 98 percent on social justice issues.

We could feel early on that we were doing something new and exciting in our community. But our activities were also very threatening to traditional leaders. Because of our success, we were becoming more visible. As a result we began to encounter some frightening opposition. Some of the ministers who had been quite supportive and had let us have meetings in their churches began to be pressured by individuals in their congregations not to allow us to meet there. There was some organizing against us in the churches. Then more threatening things began to happen. At times, people would actually disrupt our meetings, and others would stand out in the parking lot writing down the license plate numbers of folks who came to our meetings. At one meeting, we sponsored a program where three Mothers of the Disappeared from Central America (*Madres De Los Desaparecidos*) were to speak. When they began their presentation, a man came in and started screaming that the women were communists. He told people in our audience that they had better get their names off our sign-up list. A man in the audience, who was clearly a plant, stomped up to the front of the church, grabbed our guest list, and very dramatically marked his name off. It was quite a performance. The speakers had to leave without getting to make their full presentation. They were very shaken and frightened. The experience was very intimidating and demoralizing for all

of us who were present. Some people decided they could no longer participate in our group, not because they disagreed with our views, but because they were afraid of the consequences.

The trouble continued. Soon we started experiencing more difficulties in finding meeting places. The library wouldn't let us meet in the public meeting room because they said we were "too political"—even though other religious and conservative groups met there regularly. Our office was ransacked and files were stolen. A church allowed us office space, only to have to ask us to leave after intense opposition from members in the congregation. Finally we moved our office back into the trailer where I lived with my mother.

In addition to this direct opposition to the PPP organization, white folks who were PPP members experienced a lot of pressure to quit the group. Some of that pressure was direct. Employers, co-workers, and community leaders pushed them to drop out of PPP or face being ostracized or fired. Some of the pressure was indirect. Members felt their family and friends didn't approve of PPP. They worried they would no longer be welcome in their own community if they continued to support PPP.

In 1987, after a particularly violent attack against us, a lot of people left the organization. I still cannot describe this time in detail for fear of jeopardizing others. Nearly all the middle-class people who had worked with us left. That hurt a lot. For a long time their abandonment made me distrust middle-class folks. I thought they would remain committed to social change only as long as it was safe and easy. While later I would change my thinking, my distrust of middle-class supporters changed the way we did outreach and organizing for several years.

After the violence, the Piedmont Peace Project went "underground" in 1987. We did outreach only to low-income and working-class communities. We organized only through "word of mouth." We held no public meetings, never publicized our meeting places, and often met in different places, usually in churches. Some ministers let us meet in their churches, even though they received lots of personal opposition from church members. Others allowed us to meet as long as it was kept secret. We had informal committees that decided on the direction of our work, but we did not have a formal board of directors or membership. It was a discouraging period for PPP. In time, though, we realized we were actually building a more powerful organization while working "underground." Those who remained were even more strongly committed to the vision of PPP. We continued our door-to-door work and voter registration and education. We held leadership trainings where we talked about ourselves as low-income people and people of color being the leaders in our own communities. We continued to lobby Congressman Bill Hefner and to affect his voting record on peace and social justice issues. We began to realize that there was a positive side to all the middle-class people leaving. Their departure gave us working-class members the chance to find our own power without the kind of social barriers that I had faced in Charleston when I tried to work in middle-class groups.

During the time PPP was "underground," Susan Plyler left to go to college. In her place, we hired Jesse Wimberley, a native of Moore County who lived on the small farm his family had owned for four generations. Through Jesse, our work began to spread south to other counties into the Sandhills of North Carolina. Jesse worked out of his house, which had no phone, electricity, or running water. To set up his office, we

had to install a phone and convert an answering machine to run off a truck battery.

The fall of 1988 brought PPP a chance to use the power and influence we had built over the last four years. SANE/Freeze, a national peace organization, had been focusing their primary work on the test ban treaty and the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative, or Star Wars, as peace movement folks called it. Along with some other local groups, PPP was interested in having the national peace organization focus on cutting military spending and funding human needs.

Seventeen PPP members attended the 1988 SANE/Freeze Conference and lobbied others to support our platform. We stood together to speak in favor of our platform, saying to the conference participants that we felt a focus on funding human needs would build a broader movement that would allow us a better chance to win fights on particular weapons issues. The members of the conference voted to make our issues—cutting military spending and funding human needs—the priority issues for SANE/Freeze.

As a result of our success at the SANE/Freeze Conference, our group decided that after two years in hiding it was time for the Piedmont Peace Project to come out from underground. The connections we had made with other people in the peace movement—middle-class people—who cared about what we were doing and the difficulties we faced also encouraged us to become a visible force in our community again. Though we had lost local middle-class support, we had a strong relationship with activists in the Boston area who were now helping us raise enough funds to cover half of our annual budget. Peace movement leaders all over the country knew and respected our work.

We decided to mark the end of being underground by holding a large community event, which we scheduled for a Sunday, April 14, 1989. We invited Reverend Joseph Lowery, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to speak at our event. I was feeling proud of PPP's growth and optimistic about our future. So confident in fact that the staff and volunteers were handling this major event by themselves while I was away on a fund-raising trip. Just days before the event, however, one of our organizers discovered that the Ku Klux Klan was planning to demonstrate against us. Fearing violence, we called the local police chief who told us he would not be able to provide security for us. When Reverend Lowery's staff got the word that the Klan would be demonstrating at the event, they notified us that they didn't think Lowery should come because it would be too dangerous. I faxed Reverend Lowery saying, "If you abandon us now, just when we are trying to come out from underground—when people thought they could be a visible presence—if you step back now, it will be a disaster for us." We promised to hire Lowery a personal bodyguard and immediately set to work raising the money to pay for one. We also called the Justice Department asking for federal marshals, but the Justice Department claimed that they couldn't provide any security unless there was an "active threat of violence." So we got on the telephone to folks in the peace movement, asking them to contact their congresspeople with requests that the Justice Department provide us security. The Justice Department got so tired of hearing about us that someone in their offices called my mother on her personal phone line and told her to get me to stop having people call them because there was nothing they could do unless there was an active threat of violence. My mother conveyed their

message, but we kept calling anyway. Finally, Ted Kennedy's and Ron Dellums's offices got involved and called the Justice Department. Federal marshals were sent to provide security for the PPP.

In fact, a lot of federal marshals were sent to provide security for the PPP in Kannapolis on April 14, 1989. They probably outnumbered the Klanspeople. The Justice Department even sent an undercover woman marshal to sing in the PPP Gospel Choir—which didn't quite work out the way they had intended. Most of our choir is black, and the woman marshal was white, which would have called some attention to her. What really sunk her though was her dress. The choir had decided that everybody should wear black or white. It was the Sunday after Easter, and all the women had saved their new black or white Easter dresses—hadn't worn them on Easter Sunday—for this event. That gives you an idea of how important this Sunday was for our members. Well, the undercover federal marshal showed up in a polka-dotted blue and white dress. The only thing to do was stick her behind the curtain.

The PPP had rented the auditorium of the local high school for our event, and the school permitted the Klan members to be on the school lawn, right where people attending the event had to walk by. Some wore their robes, and most carried Confederate flags and signs. I remember one of their signs. It read "April 14—James Earl Ray Day." The Klan members screamed obscenities and chanted threats. Even though the federal marshals were present, many people were frightened away—especially white folks, many of whom had spent hours helping organize the event.

Still, we did not let the Klan stop us, and our April 14 event was a big success! Reverend Lowery spoke that day about how

national and international issues affect the lives of low-income people, and, especially, about the need for blacks and whites to work together. Black and white working folks, Lowery said, were so busy fighting over paper boats in the mud puddle while the fat cats were laughing and had taken the yacht and gone to Bermuda.

The PPP came out from underground stronger than ever. We had not let the Klan stop us. The head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was excited by and impressed with our organization. We had a unique relationship with middle-class supporters in several states, especially with our group of supporters in Boston. We were registering voters in record numbers and increasing voter turnout to 80 to 90 percent in the Cabarrus County communities where we had been organizing. We felt ready to use our power to make concrete changes in the low-income communities we served.

Two new people joined the PPP staff in the year after we came out from underground. Connie Leeper, a black woman who grew up in the mill town of Kannapolis, the daughter of mill workers, became an organizer in Cabarrus County. A single mother, Connie had worked at the Kannapolis mill for many years. And George Friday, a black woman who had grown up in the nearby milltown of Gastonia, also joined the staff. George had worked for national peace and justice organizations in Washington, D.C. She came back home to run PPP's voter registration, get-out-the-vote program.

After the PPP was visible again, one of our first major organizing campaigns took place in the Midway community in the town of Aberdeen in Moore County. Midway was typical of many communities in our area—a very small, poor black community where over 80 percent of the houses were below

living standards. Midway is located in the middle of Aberdeen—we call it the hole in the doughnut—and although Aberdeen totally surrounds Midway, Midway was not considered part of the town. The town officials of Aberdeen refused to annex Midway because they said it was too poor. As a result, the people in Midway could not get city water and sewer or other services. Aberdeen would not pick up their trash, so people buried their trash in their yards or burned it. Aberdeen would not respond to their fires or their medical emergencies. People had died because the rescue squad, which was one mile away, wouldn't respond to people's calls for help from Midway.

After talking to several people in the Midway community and identifying the community leaders, PPP worked with the leaders to pull together a meeting to talk to folks about what they wanted for their community. Minnie Ray, an elderly black woman who lived in the community, worked to turn out people for the meeting. Only four or five people showed up, and everyone, including the leaders, seemed depressed about being unable to do anything. Of course people were interested in annexation and water and sewer services and upgrading their housing, but mostly people had given up on Midway. In fact, at that time, if you asked the children in Midway where they were from, they would claim another community.

The long-term goal of the Midway group was to get a community development block grant to upgrade the houses and to persuade Aberdeen to annex Midway. But we began by asking the group to set some smaller “winnable” goals. Folks decided that an intermediate step would be to get dumpsters in the community so they wouldn't have to continue to bury their trash in their yards. It took more than two months for

PPP to organize a group to go down to the town council and demand a dumpster for the Midway community. People would not go—either because they were too afraid of challenging people in power or because they felt it wouldn't make a difference. Now, our organizer knew the mayor, and he could have called and probably would have got the dumpster much quicker. But it was absolutely essential that the folks in Midway do it for themselves. Once the community got the dumpster, we had a big party to celebrate.

Once the dumpster was acquired, the whole Midway community pulled together and began a major campaign for community development block grants. Representatives from Midway and PPP made trips to Raleigh, our state capital, as well as to Washington, D.C., where we held a national press conference and visited our elected representatives. We brought to a major press conference in Washington a huge wooden missile made by peace activists in Charlotte, North Carolina, which turned into a house when you opened it. We showed how money from the military budget could be used for our community's needs. We also brought with us six-foot report cards which rated our representatives on their votes about housing which would benefit Midway as well as other communities. After we received national press coverage and were featured in a public television documentary called *The Rage for Democracy* (which aired in April 1992), other people in the surrounding communities became aware of the conditions in Midway and began to offer their support. As a result of three years of continuous organizing, folks in Midway have not only received a community development block grant which has allowed them to fix up their housing, but they have won other important victories like water and sewer services and paved

roads. Midway, which is still working for annexation today, looks very different than it did three years ago.

Even more important is the fact that people in Midway found their voices during this process. Folks who led that fight are now leaders in our organization and are helping to organize in other similar communities. Now, the community leaders and the people of Midway are outspoken and proud to claim their community. Because of their victory, many surrounding communities have begun to hope for themselves and ask PPP to help them organize.

Midway is a success story, but sometimes we have learned as much from organizing campaigns where the victories were mixed with disappointments. While we were working in Midway, some community folks approached us about the Proctor-Silex Hamilton-Beach Corporation (referred to locally as just Proctor-Silex). A lot of folks in Midway worked for Proctor-Silex. The plant employed eight hundred local workers. They made small home appliances like toasters and irons. Approximately 80 percent of the workers were women. Several PPP members worked there. In the spring of 1991 Proctor-Silex announced that they would be phasing out their operation in Moore County and moving to Mexico. People were going to lose not only their jobs but also their health insurance and possibly their pensions as well. The plant would also leave behind many disabled workers who were unable to work in other jobs and was walking away from a toxic waste dump. Our members and board of directors asked the PPP staff to address these problems.

We began by organizing with our board members and members who worked at Proctor-Silex to pull together a meeting of other workers. We began that meeting by letting

people speak of their concerns and fears, and then facilitated a process of getting workers to identify issues and goals. And last, we began to educate people on the issue of “maquiladoras”^{*} because our folks were blaming the Mexicans for taking their jobs. Just as with our earlier organizing about El Salvador, it was important for folks to understand that they shouldn’t blame poor people in Mexico, but instead they should criticize the U.S. corporations and government policies (tax breaks and incentives) that supported moving plants out of the United States. We talked to plant workers about the Mexican workers who were getting their jobs—mostly women who are incredibly oppressed and working in horrible conditions that are destroying their health. We knew we’d made progress when one of our members who worked at Proctor-Silex said, “Used to be when I saw a Mexican worker, I just wanted to run them down in my truck, but now I know that they’re poor people, just like me, trying to feed their children.”

We never really expected to stop the plant closing because we knew the process was too far along. But we wanted to win as many protections and rights for workers as we could. One of our major goals was to get retraining funds for the workers. We eventually won \$500,000 to retrain the workers, but these funds went immediately to the state of North Carolina which turned over the money to a “private industries council” which had been established by the federal government. The council, which by law must be made up of over 50 percent of corporate heads and executives, directed the money to the local commu-

^{*} U.S.-owned factories in Mexico that use Mexican workers to assemble goods for the U.S. and other foreign markets. The workers are often mistreated, given very low wages, and have unhealthy working conditions.

nity college to provide training for the workers. What kind of training is offered is also determined by the council. So far, the training offered has been for jobs in the region's manufacturing plants, where there are actually very few openings. Salaries for these jobs are low—as they usually are when a company expects many people to compete for only a few positions. The plant workers had hoped instead to receive training that developed new skills, opened new employment opportunities, and stimulated economic growth.

The Proctor-Silex campaign made us at PPP realize that it wasn't going to do us any good to work on local issues unless we began to address federal laws that allow funds to be diverted in this way from the people who really need them. We knew we had to work to place our own people on the federal commissions and boards where the decisions get made. We determined after the failure at Proctor-Silex to make organizing for economic democracy a centerpiece of our work.

However, in 1991 the Gulf War drastically changed our focus. By December 1990 we were convinced there would be a war in the Middle East. We were frustrated with the national peace organizations who seemed unconvinced that a war would happen and were not working on any cooperative plan to oppose it. For us at PPP, the war was more than a faraway peace issue. It was fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers whose lives would be at risk. We knew the focus of our work would have to shift to opposing the war. We revised our work plan, postponed the start of the literacy program, and figured out that some of our major goals—like getting national media coverage—could still be met under our new plan. Many of our volunteers worked every evening after getting off from a long day at the textile mill. They helped

make fliers, plan press conferences, produce a video, send copies of the video to peace groups around the country, and organize truck drivers to distribute our materials about the war all along the east coast. Many volunteers had family members who had joined the military as a way to get education, a job, and a way out of a community where working in the textile mill or in fast food service were most often their only options. Our folks clearly saw the need to oppose the government policy—not the troops. Earlier in 1990, PPP had won a national award for grassroots peace work. Part of the award was the services of a media consultant, whose advice had already helped us begin to think about the media in a new way and as one of the most important parts of our organizing and leadership development work. Our experience during the Gulf War proved how right we were. The voices of PPP folks were aired on hundreds of radio and TV stations and printed in newspapers across the United States from the local *Kannapolis Daily Independent* to the *New York Times*.

Although everyone at PPP was happy to see the Gulf War concluded in 1992, conflict still arose that year that for a time seemed to threaten the whole organization. By this time, the PPP board was well established with the percentages of low-income folks, people of color, and women that we had initially set. A few of our board members and PPP staff wanted to revise our mission statement to include welcoming all oppressed groups—including gays and lesbians—to PPP. Some of the men on the board objected strongly to this revision. Some also opposed the requirement that PPP steering committees be made up of at least 50 percent women. Later chapters will tell the full story of this crisis. Here I simply want to emphasize the lesson we at PPP learned from this conflict. It

was what we had always known. We could not compromise when it came to opposing all forms of oppression. Organizing without confronting all oppression will lead to temporary victories and ultimate defeat.

By the end of 1992, PPP was recognized by many people as a different and important model of organizing for social change. We had learned to trust our own knowledge and experience as low-income people in organizing our communities; to link local, national, and international issues; to build new kinds of relationships between low-income and middle-class communities, including donors and foundations; to create new images of leadership; and to deal directly with all forms of oppression and how they affect us. Like most new things, our model would be questioned and criticized. The criticism would sometimes feel bad, but eventually it also made us understand more clearly the lessons we had learned.