

## Organizing for Change in Contentious Times: Three Stories

### Story Two

Change was in the air when our family returned to the U.S. in the Spring of 1972. In the United Presbyterian Church offices in New York, there was a scramble to reorganize the old departments into the new Program Agency. In the reorganization, the urban-industrial concerns which had been my bailiwick suddenly took a back seat. The agency which I had come back to direct, the Institute on the Church in Urban-Industrial Society (ICUIS ), would have to fight for its place within the new structure. Fortunately, ICUIS had a connection to the World Council of Churches. Its ecumenical nature was important to the ongoing work of the Program Agency.

A place in the Program Agency budget was found for the ongoing work of the Institute. On the basis of its larger interchurch agenda, ICUIS would have both support from the Program Agency and from sources within the World Council of Churches. One of the side effects of the ecumenical nature of ICUIS was my responsibility to create a board which had representation and support from other U.S. denominations.

The transition within the United Presbyterian Church was indicative of the larger turmoil on the national scene. The energy crisis of the early 70s, embedded as it was in the failed policies of the Vietnam conflict, had changed the temper of the U.S. citizen. Long lines at gas pumps and rumors of rationing did not sit well with the public. Recounting the distress of the times, Rick Perlstein reviews fifteen books in “That Seventies Show” (The Nation , November 8, 2010 ) which chronicle the events of the 1970s and the collapse of American power. Jefferson Cowie in a New York Times op-ed piece “That ‘70s Feeling” on Labor Day weekend (September 5, 2010) sums up the despair of the decade in labor’s loss of power in its search for occupational justice. He summarizes the issues of the ‘70s:

“When the economy soured in 1974, business executives dismissed workers’ complaints about the quality of their occupational life – and then went gunning for their pay-checks and their unions as well,

abetted by a conservative political climate and the offshoring of the nation's industrial core.”

The loss of the basic U.S. industrial economy, and the jobs that went with it, became part of the ICUIS agenda. Part of my assignment, related as it was to McCormick Seminary and the ongoing work of The Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations ((PIIR ), the deanship of which I undertook from the long and effective leadership of Marshal Scott, was to line up industrial jobs for summer seminarian participants in “The Ministers in Industry” program. PIIR had been finding jobs for the Summer Seminarian program for the last 20 years. My responsibility for PIIR was in addition to the information sharing and training tasks of ICUIS. The World Council of Churches had decided on establishing ICUIS at McCormick in Chicago on the basis of the work PIIR had accomplished in its twenty year history.

In 1972 it became apparent that the industrial contacts PIIR had built up over twenty-five years had dwindled to a handful of job possibilities. A First National Bank of Chicago study showed that 352 manufacturing firms left Cook County between 1970 and 1977 with a net loss of 151,000 manufacturing jobs. The industrial base of the Chicago region had evaporated. Some industries had closed, some had moved to the more favorable labor climates in the U.S. South and the Plains States, and others had moved to similar non-unionized overseas locations. It was obvious that finding jobs for summer seminarians would be a dead-end. The summer program which depended upon “on the line” industrial experience had reached its climax, except for a brief “worker priest” experiment PIIR organized with a group of overseas Roman Catholic clergy.

In this new context of the globalization of the economy, the work of ICUIS was given a new perspective. We were called to assess the impact which global political change was having upon the church's role in the world economy. For this we had to begin in our own back yard.

With this as background, ICUIS began tracing, researching, and reporting on the economic dissolution happening within the Rust Belt region around the Great Lakes. The steel industry was our beginning point. Major U.S. steel operations had been challenged by the industrial changes taking place in Asia and South America. Steel production was one of the first sectors developed in newly industrializing economies. Not only was steel crucial to the consumer sector of the developing economy, it also provided an avenue to compete on the global export market. The

effect of this new competition showed itself in the steel industry concentrated in States around the Great Lakes.

The clarion call for action came in September 1977 when the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Co. shut down its Campbell Works in Youngstown, Ohio with the loss of 6,000 jobs. The reaction in the religious community was immediate. Across the religious community, the call for action brought into being the Ecumenical Coalition of the Mahoning Valley. The Coalition was a cross section of the religious and community leadership of the Youngstown region, with representation from Cleveland in the presence of the Protestant Episcopal Bishop. Within six months of the closure of the Campbell Works, the leadership of the Coalition had organized a "Save Our Valley" campaign with the creation of a savings account to buy out the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Co. and establish a worker-owned and managed corporation. The "Save Our Valley" campaign drew support from national church offices in New York as well as local contributions from Youngstown congregations. The savings account reached over four million dollars.

I was present in Youngstown early in the campaign and reported on the proceedings in our ICUIS Abstract Service and Justice Ministries publications. We were present at the White House when the Ecumenical Coalition sought financial support from the Carter Administration for a worker-owned and managed corporation. After making a strong appeal for Federal support of the \$ 525 million plan to reopen the Campbell Works, in March 1979 the Federal government turned down the request.

As the Youngstown situation was unfolding, South Chicago was facing its own major steel shutdowns. On March 28, 1980 Wisconsin Steel Company in South Chicago unceremoniously shut its doors. Suddenly, without previous notice, 3,500 workers were thrown out of work. Frank Lumpkin's story was symbolic of the fate of the workers at Wisconsin Steel.

"Friday.....March 28, 1980. Frank Lumpkin went to work happy. He had just completed 30 years at Wisconsin Steel. He liked his job, fixing machinery. But last year, a half ton of steel broke his foot in two places. So Frank was looking forward to his 13 weeks vacation that would begin March 30. He expected an insurance settlement for his foot. Then he would retire. One hour after the shift ended, Frank was home. The phone rang. 'Don't come to work

tomorrow. The mill closed. It looks bad.' Frank's 14 paychecks bounced but not before Frank had written some large checks. So the bank emptied Frank's savings account to cover his checks.....3500 workers —3500 tragedies.”

The troubles at Wisconsin Steel, which had gone into bankruptcy, was indicative of the steel industry across the Midwest. U.S. Steel, which had a neighboring plant in south Chicago, put 5000 of its workers on “furlough.” Nearby Inland Steel, which was financially sound, put its 5500 employees, blue collar and salaried, on a four day week. In the Calumet region, where the south Chicago steel industry is located, 125,000 jobs were related to steel production. The losses within the industry sent shock waves through the community. The churches were directly affected by the loss of jobs among their people.



Following on our experience with the Youngstown Sheet and Tube situation, ICUIS responded immediately to the steel-shut down close to home. Besides our reporting on the Wisconsin Steel closure and its impact on the work force, Fr. Tom Joyce, of the Eighth Day Center, a Roman Catholic social activist group, and I sought out one of the main religious actors in the Calumet region, Fr. Leo Mahon of St. Victor's parish. Fr. Leo Mahon, had previously served in Panama and had been active in the “comunidad de bases” (grass-roots) movement. Fr. Leo was ready for action, and on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1980 called together twenty pastors, priests and community workers from the Calumet region at St. Victor's Church. Out of the St. Victor's meeting on June 10<sup>th</sup>, two goals were set. The first was to gather

information on the state of the steel industry in the Calumet/Gary region. The second was to organize the religious community to keep the human issues front and center in the ensuing steel crisis. The next step was to call a larger community meeting which would bring together all the major actors in the steel community: the management of the mills, the labor union leadership and “on the line” workers, representatives from government, and the religious leaders in the community. The community meeting was held on August 23<sup>rd</sup> at the Calumet College. Over 125 steelworkers, community workers and clergy gathered to hear the presentations of the Congressional representative of the region, the U.S. Steel Workers (USW) local president, the Inland Steel management and the unemployed in the community. The meeting decided to create a congregationally-based organization aimed at increasing local citizen’s participation in the economic decisions affecting the region.

A follow-up meeting in September brought into being the Calumet Community Religious Conference on the Steel Crisis (CCRC). The CCRC counted among its members representation from Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptists and Muslim congregations. Ensign Leininger and I were appointed by the Presbytery of Chicago as its official representatives. The CCRC steering committee set the following goals for its work:

- To alert the community to the seriousness of the crisis in steel and the threat it poses to our economic and social well-being.
- To bridge the interests of labor, industry, and government in increasing productivity of the steel industry to make it competitive with world markets, and in the process, to move from adversary to cooperative relationships.
- To promote awareness of the issues through meetings, study groups and dialogue that will involve the spokespersons for industry, labor and government, as well as community residents.
- To encourage original analysis and collate the research of community organizations, industry, government, unions and universities.
- To develop a broad-based membership representative of the community that will seriously study and debate the many facets of our situation with a view of moving towards actions.

- To provide a headquarters, staff and the resources to achieve the above goals.

The CCRC hired two organizers to organize the religious community: Roberta Lynch organizing in South Chicago and John Beckman working in the Gary/Hammond area. As the organizing campaign got underway in 1981, the CCRC concentrated on the following objectives:

- (1) a mortgage protection campaign to prevent the unemployed in the region from losing their homes;
- (2) a campaign to have the steel companies make public commitments to remaining in the Calumet region;
- (3) federal assistance for the modernization of the existing steel plants;
- (4) state legislation calling for advance notice of a plant closing, extra severance pay, a community fund for retraining the unemployed, and aid for medical insurance; and
- (5) the creation of a community services center to provide emergency food and clothing, housing counseling, job information, and counseling with emotional problems.

The impact of the loss of jobs in the steel industry continued into 1982 as the CCRC worked to encourage local congregations to take action on behalf of the unemployed in the community. By June 1982 it was decided that CCRC needed a stronger education/action base to encourage wider congregational participation.

A proposal from the Latino Institute outlined such a possibility. The letter from Jerry Kellman pointed to a program already begun in Catholic parishes in Chicago's Hispanic neighborhoods by the Latino Institute. He suggested that a similar approach might be made in the Calumet region. He suggested an organizational campaign which raised these questions: (1) How do you organize enough strength to change the situation, rather than set people up for still another defeat? (2) How do you sustain the organizing over an extended period of time by developing the parish as a community through the organizing process?

For the Latin Institute, developing the parish as a community included: (a) increasing the clarity of the laity about their own situation, their aspirations and how these relate to the world; (b) drawing people from the periphery of the church community and from a retreat into themselves back into the center of the parish and (c) integrating the organizational action with reflection and faith tied to religious commitment.

Kellman laid out a five-year plan which would work intensively within the parishes to build a congregationally-based organization to take common action on the issues facing the people in the Calumet region. The plan proposed by Kellman centered in developing Catholic parishes in a bi-state project. The initial funding for the Latino Institute oversight had come from the Chicago diocese. After the Catholic parishes had been gotten on board, the next step would be to invite Protestant congregations to participate.

The Intense organization campaign began in 1985. It was at this point that the CCRC campaign was split into three areas; a south suburban action conference in Chicago; an organizing campaign in northwest Indiana; and a new independent project on the south side of Chicago. In pursuit of an organizer for the southside project Kellman ran an ad in the New York Times for an organizer to work in south Chicago. A recent Columbia University graduate named Barack Obama responded to the ad. Kellman interviewed him and offered him the position as an organizer in the Roseland area of Chicago. Barack Obama went to work as the organizer in the Developing Communities Project, an offshoot of the Calumet Communities Religious Conference. He concentrated his efforts in the Altgelt Gardens housing area of the Roseland area.

The underlying issue of job loss in the Midwest Rustbelt drew together communities across the Great Lakes region. A call went out across the region for a more comprehensive approach to the conditions in the steel and related industries. In late 1984 regional representatives from Buffalo in Western New York, across western Pennsylvania and through Ohio and Indiana and into Chicago came together to form the Ecumenical Great Lakes/ Appalachian Network. It was as part of that network that I became involved in the third example of community organization.

Richard P. Poethig  
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