WHY EDUCATION?

In our work of building a social movement to end poverty, we have found that education is central. If we are serious about the work of ending poverty, we don't have to merely do more actions; we have to do smarter actions. We don't just have to be more active; we have to be more effective. We live in a very pragmatic society, and many of us think that if we just start one more program or effect one more policy change it will bring an end to poverty. But our experience has shown that poverty is more complex than that and it is going to take clarity, competence, and commitment to achieve real social change in this country. To outfight the forces arrayed against us, we must outsmart them. Nowhere in world history can anyone find where a dumb force rose up and defeated a smart force. Therefore, it is vitally important for anyone interested in ending poverty to develop an engaged intelligence that will outsmart, not only out organize, the current conditions that cause poverty and misery.

LEADERSHIP IS KEY IN THE FIRST STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT IN BUILDING A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Before the elements of mass and velocity of a social movement are considered, its direction must be determined. This is what leadership of a social movement is all about. History teaches us that this leadership is twofold: (1) The unity of the leading social force for social change; that is, a unity on the basis of needs and demands incompatible with the status quo. And (2) systematically educated and trained core(s) of leaders sufficiently connected, clear, competent, and committed to enlighten and organize the leading social force. Today's society is defined by the problem of the ever-deepening polarity between wealth and poverty. Today the poor and dispossessed are the leading social force because they have the least or no stake in such a polarized society. Either they end this inhumane polarity or it will end them. In the last years of his life, the words and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. anticipated the present situation. His launching of the Poor People's Campaign in 1967–1968 inspires us today. The strategic concept introduced by this historic campaign was the need and possibility "to lift the load of poverty" through unifying the poor across color lines into "a new and unsettling force." The Poverty Initiative has taken up this mantle by working to reignite a new Poor People's Campaign in response to the present deepening economic and social crises. We believe that such a campaign adapted to today's economic and political situation is needed to build a broader social move-
ment to end poverty. The first step and requirement in organizing and building this campaign and movement is the development of a united and sophisticated core of leaders capable of analyzing and putting forth solutions that address the scale and complexity of poverty today. It seeks to carry this mission out by helping establish a multiracial, multifaith, multi-issue network of grassroots community and religious leaders. Central to this process is the identification and development of leaders who are emerging out of the growing ranks and struggles of the dispossessed. Learning from the crippling effects of Dr. King’s assassination, the Poverty Initiative is clear that there is a need to develop many Martin Luther Kings. Such leaders are not developed spontaneously, but instead must be systematically educated and trained.

We work with an analogy of building a house to understand the stages of development of building a social movement. Building a house has to be done in stages, and builders must have a blueprint or a strategic plan. No stage can be skipped, nor can we stop at any stage. Today with our remote control mentality we impatiently want to fast-forward to start with building the roof, to begin at the end. But before a building has a roof, it must have a strong foundation. Presently, we are at the foundation stage of building a massive movement to end poverty led by the poor as a united and organized force. This is the stage of building the large and expanding core of leaders who are connected, clear, competent, and committed. History teaches that every successful social movement has to begin with the development of such a core as its cadre base or foundation. The basic strategic content of this leadership is the recognition of the necessity of poverty being solved by the building of a massive movement led by the poor as a force united and organized across color lines. All our various activities, tactical as well as educational, must be coordinated as means toward accomplishing this task of the current initial stage of the construction of a movement to end poverty.

Organizing to unite the poor as the base of a broader movement to abolish poverty is necessarily founded on the concept of "commitment, not compensation." Commitment to build such a movement is the primary quality of leadership. This must be a commitment strengthened by clarity, competence, and connection to the emerging struggles of the poor and dispossessed. The other indispensable quality of leadership is the ability to learn and teach as well as to organize. This includes, most important for this initial stage, that the indispensable quality of a leader is the development of other leaders. "The more you know, the more you owe" sums up this quality. Therefore, the cornerstone of our general education plan must be "educating the educators, training the trainers."

Teach as We Fight, Learn as We Lead

ORGANIZING WITHOUT EDUCATING IS MOBILIZING

Without education, organization is reduced to mobilization. We cannot afford to just mobilize bodies—we must move minds. Without a deep understanding of the causes and conditions of poverty, it is difficult to develop the commitment necessary to endure the hardships and inevitable setbacks of a protracted struggle. Despite the fact that the Kensington Welfare Rights Union was able to house over 700 formerly homeless families over the course of a decade of organizing work, many of those families left the movement when they got their houses rather than staying committed to the fight to end homelessness for everyone. Simply mobilizing bodies, moving from one event to another, is not enough to counter the sophisticated and dangerous forces arrayed against us and to "stick and stay" the necessary course of ending human misery.

OUR APPROACH TO EDUCATION

We believe that popular conceptions about poverty are in most cases inaccurate, incomplete, and biased. Therefore, we have found that it is important to have education central in the struggle so people can acquire new information and understanding about poverty. Education is about teaching people that it is possible to end poverty. We have a saying in the Poverty Initiative: We have to first end poverty in our minds before we end poverty with our hands. We see the main playing field or battleground for a movement to end poverty as our minds.

Our basic pedagogical approach recognizes that the mind does not present itself as a blank tablet. The mental battlefield is littered with old and entrenched values and views. These values and views are held intact by emotion-laden myths and stereotypes. Our experiences, particularly in the work of the poor organizing the poor, have taught us that the process of education is at once one of uneducating and unlearning as well as one of educating and learning. "Plowing the field" of old ideas is indispensable to "planting seeds" of new ideas. The wrenching conditions of economic and social crises and the practical struggles in response to these conditions compel especially those embattled to question their deeply held beliefs and habits. This begins to clear the way for the introduction of new ideas, new consciousness, and the development of new leaders. The pedagogical principle of "plowing the fields and planting the seeds" is what is meant by the teachings that every action, protest, and campaign must be used as a school.
We have learned that, especially in an age of a profound information revolution, education is pivotal in developing leaders and organizing a broad movement to abolish poverty. Most of our work has been carried out in this new age in which people are rapidly and constantly bombarded with all sorts of information, all sorts of appeals to old ideas and images, and all sorts of miseducation and stereotypes. In such a period, leadership development in terms of imparting a true and effective epistemology (true and false), ethics (right and wrong), and expertise (capacity in strategy, tactics, and techniques) requires an educational process that focuses more on how we think than what we think, more on initiative than on imitation, more on commitment than on compensation.

In our work, we are repeatedly coming up against the strong influences of old American pragmatism. Being pragmatic is often interpreted as being practical. This is not what we are referring to here. We are talking about a worldview, a philosophical way of thinking, that is deeply embedded in American culture and that results in separating theory from practice, knowing from doing. Although it affects all of us, this philosophy is an antintellectualism created by intellectuals from elite universities. It promotes an impatience with and resistance to study, educational discipline, and social theory that provides vital lessons from history and political economy. While at times giving lip service to the “long term” or strategy, it is consumed with the immediate, with “what works for the moment for me.” For this reason, it is a very eclectic and categorical way of seeing the world, seeing only the superficial separateness of things and not their substantial inner connections. The poor cannot afford this pragmatism. We need to fight for an intellectual rigor and theory to guide our actions.

"Teaching as we fight, learning as we lead, talking as we walk" is how we approach education. This pedagogy ensures that the fight teaches. Carrying out plans for using antipoverty campaigns, activities, and protests as schools has been effective in imparting transformative experiences that lead to a transformation of values. For example, the Homeless Union’s nationwide housing takeovers (as discussed earlier) served as effective schools for developing leadership and membership. Other examples (also discussed in earlier chapters of this book) include bus tours and marches, which became traveling schools. These experiences have been effective in raising questions in participants, offering a space for mutual living and learning.

We have embraced the concept that “the struggle is a school” and that integrating education into daily actions and activities is a central way to raise consciousness among pragmatic people. One example of this was in October 1999, when organizations of the poor and homeless from across the Americas marched from Washington, DC, to the United Nations in New York City. We marched in protest of economic human rights violations caused by the U.S. government around the world. We marched 10 to 20 miles a day for 32 days, sleeping in community centers and churches throughout DC, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. Each day we held press conferences, educational presentations, events, rallies and protests, cultural presentations, and so on to show the world how poor people from the United States, Canada, and Latin America were coming together to build a movement to end poverty. More than anything this march was a traveling school for all participants, as groups and individuals were able to share what lessons they had learned from their communities with others.

We have also found that the use of civil disobedience actions and schooling in jail cells has proved to be a particularly effective means for values formation and the development of commitment. Civil disobedience helps to produce moments where participants question the things that govern behavior and form their core belief system. Being prepared to go to jail because you understand the current system/quo is unjust is a huge step in the development of a commitment to ending poverty and human misery and standing up for something bigger than just yourself.

**TEACHING METHODS, FORMS, AND ACTIVITIES**

In order to end poverty in our minds, we have culled lessons from our years of organizing and educating. These lessons are in the form of specific methods and activities as well as content of the teaching and learning. Following is a select but important list of methods of teaching and learning that we have used to develop low-income and other leaders dedicated to ending poverty. We know this list is not complete but hope that educators, social movement practitioners, and other people of conscience find these methods and insights useful.

**Collective study and self-study.** Our educational process involves collective study, including classes, retreats, conferences, schools, and seminars as well as ongoing self-study and research. Both are aided by a general and individual library system, including books, articles, videos, audio recordings, and photo documentation. We take advantage of every opportunity to teach and learn together. We prioritize small-group and one-on-one conversations because in these situations barriers of distrust and insecurity are more likely overcome so that real questions and concerns can be grappled with.