

2013

# Radicals in the Heartland: The farm crisis, immigration, and community organizing

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**Radicals in the heartland:  
The farm crisis, immigration, and  
community organizing**

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: History

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Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa  
2013

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DEDICATION

For Amelia, my beloved wife.

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## ABSTRACT

Due in part to the short amount of time since the American farm crisis of the 1980s, few historians have done much research on the topic. Even fewer have examined the activism of this time, and those who have suggest that farm crisis activists were less confrontational and more compromise and consensus oriented in their approach than earlier farm organizations. This study contributes to a more robust understanding of the wide-ranging nature of activism during this period by examining the foundations and work of an Iowa-based community organizing group named Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement (CCI). An analysis of interviews with members and organizers of the group, internal notes and planning documents, newspaper articles, books, and journal articles provide a detailed look at how the group operated. This study explores Saul Alinsky's idea of community organizing, CCI's work during the farm crisis, and its later work with a growing Latino population in the state of Iowa. It explores how CCI's confrontational actions and radical ideas helped farmers save their farms and how its persistence and cultural competency helped immigrants create a soccer league, recover from devastating immigration raids, and reclaim stolen wages. Using untapped sources, this project will help illuminate the work of an organization that scholars have largely ignored until now.

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In 1980, with the election of Ronald Reagan, the United States took a conservative turn. Many Americans had grown tired of the internal struggles the nation had experienced in the previous decades, from the southern civil rights movement to violent antiwar protests. Americans fought each other for decades about the changing roles of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, as well as women. For many, the radicalism of the early seventies was just too much. As movements defined by marches and calls for peace increasingly became identified with acts of violence and calls for the overthrow of the U.S. government, the public grew increasingly uncomfortable with radicalism. For many Americans, the economic malaise experienced during the Carter administration served as further proof that the U.S. needed to return to conservative values. The Reagan Revolution took place during the 1980s and conservative politics have held sway ever since. Conservatism became the new orthodoxy, and radicalism became heresy.<sup>1</sup>

Along with the political climate, activism also changed in the 1980s. By in large, activists did not shut down universities, enter state capitols while heavily armed, nor fight with police. Instead, they held hands and benefit concerts. The prominent causes of the time were still important in activist circles. For example, people fought against

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<sup>1</sup> Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Made Political History*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

apartheid in South Africa, they raised awareness about AIDS, and they pushed for greater equality for LGBT people across the country. What changed was the approach to activism. The conservative times called for more conservative tactics, policy goals, and expectations. Perhaps most importantly, fewer people were interested in social movements and activism in general. Organizers continued to put together events, but the marches and protests were smaller and there was certainly less talk of revolution<sup>2</sup>.

Arguably, the largest area of social unrest in America during this somnolent decade was in the most conservative part of the country outside of the South, the Midwest. Agricultural states and communities suffered from a farm crisis, causing remarkably rapid social change during the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Changes in federal policies, technologies, and global demand made farming economically unsustainable for many people. This drove many out of farming and the Midwest altogether. Rates of violence, including suicide, as well as other social and personal ills rose significantly across rural America. Governments, communities, families, and activist groups all responded differently to the crisis. The farm crisis turned the Midwest into a hotbed of activism, but an activism tempered by the times. Some historians, including Mark Friedberger and Jenny Barker Divine, have referred to farm crisis activism as “feminized.”<sup>4</sup> They claim that the “farm advocacy and activism during the farm crisis focused less on

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<sup>2</sup> Hodgson, *World Turned Right*.

<sup>3</sup> This period is also referred to as the “farm crisis of the 1980s,” the “farm financial crisis,” the “1980s Midwest farm crisis,” and numerous other derivations of this type. For simplicity, the phrase “farm crisis” will be used.

<sup>4</sup> Jenny Barker Divine, “Our Cherished Ideals: Rural Women, Activism, and Identity in the Midwest, 1950-1990” (PhD diss., Iowa State University, Ames, 2008). In this text Barker Divine paraphrases and further elaborates ideas set forth in Mark Friedberger, “Women Advocates in the Iowa Farm Crisis of the 1980s,” *Agricultural History* 67 (Spring 1993): 224-234.

confrontation and more on peaceful mediation and conflict resolution.”<sup>5</sup> According to Friedberger, the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, a coalition of farm crisis activist groups, represented the tone of activism at the time. Friedberger wrote that the coalition “had none of the ‘macho’ image of earlier farm organizations. The coalition saw that while shock tactics were a useful weapon in gaining attention in the early stages of the crisis...far more useful were methods that were recognizably feminine in character.”<sup>6</sup> While the “feminized” versus “macho” dichotomy is limited in its explanatory power, this argument might explain why people remember the farm crisis for its Farm Aid concerts, rather than firebrand activists.

Farm crisis activism did have a gentler, less confrontational tone, but many organizations clung to a more aggressive activist tradition. Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement (CCI), for instance, stood apart from most of the other organizations active during the farm crisis. Their philosophy and tactics came down in a nearly unbroken line from the famed community organizing radical Saul Alinsky. The policies CCI advocated were undeniably radical, their tactics were technically legal, but rather out of the ordinary, and their unwillingness to compromise with their opponents left them more often than not ostracized by fellow farm crisis organizations.<sup>7</sup>

As the farm crisis unfolded, Iowa changed drastically. It had lost a considerable percentage of its population as young people fled the state in search of nonfarm jobs. The number of people who were involved in agriculture dropped considerably. Larger

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Friedberger, “Women Advocates,” 224-234.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid; Larry Ginter, personal interview, September 26, 2011. I interviewed Larry Ginter at his family farm in Rhodes, Iowa.



farmers who managed to survive the crisis bought up the farms of those who did not, consolidating larger and larger tracts of land under the control and ownership of a relatively small number of people. This new landscape posed a number of problems for those who still lived in Iowa during the 1990s and the 2000s. The most pressing issues related to the need for younger people in the state to fill the schools and provide a workforce.

Iowans turned toward the growing number of immigrants coming into the U.S. to meet these needs. Many of these immigrants came to the U.S. from rural Mexico. Like their American counterparts, many Mexican farmers were forced out of farming as a direct result of public policies that were intended to modernize the economy. For the Mexican farmers, this policy came in the form of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which policymakers had intended to gradually move small-scale, sometimes subsistence, farmers out of farming and into low-skill, low-wage manufacturing jobs.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the transition was not gradual, nor were there enough low-wage manufacturing jobs once China joined the G20.<sup>9</sup> Mexican farmers could not compete against the soil, climate, technology, and the massive subsidies enjoyed by the American commercial farmers, and since Mexico lacked a substantial welfare state to support transitions to new professions, many farm families journeyed to Iowa and other parts of the U.S.

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<sup>8</sup> Sidney Weintraub, "NAFTA and Migration," *National Forum* 74 (Summer 1994): 29-34.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Polanski, "Mexican Employment, Productivity, and Income a Decade after NAFTA," A brief produced by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. February 25, 2004.

CCI continued to organize in Iowa as the state's population, economy, and culture shifted. This thesis examines how this group of Alinskites functioned in the state throughout the farm crisis and how it adjusted to the state's changing demographics. It explores the causes of the upheaval felt by rural residents in the U.S. and Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s, and the crucial role of cultural competency in community organizing. It seeks to explain how a radical group has managed to thrive in a conservative part of the country during a thirty-year conservative hegemony. I argue that CCI is a notable example of the Alinsky activist organizing tradition, one that existed in a period of supposed activist inactivity. As such, this thesis offers an alternate understanding of farm activism and differs from the assertions of Friedberger and Barker Divine. They have claimed that the activism of the farm crisis focused on finding compromise rather than fomenting conflict. CCI organizers, following Alinsky's belief that conflict was necessary for change, rejected compromise out of principle. I, therefore, offer a more nuanced analysis and understanding of activism during the farm crisis. This thesis first introduces community organizing founder Saul Alinsky. It then looks at the founding and early years of CCI. Next, it explores the organization's work during the farm crisis. Then it explains the effects of NAFTA, and, finally, CCI's work with immigrants.

## CHAPTER 2

## FROM THE BACK OF THE YARDS TO THE BACK FORTY

More than anyone else, Saul Alinsky is responsible for giving the words “community organizing” the meaning they have today. Communities have long used social pressure as a way to inoculate themselves against real or imagined harms, but Alinsky took this age-old practice and made it an art form, or maybe even a science. He borrowed ideas from churches, labor unions, the settlement house movement, and organized crime to devise a series of rules that would make local activism more effective. To understand community organizing, one must understand Alinsky’s life. This chapter explains Alinsky’s influences and ideas. It then shows how these ideas helped shape the thinking of the founder and organizers of a community organizing group named Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement. Then it explores CCI’s early urban work and transition into rural organizing. Finally, it will examine the causes and impact of the farm crisis.

Alinsky (1909-1972), the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, was a gregarious man with a sizeable ego, a penchant for bending the truth, and an implacable desire to obtain social justice for the powerless. Alinsky was a self-described radical who understood the importance of his reputation. Like other radicals before him, such as Mother Jones, in his lifetime he became an almost entirely fictional character, and he liked it that way.<sup>10</sup> He made himself into a legendary man who fought for the

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<sup>10</sup> Elliot J. Gorn, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

downtrodden and caused trouble for the authorities everywhere he went. *Time Magazine* called him “a prophet of power to the people.”<sup>11</sup> This status as a “prophet” or as the “dean of the community organizing” caused many people to dislike visits from Alinsky. As one of his biographers put it, he “became as welcome in most American cities as would Genghis Khan.”<sup>12</sup> He did not mind criticism from the powerful because he thought it gave him more power with the poor and powerless.<sup>13</sup>

Alinsky was a product of early twentieth century Chicago. He was born just a few blocks south of the Hull-House settlement house.<sup>14</sup> In 1889, Jane Addams and her colleagues started the Hull-House. By the time Alinsky was born twenty years later, it had become the most famous settlement house in the country. Settlement houses “provided structure and activities for large numbers of people...in poor neighborhoods,” with the goal of exposing “the poor to more middle-class values such as saving and character development.”<sup>15</sup> Well-educated, middle class women thought that by establishing “settlements” in city centers they would not only expose the poor to what they saw as a higher way of life, but they also hoped to become more credible advocates by living in the poorest neighborhoods and experiencing the hardship for themselves. As Judith Trolander put it, settlement workers “not only had firsthand knowledge of the

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Bruno, Review of the film *The Democratic Promise: Saul Alinsky and His Legacy*, *Labor Studies Journal* 29 (Summer 2004), 107-108.

<sup>12</sup> P. David Finks, *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), viii.

<sup>13</sup> “Mobilizing the Poor,” *Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.*, talkshow, directed by Al De Caprio, (1967; Palo Alto, CA: Hoover Institution Video Library; 2010.) DVD.

<sup>14</sup> Finks, *Radical Vision*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Wynetta Devore, “The House on Midland: From Inside Out,” in *Community Organizing in a Diverse Society*, ed. Felix G. Rivera and John L. Erlich, 62-74 (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1998).

situation but also had a right to complain” about social woes.<sup>16</sup> Settlement workers sought to bring the poor into middle class society through education and cooperation, all the while acting as an interpreter for the poor to the middle class. Over time, as social work became a formalized field and social workers started to receive more education, fewer and fewer social workers actually lived in the settlement houses. The settlement movement was one of many Progressive Era reforms, but it peaked around 1920 and thereafter declined rapidly.<sup>17</sup>

Saul Alinsky rejected the notion that middle class social workers who lived in low-income neighborhoods made credible spokespeople for the poor. Moreover, the poor did not need outside spokespeople. They needed power, and in Alinsky’s mind, power was not achievable through cooperation; conflict was the only means of obtaining power. The settlement houses sought to bring people into the middle class by changing the values and habits of the poor. Alinsky did not desire to change the poor themselves, but rather the amount of power the system allotted to them.<sup>18</sup>

The Chicago School of Pragmatism also directly shaped Alinsky’s ideas. In the fall of 1927, Alinsky started at the University of Chicago. He took twenty-eight courses in sociology, and eight of the classes were with just three professors. Robert E. L. Faris, who had received his PhD under the tutelage of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, chaired the department and taught Alinsky in four classes. Alinsky took the other four classes with Robert Ezra Park and Ernest Watson Burgess. All three professors

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<sup>16</sup> Judith Ann Trolander, “Social Change: Settlement Houses and Saul Alinsky, 1939-1965,” *Social Service Review* 56 (September 1982): 346-365.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Mobilizing the Poor,” *Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.*, talkshow, directed by Al De Caprio, (1967; Stanford; Hoover Institution Video Library; 2010.) DVD.

“mentored their students in firsthand empirical investigations of Chicago’s neighborhoods.”<sup>19</sup> Burgess had a profound effect on the young man’s philosophical approach to social change. Burgess’s dissertation contains the foundations of Alinsky’s life work in a few simple lines. Burgess wrote, “with the realization of democracy in our present age it is now possible to reconstruct our social order” by the “harnessing of social forces.”<sup>20</sup> The citizen “in so acting...realizes his best self.”<sup>21</sup> Although these words were inspiring to the young Alinsky, most of his work at the University of Chicago focused on research. Alinsky had learned how to study and interpret the world in various ways, but he thought, as had others, that the point was to change it.

As Saul Alinsky studied the neighborhoods of Chicago in 1927, organized crime was pervasive in the city. The St. Valentine’s Day massacre was still two years away, and Al Capone and his associates influenced nearly everything. Crime syndicates, which he compared to a “public utility,” fascinated Alinsky.<sup>22</sup> He marveled at how they organized themselves and made the city work. Alinsky, like many Chicagoans, viewed members of the mafia as perfect antiheroes. They stood in opposition to those in charge, but they did so because those in charge unjustly denied people the freedom to do what they wanted. In the era of prohibition, Al Capone provided the people what they wanted, namely alcohol, and for that Capone was beloved (at least in 1927). Alinsky’s

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<sup>19</sup> Lawrence J. Engel, “Saul D. Alinsky and the Chicago School,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16 (2002): 50-66.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Donna Seaman, “How to be a Radical- Nicholas von Hoffman’s *Radical: A Portrait of Saul Alinsky*,” *Booklist* (June 1 & 15, 2010): 26.

fascination was not all-out admiration; he was well aware of the hardship organized crime inflicted on people.<sup>23</sup>

Alinsky studied Capone's operation for nearly two years and in that time learned many important lessons. One came from Frank Nitti, an "enforcer" and one of Capone's top lieutenants. Nitti told him that he used out-of-town gunmen to kill people because it was difficult for many people to kill "a man from the old neighborhood, whom you saw at the ballgames and parties."<sup>24</sup> This taught Alinsky, "the terrible importance of personal relationships."<sup>25</sup> This anecdote, which Alinsky often told, appeared in at least four publications.<sup>26</sup> There is no way to verify the accuracy of the account, but the mere fact that Alinsky chose to impart a lesson about personal relationships through a story about murder reveals a great deal about Alinsky and the public image he worked hard to craft. While the impact organized crime had on Alinsky as a political strategist and tactician is unclear, Alinsky's desire to craft a Capone-like public image is much more certain.

Perhaps the most important set of events in the history of community organizing took place in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood in the late thirties. The neighborhood consisted of ninety thousand people, mostly immigrants from Eastern Europe, and had been made famous by Upton Sinclair in his 1906 novel *The Jungle*. The buildings were dilapidated, services were inconsistent, and disease and crime were

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<sup>23</sup> When a member of Gang 42, which Alinsky had been studying, shot and killed a child during a robbery, Alinsky consoled the child's grieving mother and brought her a "touch up" photo of the dead boy. It was the only photograph the mother had of her child. Finks, *Radical Vision*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 9; Marian K. Sanders, *The Professional Radical: Conversations with Saul Alinsky* (New York: Harper and Row, Perennial Library, 1970): 1920; Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon, 1970): 311; Eric Norden, "Saul Alinsky Interview," *Playboy* (March 1972): 60.

commonplace. This was the place where Saul Alinsky started his community organizing career. He quickly learned the importance of connecting with the local centers of influence, and in the Back of the Yards, this was the Catholic Church. Alinsky was not himself religious, but he spent the whole of his organizing career working very closely with religious institutions.<sup>27</sup> It was at this time that Alinsky met his mentor and labor organizer John L. Lewis.<sup>28</sup> Through this relationship, Alinsky learned many of the key ideas that guided the rest of his life's work. He learned about power relationships, the importance of organization and practicality, and he came to understand the power of the right kind of reputation. This relationship brought the basic principles of labor organizing to community organizing.

For nearly forty years, until his early death in 1972 at age 63, Saul Alinsky spread his gospel of community organizing across the country. He wrote two best selling books on the topic, trained numerous organizers including Cesar Chavez and Ed Chambers, and helped people establish organizations in several major cities.<sup>29</sup> By the time of his death, there were enough community organizing groups that Alinsky's ideas could continue to spread from one organizer to the next. Then, in 1974, Alinsky's ideas spread to a priest from Iowa named Joe Fagan.

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<sup>27</sup> Despite Alinsky's close working relationship with the church, William F. Buckley joined others and accused Alinsky of being "anti-Christian." After all, Alinsky starts *Rules for Radicals* with a quote that praises Lucifer and his rebellion against God. In response to Buckley's charge, Alinsky said he was not anti-Christian but rather he had an aversion to "hypocrisy seasoned with sanctimoniousness." "Mobilizing the Poor," *Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.*, talkshow, directed by Al De Caprio, (1967; Stanford; Hoover Institution Video Library; 2010.) DVD.

<sup>28</sup> Alinsky's admiration for Lewis is illustrated in his 1949 biography of the labor leader. Saul Alinsky, "John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography," (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1949).

<sup>29</sup> Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1946); Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Radicals*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).



Fagan attended training on community organizing in Chicago just two years after Alinsky's death; he left committed to bringing Alinsky's style of organizing to Iowa. The trainers had laid out the specific rules that guided community organizing and given plenty of concrete examples of how organizing could make a difference in the lives of the poor and powerless. Fagan's previous efforts to affect social change now struck him as aimless and amateur. The training in Chicago showed the "science" of "real" community organizing.<sup>30</sup> Alinsky's model appeared to be practical and effective, but perhaps more importantly, it would be enjoyable. Fagan recalled thinking, "The whole world could be this... that sounded really fun."<sup>31</sup>

Upon returning to Waterloo, Iowa, Fagan set about starting a community organizing group. By 1975, Fagan and three other priests had raised enough money from eight parishes to start an organization they called Catholic Charities for Social Concerns. Fagan was the sole employee, and he worked alone out of a breezeway furnished simply with a space heater and desk. The nascent organization had no sign out front, no glossy literature, not even a phone. With a budget of just \$6,200, Fagan limited his efforts to Waterloo. However, in a few years, he had expanded his funding sources, hired three new organizers, branched out to the other major cities in Iowa, and changed the group's name to Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28 and October 3, 2011. I conducted interviews with seven people affiliated with CCI. I interviewed Joe Fagan at his home in Des Moines, Iowa. He provided me with additional archival materials from his personal collection. See also Hugh Espey, personal interview, September 19, 2011. I interviewed Hugh Espey at the CCI office in Des Moines, Iowa. He is the current Executive Director of CCI.

When asked why she spent her life settling issues by organizing rather than lawsuits, long time CCI member and Des Moines, Iowa, resident Brenda LaBlanc said, “Lawsuits are the rich person’s form of justice. If you’re poor, you have to organize.”<sup>33</sup> In the early years of CCI, Joe Fagan and his small staff did just that; they organized mostly poor and exclusively urban people in the larger cities across Iowa. They used the system laid out by Alinsky. Either community members came to CCI, or CCI organizers reached out to the community to identify a problem. CCI organizers then worked with the community to draft a list of demands. The next step entailed selecting the target, or the person who could grant the demands and therefore solve the problem. Once they had their target and demands, the community members asked to meet as a group with the target to present the demands. If the target granted the meeting and met the demands, the community could declare victory. However, if the target refused to meet with the group or refused to grant the demands, then the community changed its approach. At this point, the ingenuity of the community and the organizing group became crucial. People needed to devise new and creative ways to apply social pressure to the target or the entities the target had connections to, such as a church, business, or governmental body.

The Community Reinvestment Act (CRA), passed in 1977, which gave community members and groups like CCI a way to apply social pressure for those targets involved with banking.<sup>34</sup> Congressional lawmakers intended the CRA “to encourage depository institutions to help meet the credit needs of the communities in

<sup>33</sup> Brenda LaBlanc, personal interview, October 3, 2011. Brenda LaBlanc became active in CCI in 1978. I interviewed her at her home in Des Moines, Iowa.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid; Hugh Espey, personal interview, September 19, 2011.

which they operate.”<sup>35</sup> This legislation gave people an opportunity to weigh in on how banks conducted business in their communities. It allowed members of the public to challenge banks that had a branch or planned to move into their community. In the event that a bank appeared to be failing to meet the “credit needs of the communities in which they operate,” a citizen could file a complaint by simply adding the grievance to the bank’s CRA file that was required in all of the banks’ branch offices. Several federal agencies then reviewed these complaints. If a bank received too many complaints in their CRA file, it could potentially see its growth stifled as the federal agencies that approve mergers, acquisitions, and branching consider all CRA complaints. The CRA not only required more out of the banks in terms of meeting the community’s needs, it also gave the community some power over the banks. In the late seventies and early eighties, CCI used the CRA in urban areas to fight redlining and other forms of housing discrimination.<sup>36</sup>

When CCI started working on rural issues, the farm crisis, according to some, had been underway for several years. The exact dates of the farm crisis are debatable, with some scholars, journalists, and authors dating it from the late 1970s to 1990 while others date it to include just its most destructive period, the first half of the 1980s.<sup>37</sup> By

<sup>35</sup> Maintained by the Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council, “Community Reinvestment Act,” last modified January 18, 2012, <http://www.ffiec.gov/cra/> (accessed February 4, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011; “Redline,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, accessed on November 20, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/redline>. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, to “redline” is “to withhold home-loan funds or insurance from neighborhoods considered poor economic risks.”

<sup>37</sup> Almost no one offers a specific range of dates for the farm crisis. It is often referred to as the farm crisis of the 1980s, but this is most likely used as a simple way to distinguish it from other farm crises such as the 1890s and the 1920s, rather than firm lines of demarcation. Scholars like Friedberger and Barker Devine date the farm crisis as starting in the mid-late 1970s, while Barnett seems to offer a narrower focus on the 1980s with most of this effort focused on 1981-1986.

the time CCI brought their style of organizing to bear on the farm crisis in 1981, several other organizations were already attempting to address the plight of the rural community. For example, the American Agriculture Movement (AAM) formed in 1977 specifically to address rural issues. This new group started to work with older, more established farm groups such as the Farmers Union, which had worked on rural issues since its inception in 1902. Adding to the coalition were churches and unions. These groups came together under the name of The Iowa Farm Unity Coalition. However, this coalition lacked consistency, with the exact list of groups that were active changing on a regular basis. Several groups formed to wage various local fights but faded away after they ended. Churches and unions contributed in certain parts of Iowa depending on their membership. An organization named PrairieFire Rural Action joined the fight after forming in 1985.<sup>38</sup>

CCI frequently collaborated with several of these other organizations, which all worked to ameliorate the farm crisis. However, several factors led to a distance between CCI and the others. The organizational focus often differed enough between CCI and other organizations that they addressed different aspects of the farm crisis. For example, some organizations focused almost exclusively on counseling services, which was not part of CCI's mission. Some people also viewed CCI as an urban organization that helped farmers on the side as opposed to a group like the Farmers Union, which focused exclusively on farmers. The main reason for organizational distance between CCI and the other groups was the confrontational nature of the Saul Alinsky style community

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<sup>38</sup> Gilbert C. Fite, *American Farmers: The New Minority* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981), 38, 97-99, 209-217; "National Farmers Union: History," accessed on October 10, 2011, <http://www.nfu.org/about-nfu/history>; Daniel Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 29; Greg Forest Thrane, "PrairieFire Rural Action: A New Social Movement of the 1980s" (master's thesis, Iowa State University, 2000), 46.

organizing that CCI practiced. Since many of the other organizations practiced a less combative form of activism that was typical of the times, especially in the Midwest, CCI often found it difficult to find other organizations that were willing to publicly collaborate with them. On the other hand, some people found the aggressive nature of CCI to be empowering.<sup>39</sup>

Larry Ginter, a third generation farmer from Rhodes, Iowa, like many farmers, understood many of the causes of the farm crisis. Ginter saw the 1970s as a time of changing attitudes toward farming. He recalled a new, growing attitude that pressured farmers to farm “fence row to fence row,” which he saw as the motivation for some farmers to cut down trees and tear up waterways in order to plant more crops. This principle of expansion came from Earl Butz, Secretary of Agriculture under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, and it reflected a paradigm shift in federal agricultural policy. The previous paradigm, which had been in place since the New Deal, was based on the idea of limiting the amount of agricultural commodities that made it to market, with the goal of keeping crop prices high enough to keep the farmer in business and low enough for the consumer to afford. The new approach advocated producing as much as possible, which would inevitably flood the market and decrease crop prices, requiring the government to then prop up the crop prices with subsidies. These new policies of mass production were naturally more favorable for large-scale farmers and less favorable for the smaller family farms. Earl Butz traveled the country promoting his new policies and telling these smaller farmers, they had to “get big or get out” and “adapt or die.” By the

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<sup>39</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011; Larry Ginter, personal interview, September 26, 2011; Hugh Espey, personal interview, September 19, 2011.

time Butz resigned as Secretary of Agriculture in late 1976, policies were in place that made farm consolidation almost inevitable. One historian has noted that “the [farm] crisis of the 1980s had its immediate roots in the inflationary, expansive, and optimistic 1970s.” Butz helped plant those roots.<sup>40</sup>

These policies drove up land prices along with crop prices, which ultimately laid the groundwork for the farm crisis. As Friedberger explained the situation:

In the late 1970s, farm men and women on commercial operations were drawn into a cycle of deficit cash flow. Equity financing - the borrowing of money based on the collateral provided by the ever-increasing values of land - was a rational and legitimate strategy for them as long as inflation continued to push land values ever higher. Lenders were very willing to finance expansion so long as the inflationary spiral continued.<sup>41</sup>

In sum, farmers were able to borrow practically as much as they wanted, since they had a strong income and their valuable land for collateral. Farmers accumulated massive amounts of debt to buy newer and larger equipment and as much land as possible. Then, crop prices started to fall. By 1978, corn was \$1.75 per bushel below the cost of production. In 1979, the Federal Reserve reversed their monetary policy by raising

<sup>40</sup> Larry Ginter, personal interview, September 26, 2011. Gilbert C. Fite, “The 1980s Farm Crisis,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 36 (Winter 1986): 69-71; Richard Goldstein, “Earl L. Butz, Secretary Felled By Racial Remark, Is Dead at 98,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/04/washington/04butz.html> (accessed October 20, 2011); William Robbins, “Butz Campaigns On a Platform of Good Times,” *The New York Times*, September 16, 1976, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=FA0B17FB3E5C137B93C4A81782D85F428785F9> (accessed February 25, 2012); James Risser and George Anthan, “Why They Love Earl Butz: Prosperous Farmers See Him as the Greatest Secretary of Agriculture Ever. But Critics Charge That His Grain Deals Ignore the World’s Hungry and Hurt the American Consumer,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 1976, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F50910FC3D5A107B93C1A8178DD85F428785F9> (accessed February 25, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Friedberger, “Women Advocates,” 224-234.

interest rates, which “had tremendous and largely unforeseen ramifications for all sectors of the nation’s economy.”<sup>42</sup> Real interest rates, or the rate at which interest exceeded inflation, rose to as much as 8-10 percent. This not only directly increased the cost farmers had to pay to borrow money, but it also made the dollar weaker relative to foreign currencies, which weakened exports. Then, by the early 1980s, the bottom fell out of land prices. Throughout the course of the 1980s, “the decline in average land values ranged from 39.6 percent to 40.0 percent.”<sup>43</sup>

This confluence of economic forces left farmers with little income and massive debt. To make matters worse, the collateral used to back their debt, their land, depreciated significantly. This made it difficult for farmers to get access to new credit, which they increasingly depended on as crop prices dropped. It also became challenging to renegotiate existing loans, with any refinancing resulting in an increase in interest rates. Nervous bankers became less flexible with their farming customers and eventually

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<sup>42</sup> Barry J. Barnett “The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s,” *Agricultural History* 74 (Spring 2000): 336-380.

<sup>43</sup> Crop prices were incredibly high in the early and mid-seventies due in part to extremely large commodity sales to the Soviet Union in 1972, 1974, and 1975. In 1972 alone, the U.S.S.R. purchased over one quarter of the total U.S. wheat production. They also bought several tons of corn, soybeans, and feed grains. These transactions took place during these years for two reasons: 1) the Soviet Union had suffered a series of poor harvests in during this time, especially in 1972, and 2) the climate and policies of the Détente era allowed the two countries to decrease their hostilities toward one another. I. M. Destler, “United States Food Policy 1972-1976: Reconciling Domestic International Objectives,” *International Organization* 32 (Summer, 1978): 617-653; Martha M. Hamilton, *The Great American Grain Robbery and Other Stories*, (Washington, D.C.: Agribusiness Accountability Project, 1972), 311-313; Paul Lasley, “Crisis in Iowa,” as cited in Thrane, “PrairieFire,” 21; Barry J. Barnett, “The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s,” *Agricultural History* 74 (Spring 2000): 336-380; Bruce L. Gardner, “Changing Economic Perspectives on the Farm Problem,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 30 (March 1992): 62-101; Larry Ginter, personal interview, September 26, 2011; Rand D. Conger and Glen H. Elder, Jr., *Families in Troubled Times: Adapting to Change in Rural America* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1994), 62,65.

started calling the loans due. The number of farm bankruptcies and foreclosures started to rise.<sup>44</sup>

The farm crisis became so unbearable that some committed horrible acts of violence. On December 9, 1985, Dale Burr, a third-generation crop farmer from Johnson County, Iowa, walked into the Hills Bank & Trust Company and shot his banker, John Hughes, in the head with a twelve-gauge shotgun. Burr had done the same to his wife, Emily, before traveling to the bank. After leaving the bank, he shot and killed his fellow farmer, Richard Goody, and then he shot himself.<sup>45</sup> Burr had owned a “successful farming and farm chemical business,” but by the mid-eighties, things started falling apart for him.<sup>46</sup> His brother-in-law estimated that he had accumulated nearly a million dollars in debt, he fell behind on his taxes, and tried to bail out his son who had made some “questionable [farm] investments.” Just before the shooting, Emily Burr reportedly said, “I’m 64 years old and for the first time in my life I don’t have money for groceries.”<sup>47</sup> People knew about the Burrs’ financial trouble and in some sense, some people could understand why Dale did what he did. Jerry Wormer, the Hills general store manager, said, “[Dale] was a proud man, once successful, whose problems had become common knowledge. Maybe he’s better off now.”<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Douglas K. Barney, O. Finley Graves, and John D Johnson, “The Farmers Home Administration and Farm Debt Failure Prediction,” *Journal of Accounting and Public Policy* 18 (1999): 99-139.

<sup>45</sup> “Despondent Farmer Kills 3, Then Self,” *Sun Sentinel*, December 10, 1985, (accessed October 6, 2011), [http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1985-12-10/news/8502250753\\_1\\_fellow-farmer-payment-four-days-hills-bank](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1985-12-10/news/8502250753_1_fellow-farmer-payment-four-days-hills-bank)

<sup>46</sup> Ann Marie Lipinski, “A Farming Legacy Wiped Out,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 11, 1985, (accessed October 6, 2011), [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-12-11/news/8503250563\\_1\\_forbes-estimates-dale-burr-hills-bank](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-12-11/news/8503250563_1_forbes-estimates-dale-burr-hills-bank).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



What happened with Dale Burr and his victims, what happened to Hills, Iowa, happened in other small towns across the Midwest as well. In 1983, in Ruthton, Minnesota, James Jenkins and his son Steve ambushed Rudy Blythe, their banker, and Toby Thulin, a loan officer, at their defaulted-on dairy farm. The Jenkins boys used their 30-caliber rifle to shoot Thulin through the throat before shooting Blythe five times, killing them both. After the murders, the Jenkins fled to Texas, where James shot himself. Similarly, in 1986, in Elk Point, South Dakota, the stress of the bad farm economy drove Bruce Litchfield to murder his wife, his thirteen-year-old daughter, and his nine-year-old son, before he turned the gun on himself. Litchfield worked for the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), the federal government's lender of last resort for farmers, and after the moratorium on foreclosures ended, he faced the possibility of having to foreclose on a large number of farmers who were also personal friends.<sup>49</sup>

These murder-suicides captured the headlines during the 1980s, but in many cases, similar types of tragedies were not widely discussed. Out of respect to the families, many suicides did not make the front page, leaving the obituaries short on details and peppered with euphemisms. Research from just five midwestern states conducted by the National Farm Medicine Center and the Minnesota Center for Health Statistics compiled in the early 1990s showed that 913 male farmers killed themselves in the 1980s.

Between 1980 and 1988, 71 female farmers, 96 farm children, and 177 farm workers

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<sup>49</sup> "Suspect in Bankers' Killings Found Dead on Texas Farm," *New York Times*, October 3, 1983, (accessed October 6, 2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/03/us/suspect-in-bankers-killings-found-dead-on-texas-farm.html>; David J. Krajicek, "Rage on the Farm," *New York Daily News*, September 27, 2008, (accessed October 6, 2011), [http://www.nydailynews.com/news/ny\\_crime/2008/09/27/2008-09-27\\_rage\\_on\\_the\\_farm.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/ny_crime/2008/09/27/2008-09-27_rage_on_the_farm.html); Scott Kraft, "Were Foreclosure Pressures to Blame?: Farm Family Deaths Shock Hamlet," *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1986, (accessed October 6, 2011), [http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-10/news/mn-839\\_1\\_farm-crisis](http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-10/news/mn-839_1_farm-crisis).

committed suicide. These suicide rates far exceeded the national average. In the case of the male farmers, suicide rates peaked at 187 percent of their non-farming counterparts. The increase in farmer suicides and the high profile murders are a clear illustration of the desperation many farmers felt during the farm crisis of the 1980s.<sup>50</sup>

CCI organizers understood that this desperation resulted from a lack of power. As they saw it, farmers and rural residents of Iowa were suffering because of decisions often made by corporate leaders and government officials far removed from the daily lives of Midwesterners, just as the immigrants in the Back of the Yards neighborhood suffered at the hands of the meatpacking plant owners. For the duration of the farm crisis, CCI would continue to implement Alinsky's ideas and approach to social reform throughout the state of Iowa. Just as Alinsky rejected the settlement house idea of the poor being poor because they did not have the proper middle class values, CCI organizers rejected the idea that African Americans who faced housing discrimination or farmers who, after a lifetime of successful farming, suddenly found themselves facing foreclosure, were to blame in any way. They placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the bankers and government officials who changed the environment in a way that resulted in redlining and the farm crisis. With this blame came all of the public shame and pressure CCI could muster.

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<sup>50</sup> "Farmer Suicide Rate Swells in 1980's, Study Says" *New York Times*, October 14, 1991, (accessed October 6, 2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/14/us/farmer-suicide-rate-swells-in-1980-s-study-says.html>. This article covered Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana. It did not cover Iowa, which is the area of focus for this paper, and for that reason, I almost left this information out. However, I included it in the end, since it struck me as reasonable to conclude that the results of this study probably represent a general trend in suicide rates as opposed to a spike that is isolated to the five studied states.

In order to be a more effective agent of public pressure, CCI organizers again emulated Alinsky. They developed a reputation for being extremely aggressive, unconventional, and, to many people, unacceptably rude. By protesting at a banker's personal residence to protest that banker decisions – in front of their children and neighbors – CCI sent a powerful message not only to the banker they were protesting, but also to any bankers who heard about the protest. If an organizing visit from Joe Fagan had been compared to a visit from Genghis Khan, Joe Fagan would have been very pleased.

With a focus on conflict instead of compromise, CCI may have distanced itself from many groups and individuals who disagreed with those tactics. Nevertheless, the group continued to grow in strength, numbers, and influence. They would continue to do so throughout the farm crisis and the more than twenty years since. This approach provides the organization with a niche that appeals to an activist segment of the population. It can also be extremely effective at bringing about change in certain circumstances. However, it can also be extremely limiting. Many organizations cannot or will not change their policies to please the loud demands of a small portion of the population. These limitations did not deter CCI organizers from fighting and winning several important victories during the farm crisis.

## CHAPTER 3

### ORGANIZING IN THE EXODUS

In 1981, CCI started its rural organizing in Mount Ayr, Iowa. Local farmers, Bob Andrews and his brother Bill, as well as Herb and Vivian Jackson, invited Joe Fagan to come to Ringgold County and help organize the people. Fagan spent a couple of days traveling around the countryside and meeting with the residents in an attempt to gain an understanding of the issues. Then, Fagan arranged for a meeting in the town's small Presbyterian church. Seventy people showed up, discussed the situation, and decided they needed to hold a meeting with a representative of the Small Business Administration (SBA). The SBA agreed to meet, and one hundred and thirty people showed up to air their grievances and demand relief.<sup>51</sup> The SBA had done nothing wrong per se; they operated under the same rules as they always had, but the farmers' situation had changed considerably. With the increase in interest rates, the cost of running a farm rose substantially, while the value of the land that the farmer used for collateral to obtain operating loans had plummeted. The residents of Mount Ayr met with the Small Business Administration with the hope of convincing, or forcing, the SBA to make capital more available for farmers. Pressuring government entities and private banks to reduce or write off interest rates or existing balances or take any other actions that would keep farmers from losing their homes or farms would become a mainstay of CCI for the next decade.

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<sup>51</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011; Hugh Espey, personal interview, September 19, 2011.

Although this foray into rural organizing demonstrated that farmers and rural residents were ready to take action, CCI did not commit a fulltime staff person to the farm crisis until 1984. Both Joe Fagan and Hugh Espey, the first fulltime rural organizer, remembered the primary reason for not working on these issues fulltime was a lack of funding. As Fagan put it, “Nobody was funding this kind of work. A few people were funding organizing around urban issues, but nobody was funding rural work. They didn’t care about that.”<sup>52</sup> Groups involved in the farm crisis struggled to find funding. As a new, primarily urban-based group, CCI found it especially difficult to find funding for rural organizing, especially at a time when the Midwest saw a growing number of farm-focused groups form. Some groups, like PrairieFire, whose Executive Director was a United Methodist Minister, had indirect affiliations with churches, and therefore church funding. Other groups, like Catholic Rural Life, were directly part of a church. These groups had a reasonably reliable income source. American Agricultural Movement (AAM), Farmers Union, CCI, and many other groups competed for what little grant money or personal donations were available. Funding sources eventually started to appear as more and more people began to get involved. According to one study, as many as sixty percent of farmers attended a “crisis meeting” during the 1980s, while nearly a quarter described themselves as “activists.”<sup>53</sup>

By the end of 1984, CCI organizers had secured adequate funding and began its fulltime rural organizing operation. This chapter will explore the three main rural

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<sup>52</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

Mark Friedberger, *Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 75.

campaigns waged by CCI organizers from 1985 to 1990. Their first campaign focused on addressing falling crop prices by seeking legislation that would ensure a minimum price. After that, they worked to negotiate credit issues with federal agencies. Their other major effort consisted of working with private banks to address the credit needs of farmers. In this campaign, they utilized the same legal rights, namely, those provided by the CRA, and tactics they had employed in fights with banks concerning urban credit issues.<sup>54</sup> This chapter argues that although the tactics changed from campaign to campaign, the underlying principle of direct conflict remained the same. Furthermore, all actions that appeared to be similar to a social service, such as the service provided during the farm credit days, were services that resulted from confrontational organizing. They also had the added benefit of bringing more people into the organization, which helped build CCI's power.<sup>55</sup>

Once CCI started rural organizing full time, staff members immediately advocated for passage of a minimum price bill. This bill called for a “minimum price for most commodities at 80 percent of parity,” in other words, an amount “roughly equivalent to the production cost.”<sup>56</sup> Burt Henningson, an agricultural economist from the University of Minnesota at Morris and a supporter of the bill, said, “Minimum pricing is like minimum wage.”<sup>57</sup> The bill had a provision that prohibited the minimum pricing from taking effect unless similar legislation passed in other agricultural states, which in conjunction covered at least sixty percent of a given commodity market.

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<sup>54</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011; Hugh Espey, personal interview, September 19, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, February 21, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Lori Leonard, “Farm Rally Activists Urge Commodity Price Floor,” *Gazette*, December 19, 1984.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

According to its supporters, the minimum price bill would have raised the price of corn and soybeans considerably, as they were selling for fifty-nine and fifty percent of parity respectively in February of 1985. These rates were untenable for most farmers. Virginia Genzen, a farmer from Crawford County, Iowa, told the *Iowa Farmer Today* that, “We are producing food for the United States without a wage. In Lincoln’s day they called that slavery.”<sup>58</sup> If the bill passed into law, anyone who purchased or sold a commodity at less than eighty percent of parity would be subject to penalty, which would virtually guarantee the farmer a fair price for his or her crop. In addition, the bill would not require any allocation of state funds.<sup>59</sup>

CCI organizers traveled the state, holding informational meetings and gathering support for the proposed legislation. In four months, they held more than forty meetings across the state at churches, homes, community buildings, co-ops, and the State Capitol. CCI also organized a protest at the Farm Bureau’s state headquarters in West Des Moines in March of 1985, at which forty farmers participated. The Farm Bureau adamantly opposed the minimum price bill and was the most powerful lobby that CCI confronted. Many of the farmers who protested Farm Bureau were lifelong Farm Bureau members who were upset at the organization’s opposition to a bill they strongly

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<sup>58</sup> Dan Miller, “Minimum Price Good or Bad Idea?: Iowans Air Pros and Cons of Plan,” *Iowa Farmer Today*, February 2, 1985.

<sup>59</sup> Parity pricing is a somewhat controversial idea, and the formula to determine it has changed over time. However, the basic idea behind parity has stayed the same. It is the price that a commodity should be sold at if it is to cover the true cost of production. What goes into the true cost of production is the difficult part because in order to determine that, one must determine the rate of the labor that went into the production. According to Conger and Elder on page 62 of *Families in Troubled Times*, “the price ratio that existed in 1910-1914 is used as the standard called parity.” These years are generally considered the Golden Age of Agriculture. Conger and Elder, *Families in Troubled Times*; “Minimum Pricing Hot Issue At Farmer’s Meeting,” *Toledo Chronicle*, February 20, 1985; “Farmers to Rally in Support of State Minimum Price Legislation on March 20 and March 26,” *Sentinel*, March 23, 1985.

supported. The rest of the meetings were less confrontational and saw similar turnouts. In Clutier, thirty people met at the grain elevator. In Dunlap, fifty people met at the Catholic Church. In Des Moines, one hundred and fifty people joined in a march downtown. People were turning out to meetings consistently across the state, writing letters to newspaper editors, and contacting their elected officials. These efforts kept pressure on legislators and ensured the bill became part of the public debate. However, the decisive event that moved the bill forward happened on February 27, 1985, in Ames, Iowa, where 15,000 “angry and frustrated” farmers and their allies gathered for the National Farm Crisis Action Rally.<sup>60</sup> Ten farm organizations collaborated to organize the rally. Iowa State University’s Hilton Coliseum reached capacity, and with all 14,800 seats filled in the arena, hundreds of people ended up gathering outside on the steps listening to the speeches over loud speakers. As Joe Fagan remembered it, most of the legislators attended, since the State Assembly canceled all legislative activities in order to support the event. The rally demonstrated such an arresting show of rural dissatisfaction that within a week, the Iowa Senate passed the bill by a vote of 29-19; a few days later it passed the House by a vote of 55-43.<sup>61</sup>

Supporters celebrated these victories but knew it would be difficult to get Governor Terry Branstad to sign the legislation. On March 20, 1985, CCI held a rally at

<sup>60</sup> Eileen Orgintz, “15,000 Farmers Rally for Aid,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 28, 1985.

<sup>61</sup> Ferd Kvidera, “Minimum Price Legislation Discussed at Clutier Meeting,” *Star-Clipper*, January 31, 1985; “Farmers to Rally in Support of State Minimum Price Legislation on March 20 and March 26,” *Sentinel*, March 23, 1985; “Farm Rally Focuses on Minimum Price Legislation,” *The Reporter*, February 28, 1985; “Farmers Protest, Lobby Branstad to Sign Price Bill,” *The Des Moines Register*, March 21, 1985; “Iowa CCI and Farm Bureau Lock Horns Over Minimum Pricing Bill: Says Farm Bureau Members Should be Consulted on Issue,” *Fort Dodge Messenger*, March 15, 1985; “History of Senate Bills: S.F. 32,” Senate bill history collection, State Library of Iowa, Des Moines, IA.



the State Capitol to show support for the bill and meet with the Governor in an attempt to persuade him to sign it. More than two hundred people showed up in Des Moines. Several of the leaders met with Branstad immediately following the rally but could not get him to commit to signing the bill. They decided to stay at the Capitol and hold a vigil until he did. A few days later, Branstad vetoed the bill. He cited a study from Iowa State University that claimed, “Iowa could lose 86,000 jobs and \$6.7 billion in economic activity.”<sup>62</sup> He also said, “I am concerned that signing this legislation would take the pressure off Washington to act to address our agricultural problems...instead we need to redouble our efforts to demand changes in national farm policy.”<sup>63</sup> Many farmers were far less optimistic about the possibility of the Reagan administration intervening in the situation.<sup>64</sup>

Most of the tactics that CCI used during the minimum wage bill fight were typical of any sort of social or political organization. Making phone calls to legislators, sending letters to the editor, holding meetings, and giving speeches are all part of political organizing. Some people considered CCI’s rhetoric and protesting of the Farm Bureau too confrontational; others thought that the severity of the situation demanded drastic actions. Very few who knew about CCI were indifferent to the organization.

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<sup>62</sup>Dan Miller, “Branstad’s Veto Shoots Down Pricing Bill; Backers Mobilizing,” *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, March 23, 1985. The report was titled “Options for the 1985 Farm Bill: An Analysis and Evaluation,” and presented likely outcomes of various agricultural policies that could be implemented at the federal level. The specific numbers Branstad cited were extrapolations made by the authors as to what might happen to Iowa if the state level minimum price bill took effect. No official study examined the possible outcomes specifically of the minimum price bill.

S.R. Johnson, Banner W. Womack, William H. Meyers, Robert E. Young II, and Jon Brandt, “Options for the 1985 Farm Bill: An Analysis and Evaluation,” Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute, University of Missouri-Columbia and Iowa State University.

<sup>63</sup> Leonard Jensen, “Letter to the Editor,” *Onawa Sentinel*, March 28, 1985.

<sup>64</sup> Scott Sonner, “Farm Rally at Statehouse,” *Ames Daily Tribune*, March 21, 1985; Tom Witosky, “Branstad Vetoes Crop Price Floor,” *Des Moines Register*, March 23, 1985.

Some of the tactics CCI used also differentiated it from the rest of the organizations. Joe Fagan remembered one of these tactics as being a lot of fun. One night, in the middle of the minimum price bill campaign, at approximately 11:00 p.m., Fagan and Hugh Espey went into the State Capitol, which remained unlocked at all times. They were entirely alone in the building, as it was several hours past the close of business. Fagan found a “fact sheet” that the Republicans circulated among their caucus to inform their members about arguments that could be used against the minimum pricing bill.<sup>65</sup> He then sat down and “corrected” the sheet, replacing their numbers with CCI numbers and answering the questions that the paper presented as unanswerable.<sup>66</sup> Fagan then walked over to the copy machine, made a sufficient number of copies, and distributed the revised version of the “fact sheet” to each of the legislators’ desks.<sup>67</sup>

CCI’s opponents and would-be supporters were not surprised by the organization’s unconventional tactics, especially given the radical nature of the minimum pricing bill. To many people, including agricultural economists Arne Paulsen and William H. Meyers at Iowa State University, the minimum pricing bill was an entirely impractical, hare-brained scheme that would destroy the economy of any state that tried it.<sup>68</sup> Since the bill only required the states that accounted for sixty percent of any given commodity's production and commodities traded at a national level, the states that passed the bill would price themselves out of the market. The remaining forty percent would be able to sell their products considerably cheaper and ultimately

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<sup>65</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Tom Witosky, “Economists Blast Grain Price Bill, but Leaders to Proceed with Debate,” *Des Moines Register*, February 22, 1985.

dominate the market. If the bill passed at the federal level, the entire country would price itself out of the global market. Given the seemingly obvious economic problems with the bill, why did CCI support it? There are several answers to this question. For one thing, economists in general frequently made mistakes. Earl Butz was an economist himself, yet his decisions were in part to blame for the farm crisis. Beyond this general skepticism, CCI members were especially weary of economists and policy advocates that were associated with land grant universities like Iowa State University. Given the financial connections between large agribusiness corporations and land grant universities, reports issued by one were viewed as the same as a report issued by the other. In the eyes of CCI members and organizers, what was good for Monsanto was not good for the family farmer. Indeed, many CCI members viewed the desires of agribusiness as completely antithetical to their own. Finally, the economic opinion of the bill was not unanimous. An economist named Bert Henningson from the University of Minnesota supported the bill and argued that it was economically sound. He stood in agreement with CCI on many things and in December of 1985, CCI brought Henningson to Iowa State University for a protest and meeting. During the meeting:

Henningson pointed to a list posted on one wall of the meeting room containing the names of corporate contributors to Iowa State and the amounts contributed. “Look at who funds the ag economics department at Iowa State,” Henningson said. “It’s the chemical companies and seed

companies...they're not in it for (the betterment) of farming, they're in it for themselves.”<sup>69</sup>

The 1985 minimum price bill campaign proved to be the most intensive, though not the only, legislative fight CCI had in the latter half of the 1980s. They unsuccessfully tried to push the same legislation through the next year. Despite the continued meetings, rallies, and constant political pressure from CCI members and other supporters of the bill that lasted the better part of a year, the bill did not make it out of committee. From the very beginning of the legislative session, many legislators doubted the viability of the bill passing in 1986, since Governor Branstad had given no sign that he had changed his mind about the legislation. In 1987, Branstad also came into conflict with CCI when he vetoed a bill that contained funding for several farm programs that would have provided legal services and reduced interest rates for farmers. Federal legislators also heard from CCI members who called for the “transfer of \$581 million from the Pentagon’s budget to Iowa’s Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) loan program.”<sup>70</sup> These smaller lobbying efforts did not yield many tangible results. They did, however, serve to keep the concerns of CCI members in the public spotlight.<sup>71</sup>

The largest concerns desperate farmers had in the late 1980s, next to low crop prices, had to do with credit availability and interest rates. In accordance with this, CCI directed its efforts largely at two main government-affiliated entities. The first was a federal agency by the name of Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), which offered

<sup>69</sup> Kerry Gibson, “ISU Criticized on Farm Stand,” *Daily Tribune*, December 11, 1985.

<sup>70</sup> “Farmers Plow Up Pentagon’s Budget,” *The Progressive*, March 1987.

<sup>71</sup> Tom Witosky, “Farm Price Bill is ‘Lost Cause’,” *Des Moines Register*, March 6, 1986; “CCI Asks You to Contact Branstad,” *Herald Journal*, June 25, 1987; Larry Ginter, personal interview, September 26, 2011.

credit to farmers who could not get credit from other institutions. The second was Farm Credit Services (FCS), which was a government-controlled corporation as established by the Agricultural Credit Act of 1987.<sup>72</sup>

CCI members and farmers across the state had several demands for the FmHA. They wanted a complete moratorium foreclosures on all FmHA farm loans, an acceleration of the loan process, an increase in funding made available to Iowa's FmHA offices, and an increase in the number of people who could participate in an interest rate buy-down program. CCI organizers traversed the state, meeting with groups of twenty to one hundred and fifty people in dozens of small towns. They held meetings to educate the public about their options, but they also held meetings with legislators and FmHA employees to tell them what the public needed. Many people who attended CCI meetings did so because they wanted to see large institutional reforms, but others attended with hopes of finding a solution to their personal financial problems.<sup>73</sup>

CCI helped farmers address their financial needs by holding meetings across the state, which they called "farm credit days." These meetings consisted of FmHA employees setting up ad hoc offices at the site of the meeting and working with farmers directly to secure more credit or renegotiate existing loans. These types of meetings were a result of a relentless pressure campaign on Iowa Farmers Home Administration Director Bob Pim. In February of 1985, CCI filled the Director's office in Des Moines

<sup>72</sup> Kenneth J. Meier, J.L. Polinard, and Robert D. Wrinkle, "Politics, Bureaucracy, and Farm Credit," *Public Administration Review* 59 (July–August, 1999): 293-302.

<sup>73</sup> Art Cullen, "Farmers Vent FmHA Gripes," *Kossuth County Advance*, June 14, 1986; "Iowa Farmers Jam FmHA Offices," *Times-Republican*, February 1, 1985; "FmHA Officials Not Targets; Failed Policies, Treatment Are," *Upper Des Moines*, June 25, 1986; Jerry Perkins, "Farmers Fill State FmHA Office," *Des Moines Register*, February 1, 1985.

with a list of demands. Over the next several years, CCI invited him to meetings where even more farmers could pressure him to change the FmHA. Most of these meetings ended with individual farmers cornering Pim and pleading their cases to him directly. Eventually, the Director agreed to a series of farm credit days. Pim made a revealing statement to the Council Bluffs *Nonpareil* newspaper when he said, “My experience with public meetings is that they turn out to be a roast of the FmHA. Don’t give me meetings, give me cases so I can help people.”<sup>74</sup> CCI members could have viewed Pim’s comments as the very definition of victory. Officials at the FmHA tried to help more farmers in an explicit attempt to avoid pressure from CCI.<sup>75</sup>

When the Farm Credit Act of 1987 passed, billions of dollars of farm loans came under the control of Farm Credit Services (FCS). CCI started to run ads and hold meetings to ascertain information about farmers’ experiences with the FCS. By 1989, they had received numerous complaints about the FCS office in Mason City, Iowa. As Espey put it in an interview with *The Agri-News*, “When you find a pocket where farmer after farmer after farmer has similar complaints, there must be something to it – not that many farmers can be wrong. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”<sup>76</sup> Jerry and Agnes Franks were one of the farm couples that struggled with the FCS. In 1979, the Franks had taken out a loan that they understood to be a fixed interest loan, but it actually had a variable interest rate. When interest rates rose, the bank foreclosed on the Franks after

<sup>74</sup> Roger Moons, “Farmer Activist Group Says FmHA Not Serving Farmers, Misuses Funds,” *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, June 24, 1986.

<sup>75</sup> “Iowa Farmers Jam Amah Offices,” *Times-Republican*, February 1, 1985; “Harken, Grandy Aides to Work on Credit Concerns With Farmers,” *Register & Tribune*, July 16, 1987.

<sup>76</sup> Jean Caspers-Simmet, “Farm Couple Aided By Group’s Protest at FCS,” *Agri-News*, December 14, 1989.

they fell behind on their payments. The Franks sued for fraudulent misrepresentation and won, only to have their case overturned because it exceeded the statute of limitation. The FCS set a date for the sheriff's sale. In response, CCI organized a group of supporters to go into the Mason City FCS branch with a simple request to wait until the Franks completed the appeal process. Employing the usual pressure tactics against the FCS, CCI members called and wrote them constantly. In the end, however, despite all of the community support, the Franks lost their appeal and ultimately lost their farm as well.<sup>77</sup>

CCI attempted to change how private banks treated farmers in their third major campaign in the late 1980s. It used a wide variety of tactics and pressured a large number of banks to make additional credit available to farmers and allow more farmers to work out an arrangement with their loans that worked for the bank as well as the farmers. CCI focused a large portion of its efforts on ensuring banks followed the requirements of the CRA. CCI utilized the features of the act to convince a large number of banks to change how they treated farmers. Norwest Bank proved to be the most difficult bank to challenge, but in the end served as the largest victory for CCI on this front.<sup>78</sup>

In January of 1987, CCI organizers held a meeting in Humboldt, Iowa to talk to members about how they could force rural banks like Norwest Bank to comply with the CRA by meeting the credit needs of the rural community. This was a relatively novel idea. People viewed and used the CRA exclusively as a law pertaining to urban banks

<sup>77</sup> Steve McMahon, "Police Clear Farm Protest," *Globe Gazette*, December 8, 1989.

<sup>78</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011; Hugh Espey, personal interview, September 19, 2011; Joe Fagan, "Iowa CCI's Campaign to Obtain Credit for Family Farmers from Norwest Bank Through Use of the Community Reinvestment Act," Fagan's File, archives of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Des Moines, IA.

even though the law contained no such limitation. Throughout the spring and summer, CCI organizers and members continued to discuss bringing their experience with the CRA into their work with farmers. They developed a team of community leaders who would become experts in the CRA called the Farm Task Force. Then in August, they saw their chance to act when a newspaper ran an article about Norwest Bank's attempts to buy Peoples Bank in Cedar Rapids.<sup>79</sup>

CCI started to investigate Norwest and put together a list of demands. Farmers and other CCI members had difficulties dealing with Norwest, and the more they asked around, the more stories CCI staffers heard. There were also media stories at that time about Norwest losing a lot of money on foreign loans. Espey looked into Norwest's FDIC filings to determine "changes in volume of Norwest farm loans, government securities, deposits, assets and total loans between December 1984 and December 1986."<sup>80</sup> After gaining a better understanding of the situation, CCI organizers and the Farm Task Force developed a list of demands for Norwest Bank. They proposed, "\$54 million of operating and real estate loans targeted to family farmers, loans for beginning farmers, participation in interest buy down loans, debt restructuring, a signed statement, a review board, [and] marketing and renewal provisions."<sup>81</sup>

In November of 1987, CCI met with Norwest Regional President George Milligan and a few top agricultural loan officials. CCI presented Milligan and his staff the demands, but they did not agree to anything. Instead, they promised to review,

<sup>79</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011; Joe Fagan, "Campaign to Obtain Credit from Norwest Bank," archives of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Des Moines, IA.

<sup>80</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid; Joe Fagan, "Campaign to Obtain Credit from Norwest Bank," archives of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Des Moines, IA.



consider the demands, and meet to talk about their response on a later date. However, it became clear within a few months that Norwest did not intend to meet with CCI again. Nor did they plan to freely agree to the demands.<sup>82</sup>

Since Norwest refused to negotiate or to even meet with CCI members and staff, CCI started to apply pressure using a variety of approaches. They got the story into the media and they started to fill Norwest's CRA file with every correspondence between the two groups. Since the CRA file is reviewed by the FDIC, which approves or denies attempts by banks to acquire other banks, and since the correspondence consisted of a series of requests by the community to discuss credit needs followed by Norwest's refusal to meet with them, the CRA file served as a running record of how Norwest failed to comply with the Community Reinvestment Act. CCI then filed an official grievance with the Federal Reserve Bank in an attempt to stop Norwest's acquisition of Peoples Bank. CCI also engaged in direct actions, which consists of a direct public confrontation with the target. One of these direct actions took place at Milligan's home in January of 1988. CCI organizers and community members blanketed his neighborhood with literature explaining the situation and asking people to tell Milligan to meet with CCI. Additionally, they sent letters to the Federal Reserve Bank (FRB) asking them to meet with CCI and Norwest at the same time in order to negotiate a deal.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011; Joe Fagan, "Campaign to Obtain Credit from Norwest Bank," archives of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Des Moines, IA.

<sup>83</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011; Joe Fagan, "Campaign to Obtain Credit from Norwest Bank," archives of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Des Moines, IA.

In March of 1988, the FRB and Norwest met with CCI, AAM, and Catholic Rural Life. Norwest refused to agree to the demands again. Immediately following the meeting, organizers and community members returned to Milligan's house to protest, in direct violation of the request sent by Milligan's lawyer not to do so. They also took flyers to Norwest Bank's competitors explicitly explaining what Norwest did to warrant the public's ire and implicitly warning the other banks about what would happen if they did the same. They continued to call for meetings with Milligan and later his replacement, John Nelson. Norwest officials told them to meet with local branches, which they did. CCI organizers brought more allies into the fight and the campaign widened. They convinced the United Methodist Church and the bishop of the Sioux City diocese to join the campaign. Then Norwest applied to build a bank branch in Lincoln, Nebraska. CCI filed another protest with the FRB. A month later, the FRB, which had previously approved Norwest's acquisition of the Cedar Rapids bank, granted CCI's appeal of that ruling. This halted all further progress on the purchase.<sup>84</sup>

Nelson knew that he would have to do something to accommodate the demands of CCI and its allies. He called Joe Fagan on August 5, 1988, and said, "Let's meet."<sup>85</sup> "That's when we knew we had him," Fagan recalled years later.<sup>86</sup> Nelson met with the Farm Task Force a few weeks later, but this time he eagerly negotiated. He said at one point during the meeting, "When you (CCI) go away mad, bad things happen."<sup>87</sup> The leadership of Norwest Bank and the CCI Farm Task Force met to negotiate five times in

<sup>84</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011; Joe Fagan, "Campaign to Obtain Credit from Norwest Bank," archives of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Des Moines, IA.

<sup>85</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, September 28, 2011.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

a five-month period, and on the final day of negotiation in January of 1989, they reached an agreement. Norwest Bank would commit eighteen million dollars in new loans and fourteen million to “farmers owing less than 500 acres and having a net worth of less than \$150,000.”<sup>88</sup>

The Norwest agreement was a major victory for CCI, their allies, and people across Iowa, especially small family farmers, but it was not the only banking deal reached at that time. In November of 1988, CCI reached agreement with Banks of Iowa to guarantee five million dollars in low-interest loans to small farmers. The loans would be four percent lower than those available through the FmHA. This would be “an opportunity to keep this land in the hands of family farmers,” Jerry Streit, a West Bend farmer, said about the program.<sup>89</sup> Rodney Schroeter, a farmer from Brayton, also supported the agreement. He said, “It won’t save everybody, but it’ll be a help to an awful lot of them.”<sup>90</sup>

The above comment by Rodney Schroeter referred to the loan agreement reached between CCI and Banks of Iowa, but he could have just as easily been referring to Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement’s role in the farm crisis more broadly. CCI had many victories between 1985 and 1990 but also suffered a number of serious setbacks. Its first major campaign to pass legislation at the state level that would have guaranteed farmers a minimum price for their crops did not ultimately become law. CCI pushed the bill through both the Senate and the House of Representatives, but in the end, that did

<sup>88</sup> Ibid; Joe Fagan, “Campaign to Obtain Credit from Norwest Bank,” archives of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Des Moines, IA.

<sup>89</sup> Bert Kreitlow, “Loans Announced to Help Farmers Buy Back Land,” *Gazette*, November 12, 1988.

<sup>90</sup> “Plan Will Provide \$5 Million in Loans for Small Farmers,” *Journal*, November 12, 1988.

not change anything for the struggling farmer. The fight proved to be a useful one, though, for many reasons. CCI and coalition partners showed that they were a political force that had to be dealt with as they were able to apply sufficient public pressure and offer a compelling enough reform proposal that their legislation made it to the Governor's desk. Additionally, the campaign to support the bill required CCI organizers and members to travel the state, which allowed them to meet with hundreds of farmers and rural citizens, learn more about the dynamics of the farm crisis, and establish a greater network of members and supporters in towns across the state. The minimum price bill campaign ended in defeat, but in the process of fighting it, CCI became one of the leading rural issue community groups.

The campaign to renegotiate loans and open up more credit for farmers with federal agencies yielded tangible victories. CCI publicly criticized Farmers Home Administration and Farm Credit Services, calling for a large number of significant changes in how they operated. Most of these changes did not occur. Some of the changes CCI asked the agency directors to make were not even within the directors' authority, such as the amount of funding the agency had. These types of public criticism of government entities derived from the old adage, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." If politicians continuously read about these common complaints in the paper, they would be more likely address the problem. The direct victories in this campaign came from the Farm Credit Days. These days of direct negotiations allowed farmers who faced difficult financial situations to meet with FmHA or FCS officials who could modify their loans. These negotiations did not occur in government office buildings in Des Moines, but

rather small towns across the state where the community and advocates trained in loan negotiations could easily support the farmers. All of these factors made the Farm Credit Days a success. Hugh Espey estimated that the Farm Credit Days protected dozens of farmers from losing their farms. That the Farm Credit Days occurred at all is a testament to the efficacy of CCI's confrontational approach. As Pim's comment suggested, it was better for CCI's target to sit down and work things out with a farmer than face the ire of CCI members.<sup>91</sup>

The final major organizing campaign at this time revolved around credit and private banks, which resulted in the clearest and most wide-ranging victories CCI had during this time. After years of consistent pressure and inventive tactics, CCI negotiated a massive deal with Norwest bank that allowed people, and specifically small farmers, access to tens of millions of dollars in low interest loans. Since CCI reached a five million dollar deal with Banks of Iowa, more farmers in more locations were able to have access to similar financing. This too was directly attributable to CCI's commitment to conflict. As Nelson said when he agreed to make the deal with CCI, he wanted to avoid the "bad things" that happened when CCI went "away mad."<sup>92</sup>

These three campaigns yielded impressive results for a small organization with relatively little funding, but the underlying causes of the farm crisis remained. The federal policies supporting mass production, the improvements in technologies that allowed fewer farmers to farm more ground, ever-increasing input cost, and increased global competition were all factors that contributed to the farm crisis of the 1980s. CCI

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<sup>91</sup> Hugh Espey, personal interview, September 19, 2011.

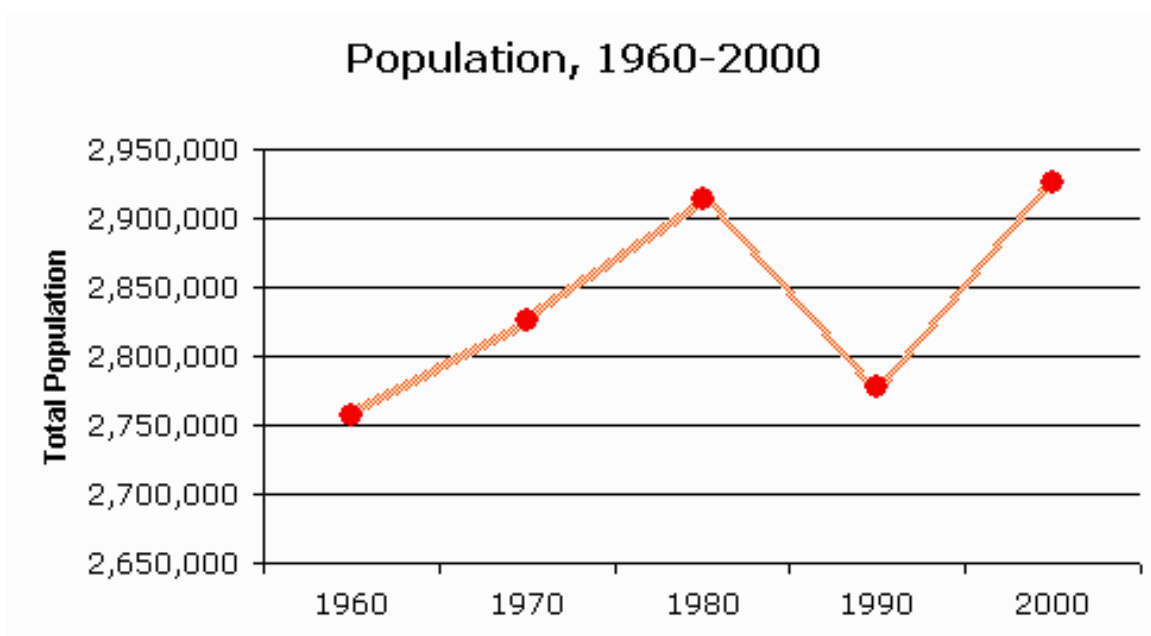
<sup>92</sup> Joe Fagan, "Campaign to Obtain."

did not and could not affect any of these factors. Ultimately, the farm crisis wiped out many farm families and farming communities, and by the 1990s, farming had started a new era defined by large-scale industrial factory farms and massive crop operations. Increasingly, national or international corporations owned part or all of the farming operation, turning many independent farmers into corporate employees.

The farm crisis drastically altered the state of Iowa. The total number of farms decreased significantly. Between 1975 and 1990, the number of farms in Iowa declined by 20 percent, with one county seeing a loss of 27.3 percent. The population also decreased. During the 1980s, the total population reduced by nearly 4.7 percent, from 2,913,808 to 2,776,755. Almost all of this depopulation occurred in rural parts of the state, where the population decreased by 137,053 or 11.37 percent. By contrast, the urban areas only saw a decrease of 6,436 or 0.5 percent.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Conger and Elder, *Families in Troubled Times*, 65; United States Department of Agriculture, "State Fact Sheet: Iowa, Population, Income, Food Insecurity, Education, and Employment," (accessed on November 21, 2011), <http://www.ers.usda.gov/StateFacts/ia.HTM>.



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These losses posed major problems for employers, educators, and policymakers. With a considerable loss in the number of farms, many of the people who left the state were people who otherwise would have inherited the family farm. The state needed more people. It needed taxpayers to fund the schools and children to attend them. It needed a workforce that could replace its aging one. It would take time, but by the mid-1990s the state would eventually experience an influx in immigration. Many of the new immigrants were also farmers who had lost everything in a farm crisis, but their farms and their farm crisis were in Mexico.

<sup>94</sup> The population loss was so great during the 1980s that by 1990, Iowa's population was nearly the same as it was in 1960. It took nearly a decade for the population loss to be made up so that by the late 1990s, the state's population had returned to what it was back in 1980. Census Scope, "Iowa Population Growth: 1960-2000," (accessed on November 19, 2011), [http://www.censusscope.org/us/s19/chart\\_popl.html](http://www.censusscope.org/us/s19/chart_popl.html).

## CHAPTER 4

### THE NEW FACE OF ORGANIZING

While the state of Iowa and the agricultural sector of the U.S. was starting to settle into a new normal, farmers in Mexico were on the verge of their own farm crisis. This crisis would result in the migration of a large number of Mexicans to the U.S., many of whom settled in Iowa. These immigrants often lacked the legal documentation to be in the United States and faced many social, economic, and legal hardships. Eventually, CCI started to organize in Iowa's growing Latino community. This chapter examines the effects that the North American Free Trade Agree (NAFTA) had on the Mexican economy and how that accounts for a considerable portion of the Latino population that started to settle in Iowa during the 1990s and 2000s. It will also look at one community that included a sizeable Mexican immigrant population, Marshalltown, and why that town embraced the new immigrants. Then, I examine the meatpacking industry, which employs a large number of immigrants under often-brutal conditions. After providing this background, the chapter explores four major campaigns undertaken by CCI and relating to the Latino community. First, CCI tried to engage the community by attempting various forms of non-organizing outreach. Second, CCI organized meatpacking industry workers against their ineffective corporate union. Third, CCI helped members of the Marshalltown community respond and fight for change after an immigration raid radically disrupted the community. Fourth, CCI worked with people from across the state and nation after another immigration raid took place in Postville,



Iowa. I argue that at time CCI worked on issues and events that were non-confrontational, but these events were, as with the Farm Credit Days, designed to build membership and therefore power.

Economic instability was a perennial feature of the Mexican economy, and the farming sector had always struggled. The country had faced three separate crises in less than ten years. Due to slow economic growth and heavy debt loads, the markets devalued the peso in 1976, 1982, and 1985. This resulted in a capital flight and a further deterioration of the overall economy.<sup>95</sup> Things were particularly bad for Mexico's rural residents. In 1984, twelve percent of them lived in extreme poverty.<sup>96</sup> Many farmers worked on ejidos, which are communal farms located on government lands first established after the 1917 revolution. In the late 1980s, fifty-nine percent of those who worked on ejidos were subsistence farmers.<sup>97</sup> Further, 38 percent of all corn produced was not sent to market, but instead consumed by the producer.<sup>98</sup>

With a desire to bring greater economic stability and increase the overall standard of living, Mexican leaders in the Carlos Salinas de Gortari Administration started pushing for the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1991. The idea was simple and the hopes were high. If Mexico, the United States, and Canada all agreed to drop their tariffs, each country would maximize their comparative advantage and prosper. Mexico had a comparative advantage in its labor costs and expected to be able to create

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<sup>95</sup> Vincent Dropsy, "NAFTA and the Mexican Economic Crisis: Causality or Coincidence?" *Social Science Journal* 32 (1995): 361-74.

<sup>96</sup> Alain De Janvry "NAFTA and Agriculture: An Early Assessment," Paper for presentation at the Transactional Research Symposium, "NAFTA and Agriculture: Is the Experiment Working?", San Antonio, Texas, November 1-2, 1996, 1-26.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

a large number of high paying jobs (relative to Mexican standards) primarily in the manufacturing sector, but also in the production of labor-intensive fruits and vegetables.<sup>99</sup> On the other hand, the U.S. would have a comparative advantage in the production of capital-intensive products such as “grains, oil seed, and meat.”<sup>100</sup> Most free trade agreements exempted agriculture, but its proponents intended NAFTA to be ambitious, covering all sectors and creating a free trade zone that would have the “same magnitude as the European Union.”<sup>101</sup> Many in the Mexican government thought that NAFTA would stabilize their economy and start to reverse the growth in the poverty rate.<sup>102</sup> They also knew it would destroy the Mexican agricultural sector as it was then constituted. They believed this was an acceptable tradeoff for two reasons. First, policymakers did not view the agricultural sector as productive. If subsistence farmers became well-paid factory workers, the GDP would grow, benefiting the society as a whole. Second, with effective public policy implemented over time, farmers could transition within the new economy with limited social unrest.<sup>103</sup>

To this end, the NAFTA agreements allowed for a periodic drop in tariff rates. During this transition period, the Mexican government intended to do several challenging things. Government officials wanted to “keep [farmers] down on the farm as long as possible,” “use this time to create alternative job opportunities,” “increase

<sup>99</sup> Ibid; Antonia Yunez-Naude, “Lessons from NAFTA: The Case of Mexico’s Agricultural Sector,” Final Report to the World Bank, December 2002.

<sup>100</sup> De Jeanery, “NAFTA and Agriculture,” 1-26.

<sup>101</sup> Gerard Bonnis and Wilfrid Legg, “The Opening of Mexican Agriculture,” *The OECD Observer* 206 (June/July 1997): 35-37; De Janvry, “NAFTA and Agriculture,” 1-26.

<sup>102</sup> M. Angeles Villarreal, “NAFTA and Mexican Economy,” Congressional Research Service, June 3, 2010.

<sup>103</sup> Weintraub, “NAFTA and Migration,” 29-34.

expenditures on social concerns,” “decentralize centers of economic opportunity in rural areas,” and “maintain a high level of overall economic growth.”<sup>104</sup> Unfortunately, the government met almost none of these objectives. In the end, the implementation of NAFTA, along with several other key factors, devastated Mexico’s rural population.

The years that followed the 1994 passage of NAFTA saw the destruction of Mexico’s farming economy. The total number of people employed in the agricultural sector dropped from 8.1 million in 1993 to 6.8 million in 2003.<sup>105</sup> The value added by Mexican agriculture also decreased from \$32 billion to \$25 billion over the same period.<sup>106</sup> The number of pork producers dropped precipitously. Before NAFTA, 15,000 Mexicans raised hogs; in 2002, fewer than 5,000 continued to do so.<sup>107</sup> Before NAFTA, Mexico imported only 5 percent of its needs; in 2002, it imported 40 percent.<sup>108</sup> Corn prices dropped as well. In 1993, corn was \$4.84 per bushel, which dropped to \$3.65 in 1997.<sup>109</sup> From 2000-2003, the price fell another 45 percent.<sup>110</sup> As was expected by many of the proponents and opponents of NAFTA, Mexican farmers were simply unable to compete with American farmers. There are two reasons for this. First, farmers in the United States tend to be more efficient because of access to better fertilizers, equipment, crop genes, climate, and soil. Second, U.S. agriculture was heavily subsidized. One report claimed, “U.S corn was sold in Mexico from 1999 through 2001 at prices 30

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Villarreal, “Mexican Economy,” 14.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Mychal Wilmes, “NAFTA puts Mexican Farmers in Tough Spot: Competition Isn’t Best Solution,” *Agri-News* Thursday, December 12, 2002.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Villarreal, “Mexican Economy,” 12.

<sup>110</sup> Laura Theobald, “Mexican Farmers Bring Message to Minnesota: They Say NAFTA is Hurting Both Sides of Border,” *Agri-News* Thursday, July 24, 2003.

percent or more below the cost of production.”<sup>111</sup> These subsidies served as de facto tariffs against which Mexican farmers could not compete. The imbalance grew even greater in 2002 when the U.S. Farm Bill increased a number of subsidies.<sup>112</sup>

Mexican farmers responded to NAFTA in a variety of ways. Some organized and held protests in Mexico.<sup>113</sup> Others tried to find work in the factories that NAFTA was supposed to bring to Mexico, but industrial growth was unable to absorb all of the people looking for work. This was especially true after China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001. Mexico tried to prevent this move; they were the last country to approve China’s entry into the WTO, but once they approved it, they saw their cheap labor competitive advantage slip away.<sup>114</sup> By 2003, China had displaced Mexico as the second largest exporter to the United States. In some parts of Mexico, more than 30 percent of the assembly plant jobs created in the 1990s moved to China and other lower-wage counties.<sup>115</sup>

The Mexican economy faced other difficulties as well in the years since the passage of NAFTA. In 1994-1995, the markets devalued the peso again.<sup>116</sup> The U.S. government assisted with the crisis, but for many foreign investors, this was another sign

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<sup>111</sup> Sandra Polanski, “Mexican Employment, Productivity, and Income a Decade after NAFTA,” A brief produced by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. February 25, 2004.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> In 2002, for example, there was a protest in Mexico City where 100,000 people, many of whom were farmers, gathered to voice their opposition to NAFTA. Theobald, “Message to Minnesota,” 2003.

<sup>114</sup> Polanski, “Decade after NAFTA,” 5.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>116</sup> Some scholars have raised the questions about the cause of the peso crisis, which occurred within less than two years of the adoption of NAFTA. They seem to be unrelated events. Instead of NAFTA, the cause appears to be poor political leadership and the “herd-like behavior of international investors.” Villarreal, “Mexican Economy,” 10; Francisco Gil-Diaz and Agustin Carstens, “One Year of Solitude: Some Pilgrim Tales About Mexico’s 1994-1995 Crisis,” *The American Economic Review* 86 (May 1996): 164-169.

of the instability of Mexico. When the global recession hit in 2008, Mexico suffered along with other countries. The number of Mexicans who were facing the “slow and silent violence of starvation” increased from 18 million in 2008 to 20 million in 2010.<sup>117</sup> Overall, since NAFTA passed, things have been very difficult in Mexico. Productivity went up 80 percent, yet poverty remained high. In 2008, moderate poverty was at nearly 50 percent with extreme poverty at nearly 20 percent.<sup>118</sup>

Many Mexicans did not stay to protest for change or look for work in Mexico. Instead, they abandoned their farms or left their cities and headed north to the U.S. Throughout the history of the United States, there has always been some immigration from Mexico, but during the last fifty years, the number of immigrants has increased. In 1960, fewer than 33,000 immigrants came from Mexico, accounting for just 12.3 percent of all immigrants and 55.2 percent of Latino immigrants.<sup>119</sup> By 1978, the number had increased to 92,367, which represented 15.4 percent of all immigrants and 47 percent of all Latino immigrants.<sup>120</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s, Latinos started to immigrate at a higher rate but congregated primarily in the southwest and larger cities.<sup>121</sup> After NAFTA was passed and its effects started to be felt, especially in the Mexican countryside, the rate of immigration picked up considerably. The rate accelerated to the point at which

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<sup>117</sup> Laura Carlsen, “NAFTA is Starving Mexico,” The Institute for Policy Studies October 20, 2011, 1-6.

<sup>118</sup> Elisabeth Malkin, “Nafta’s Promise, Unfulfilled,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 2009; Villarreal, “Mexican Economy,” 6.

<sup>119</sup> Masy and Schnabel use the term Hispanic as was common at the time of their article, but for the sake of simplicity will only use the term Latino/a. Douglas S. Massey and Kathleen M. Schnabel, “Recent Trends in Hispanic Immigration to the United States,” *International Migration Review* 17 (Summer 1983): 212-244.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Phillip Martin, J. Edward Taylor, and Michael Fix, “Immigration and the Changing Face of Rural America: Focus on the Midwestern States,” Report by the Julian Samora Research Institute.

approximately 5,000 foreigners crossed the U.S.-Mexican border every day in 1999.<sup>122</sup> Of these, authorities apprehended 4,000 people immediately upon entry into the U.S., leaving 1,000 successful entries per day. At this point, sizable immigrant communities started to develop across the entire county, including in places like Iowa.

The rapid increase in immigration changed the makeup of Iowa and helped it recover from the population loss caused by the farm crisis. Iowa experienced an increase in the Latino population of 150 percent between 1990 and 2000, bringing the total up from 49,826 to 82,473.<sup>123</sup> The overwhelming majority of these Latino immigrants hailed from Mexico, with all other national origins combined accounting for less than a quarter of the Latino population.<sup>124</sup> Many immigrants, including non-Latinos who settled in Iowa, were undocumented. These numbers are difficult to accurately determine, but, according to the Urban Institute, 30-39 percent of all foreign-born people living in Iowa in 2000 were undocumented.<sup>125</sup>

Many Latino immigrants were drawn to small towns across Iowa where meatpacking plants operated. These facilities offered low wages for hard work in undesirable conditions, but they were also willing to hire immigrants, even those who could not speak English or who did not have proper documentation to work in the United

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<sup>122</sup> Philip Martin and Elizabeth Midgley, "Immigration to the United States," *Population Bulletin* 54 (June 1999): 3-44.

<sup>123</sup> "Iowa's Hispanic Population, 2000," Report by the Office of Social and Economic Trends in Iowa at Iowa State University, October 2003.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel, Randy Capps, and Michael Fix, "Undocumented Immigrants: Facts and Figures," Urban Institute Immigration Studies Program, January 12, 2004.

States. Indeed, in many cases, meat processors specifically recruited immigrants.<sup>126</sup> Turnover rates at these facilities were incredibly high, and as a result, packing plants usually had job openings.<sup>127</sup> At one time people considered meat processing a “blue collar elite” job offering high pay and union protections, but in the 1970s and 1980s, most of the packing plants restructured or came under new management.<sup>128</sup> Automation reduced the total number of employees and the level of skill required in the industry. Although the number of jobs in the industry have decreased over the years, meatpacking plants are still among the largest employers in most towns, and usually they are the single largest by far. For example, in 1990, the town of Storm Lake had a population of 8,800; its two packing plants employed 2,000 people.<sup>129</sup> Packing plants not only determined the economic wellbeing of these towns, but they also defined the culture. Everyone shared a connection to the plant. If one did not work there, someone one knew did. The packing plant defined many towns in Iowa as Anglo blue-collar towns, but as the plants changed, so did the collective identity of these communities.

Undoubtedly, many people disliked the changing identity of their small nearly all-Anglo towns, but others appreciated the newcomers. Since the downsizing of the meat processing industry and the farm crisis hit around the same time, many packing towns experienced sizable drops in population in the 1980s. Young people who could

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<sup>126</sup> In 1991, the state of Iowa passed a law attempting to restrict companies from recruiting “non-English speaking workers from further than 500 miles away.” Martin *et al.*, “Changing Face of Rural America,” 9-10.

<sup>127</sup> David Griffith, “Impacts of Immigrants on Rural Communities: A Comparative discussion of Marshalltown, Iowa, Marshall, Minnesota, Beaufort County, North Carolina, and Hardee County, Florida,” Unpublished Manuscript, Greenville, NC: East Carolina University, 2003.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

not take over the family farm or work at the packing plant as their parents had left the state in droves. Immigrants helped turn the trend around. As one report stated, “Iowa’s population grew by over 150,000 through the 1990s, mostly through the immigration of young, working-age individuals.”<sup>130</sup> Adding “this growth...[was] a good beginning toward solving the problem of Iowa’s aging workforce.” In Marshalltown, St. Mary’s Catholic Church held a separate mass in Spanish. Of the 287 attendees, fewer than twenty appeared to be over the age of 30, according to one observer.<sup>131</sup>

CCI organizers and members witnessed this influx in the immigrant population in the late 1990s and decided the organization needed to work with the immigrants. Many felt a natural solidarity with those forced to leave their farms and their way of life due to market forces and policy decisions that were beyond their control. Between 1999 and 2003, organizers started to talk to members about the possibility of working with the Latino community. Many members like Larry Ginter were excited about the chance to organize a segment of the population that faced incredible challenges. Other members were less enthusiastic. They questioned whether the political fallout of working with immigrants, some of whom could be undocumented, would be worth it. Some undoubtedly opposed the presence of undocumented immigrants and had no desire to help. After years of quiet one-on-one discussions that eventually became a public discussion, the majority had made itself clear. CCI would reach out to the Latino population, and they would start in Marshalltown.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, March 14, 2012.



CCI hired Anna Galovich, a Spanish-speaking organizer, and set about building a relationship with the Latino community of Marshalltown. Galovich spent the better part of a year eating dinner and drinking coffee with key people in the community. She met with religious leaders, elected officials, employees at the community college, members of the business community, and a large number of Latinos, most of whom worked at the Swift & Company meatpacking plant. She read newspaper accounts, academic papers, and government reports in order to understand the community as much as possible. She found out that community leaders embraced the growing Latino presence. “They all wanted a piece of the Latino pie,” Galovich later said, “The community college, the politicians, the business community, they all wanted to be involved with the Latinos.”<sup>133</sup>

It is not surprising that Marshalltown’s institutions supported the growing immigrant population given their situation. One headline that addressed the state applied to Marshalltown as well. It read, “Iowa’s immigrant-friendly policies aren’t wildly popular among its residents. However, the state has no choice. It needs the people.”<sup>134</sup> Marshalltown’s population had decreased by 6.5 percent throughout the 1980s.<sup>135</sup> In the 1990s, its population experienced a net gain of less than one thousand people or 3.5 percent.<sup>136</sup> However, during the 1990s, the Latino population grew from 248 people, or 0.9 percent, to 3,265, or 12 percent.<sup>137</sup> Without the increase in Latinos, the town would

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<sup>133</sup> Anna Galovich, personal interview, March 19, 2002.

<sup>134</sup> Christopher Conte, “Strangers on the Prairie: Iowa’s Immigrant-friendly Policies Aren’t Wildly Popular Among Its Residents. But the State Has No Choice. It Needs the People,” *Governing Magazine*, January 2002.

<sup>135</sup> Iowa Data Center-<http://www.iowadatatcenter.org/archive/2011/02/citypop.pdf>

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> The Census Bureau reports there were 3,265 Latinos in Marshalltown in 2000, but the local leaders estimate the actual number was between 4,500-5,000 people. Mark A Grey and Anne C. Woodrick,

have had a net loss of thousands of people. The schools filled back up and Main Street began to show signs of life again. In 2005, a local newspaper article boasted about the 25 new Latino-owned businesses in “previously boarded up commercial spaces,” which had been vacant since the 1980s.<sup>138</sup>

Marshalltown had immigrants from several places across the globe, but the vast majority of them came from Mexico. Indeed, most of them came from a single small rural town in Mexico: Villachuato. Anthropologist Mark Grey estimated that 2,000 to 3,000 immigrants who lived in Marshalltown at the time of his study in 2002 came from this Mexican town. In 2000, Villachuato had a population of only 4,199. NAFTA had driven many of Villachuato residents north across the U.S. border. Many of them made it all the way to Marshalltown, where community leaders encouraged them to stay. While on an educational trip with other community leaders to the small Mexican town that sits two hours west of Mexico City, the Mayor of Marshalltown said of his intentions, “I was being self-serving. We need people.”<sup>139</sup>

While treated fairly by most of the leaders and institutions in the community, Marshalltown Latinos had a completely different relationship with the Swift plant that employed a large share of them. In interview after interview, Galovich heard about, and the newspapers covered, the horrible conditions at the plant. One employee reportedly broke his foot. The company nurse only gave him ice and ibuprofen.<sup>140</sup> Maria Cedeno asked to use the restroom because she felt nauseous due to her pregnancy; her supervisor

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“Unofficial Sister Cities: Meatpacking Labor Migration Between Vallachuato, Mexico, and Marshalltown, Iowa,” *Human Organization* 61 (2002): 364-376.

<sup>138</sup> Devona Walker, “Mucho Diner,” *Times Republican*, July 23, 2005.

<sup>139</sup> Grey and Woodrick, “Sister Cities,” 364-376.

<sup>140</sup> “OSHA Signs Partnership with Latinos en Accion de CCI,” *Times Republican*, November 24, 2005, 6B.

refused her request, so she vomited while “slaughtering pigs.”<sup>141</sup> Another woman, who went by the pseudonym Ana Moreno, fell down the stairs and hurt her back. When she complained, the company fired her because she was undocumented, a fact that Moreno claims the company was fully aware of when they hired her.<sup>142</sup> Swift terminated Maria Lira after she complained about an injury she sustained on the job. She had hurt her shoulder while “cleaning pig intestines” and her doctor told her to limit the use of the injured shoulder. The company responded by firing her.<sup>143</sup> These types of conditions have been a common feature of the meatpacking industry. They were present in Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and were still common in the industry more than 100 years later. A 2005 report by Human Rights Watch placed the meatpacking industry third on the list of most dangerous industries in America.<sup>144</sup>

If CCI wanted the Latino community to take them seriously, they needed to improve the conditions at Swift. Galovich’s research and outreach made it clear that the conditions at Swift were the single greatest concern for Marshalltown’s new immigrants. CCI organizers decided they were going to work with immigrants against the exact same giant meatpacking corporation – Swift & Company – as Saul Alinsky had done in the Back of the Yards in the 1930s. This time, however, CCI would find itself pitted against the union as well.<sup>145</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Jose De Jesus, “Employees at Meatpacking Plant Allege Mistreatment,” *The Des Moines Register*, April 2, 2006.

<sup>142</sup> Jose De Jesus, “Iowa Osha, Hispanics to Partner,” *The Des Moines Register* November 25, 2005.

<sup>143</sup> “OSHA Signs Partnership,” *Times Republican*, 6B.

<sup>144</sup> Jose De Jesus, “Employees at Meatpacking Plant Allege Mistreatment,” *The Des Moines Register*, April 2, 2006.

<sup>145</sup> On the surface, this may appear to be a departure from Alinsky’s model, however, a closer look shows that it was actually in line with the Alinsky tradition. Cesar Chavez, Alinsky’s most famous protégée, took

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) represented the employees at Swift, but according to many employees, the union stood up for the company more often than employees. CCI was not excited about picking a fight with the union; after all, the Latino project was brand new, Galovich was new to organizing, the Latino leaders had little to no experience, and unions were not only tough, but also the natural allies of groups like CCI. This hesitation did nothing to quell the consistent reports of the union representatives ignoring workers' complaints or even worse, negotiating with the workers to strengthen the company's hand.<sup>146</sup>

CCI organizers did not intend to represent the workers in the same way a union would. In fact, they thought the ideal solution would be to fix the problems with the union so that it might start to address the conditions in the plant. They first reached out to the union and attempted to set up a meeting. The union refused to meet. The UFCW already suspected CCI, who had been working with their union members for over a year, of attempting to encroach on union territory. CCI increased the pressure by calling the union, sending emails, and mailing letters in an attempt to set up a meeting. The union stalled. Then, CCI sent members to one of the union's monthly member meetings. A few of CCI's Latino leaders who also belonged to the union showed up at the meeting and demanded the union meet with CCI, but again the UFCW refused. Finally, CCI decided

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on the Teamster Union in California's Salina Valley in 1970. The Teamsters had negotiated a deal with the company without the consent of the workers, who had been working to have their own union, the United Field Workers recognized. Chavez's goal, like Alinsky's, was to empower the powerless, by letting them make their own decisions. He supported unions only in so far as they preformed this duty. Susan Ferriss and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworker's Movement*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997) 160-2.

<sup>146</sup> Anna Galovich, personal interview, March 19, 2012; Joe Fagan, personal interview, March 14, 2012.

to “hit” the union shop.<sup>147</sup> In February 2004, two-dozen CCI members, mostly Latinos, marched in the UFCW office and demanded that the union hear their grievances. Tim Olsen, the head of the UFCW at Swift, kicked the loud CCI members out of the office without agreeing to a meeting and making it clear that he would never agree to the meeting. It was clear that the union was not willing to address the workers’ complaints, and CCI did not yet have a large enough presence in the community to force the union to meet. Further, if CCI could not produce any results, the members would stop being involved and the Latino project would not even get off the ground.<sup>148</sup>

CCI members and organizers had no choice but to circumvent the union and go directly after Swift. CCI started the same process in attempting to meet with Swift management. They called, sent letters and emails, and members asked management to meet in person, but all to no effect. Over the course of more than a year, convincing the Swift management to change its ways was the top priority. CCI held a series of planning meetings that served as a chance to brainstorm ideas about how to pressure management but also gave people a venue to vent about the horrible working conditions at the plant.

In the fall of 2005, CCI decided to make another hit. This time the target was the highest-ranking Swift employee in the state and the location was his home. The night of the hit was cold and cloudy. When CCI members got to his home at 9:00 p.m., it was dark. As Fagan recalled, “it felt like the middle of the night.” With their list of demands in hand, 15 Latinos knocked on their boss’s door and demanded he address their

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<sup>147</sup> Organizers use the word “hit” in reference to a specific type of event, often portrayed as a general protest. The “protesters” are there to deliver a specific list of demands and hope to extract concessions from the target at the time of the protest.

<sup>148</sup> Anna Galovich, personal interview, March 19, 2012; Joe Fagan, personal interview, March 14, 2012.

grievances. His wife answered the door. She was holding a baby and was visibly frightened. Within a few minutes, the door closed and the police were on their way. There was no meaningful conversation and no meeting time was set. CCI and the workers at Swift had met another dead end.<sup>149</sup>

Understanding that any progress on the Swift front would be very difficult and time consuming, CCI organizers knew they needed to provide something for the Latino community if they were going to be taken seriously by them. CCI would need more members in order to bring enough pressure to bear on Swift to make a difference, but without any immediate benefit, Latinos saw little reason to join. Organizers set about working on new types of projects including the establishment of a soccer league, the hosting of two “Big Ass Dances” (BADs), and a dinner featuring Mexican cuisine. Some of these events helped raise money, but primarily, organizers intended them to provide the community with social events. Unlike most of CCI’s work, the soccer league, BADs, and dinner did not focus on bringing about social justice, at least not directly. This appeared to be out of character for an organization about which Hugh Espey said, “we are not a group that sits around having potlucks and griping about things. We go out there and get things done.”<sup>150</sup> When asked if these social events could be seen as a break with CCI’s past or its mission, Joe Fagan, half-yelling and half-laughing, loudly proclaimed, “Of course not, hell I’ve organized around cracked street curbs before.”<sup>151</sup> He went on to explain how not every fight was going to be ideal and that sometimes the

<sup>149</sup> Anna Galovich, personal interview, March 19, 2012; Joe Fagan, personal interview, March 14, 2012.

<sup>150</sup> Hugh Espey, personal interview, September 19, 2011.

<sup>151</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, March 14, 2012.

organization had to do certain things in order to get people involved with the organization.<sup>152</sup>

There was also a cultural component. CCI organizers lived in Des Moines and the organization had few active non-Latino members in Marshalltown. With nearly everyone either looking to get a “piece of the Latino pie” or hoping that the Latino community would “go home,” there was a great deal of suspicion among many Latinos when it came to predominantly Anglo organizations. Then there was the language issue and concerns about legal status. The soccer league, BADs, and dinner would be a chance for CCI to demonstrate not only their ability to get things done, but also their cultural competency and genuine concern about the lives of Latinos.

CCI’s first attempt to reach out to the Latino community in a cultural way came in late 2004, when they hosted “A Taste of Mexico Fundraising Dinner.”<sup>153</sup> At the suggestion of the Latino members, the fledgling Marshalltown group hosted a dinner aimed at developing bonds with and soliciting funds from supportive Anglo members of the community. The dinner featured homemade Mexican fare prepared by CCI members. Several dozen, mostly Anglo, community members attended the event. Latino leaders were pleased with the event, but decided that future events should focus on the Latino community instead of Anglos. The next year and a half saw the focus shift in just that way. There were two Big Ass Dances, both of which drew crowds numbering several

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<sup>152</sup> This can be seen as raising class-consciousness, though Alinsky explicitly trained his organizers to stay away from using ideological language. However, since the financial crisis, CCI has moved away from this policy of ideological neutrality (or at least the appearance of such) and toward an openly leftist position. Hugh Espey, personal interview, September 19, 2011; Joe Fagan, personal interview, March 14, 2012; Anna Galovich, personal interview, March 19, 2012.

<sup>153</sup> Joe Fagan, “Evaluation of 2004 A Taste of Mexico Fundraising Dinner.” 2004. Archives of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Des Moines, Iowa.

hundred. This again gave CCI the chance to raise money for the Latino project, but most importantly, hundreds of new people interacted with CCI for the first time. The Latino community saw that CCI organizers cared about them and had the ability to improve their lives, even if only by hosting a dance. CCI pulled the dinner and the dances together rather easily, and knew that these discrete one-time events offered little long-term connections with the Latino community, so they set about organizing a soccer league. After working for about a year with the city to gain access to fields and bringing together enough teams, the league finally started. On April 9, 2006, “300 Hispanic adults” showed up at Bicentennial Park to kick off the games.<sup>154</sup> The soccer league, dances, and dinners helped CCI make connections and grow its member and leadership base among the Marshalltown Latino community, but these activities would become almost completely forgotten in just a few short months.<sup>155</sup>

On December 12, 2006, federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, accompanied by more than 100 Department of Homeland Security agents, raided the Swift & Company meatpacking plant in Marshalltown and arrested 99 people.<sup>156</sup> The raid was one of six on Swift plants that took place across the country, which resulted in the arrest of 1,282 people.<sup>157</sup> The raid intended to arrest people who had forged or stolen federal documents, such as social security cards, in order to work illegally, as well as those employers who knowingly hired people under false pretenses. The effects of this

<sup>154</sup> Ken Black, “Local Adult Soccer League Kicks Off,” *Marshalltown Times Republican*, April 9, 2006.

<sup>155</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, March 14, 2012; Anna Galovich, personal interview, March 19, 2012.

<sup>156</sup> Philip Brasher and Jerry Perkins, “Immigration Raid Nets Scores of Swift Workers,” *The Des Moines Register*, December 13, 2006.

<sup>157</sup> Jerry Perkins and Dan Piller, “A Year After Swift Raid, Marshalltown Regroups,” *The Des Moines Register*, December, 17, 2017.



raid tore the community apart. For some people, several days passed before they found out where their family members were. Many families had both parents detained, leaving their children to fend for themselves for days.<sup>158</sup> In one case, the agents detained a breastfeeding baby's mother.<sup>159</sup> With fewer than 100 people detained, only a small percentage of Marshalltown's Latino community felt the effects directly, but everyone in the town felt the impact in some way. Fear gripped the community. People pulled their kids out of school, stopped shopping, and did not show up to work, while others left town altogether.<sup>160</sup> Marshalltown businesses suffered and home sales plummeted.<sup>161</sup> Twenty-nine people received convictions in federal court on charges related to the Swift raids. Six hundred and forty-nine people were deported.<sup>162</sup>

Immigration agents carried out the six raids on Swift & Company as part of "Operation Return to Sender," which resulted in the deportation of 14,000 immigrants who worked in the country illegally.<sup>163</sup> ICE used the high profile raids in part to publicly demonstrate its efforts against "illegal immigration," which was an explosive political issue at the time. The United States Congress voted on comprehensive immigration reform bills in 2005, 2006, and 2007, but failed to pass any legislation on the issue.<sup>164</sup>

<sup>158</sup> Jerry Perkins, "'What a Sad Day it is,' Woman's Husband Says," *The Des Moines Register*, December 13, 2006.

<sup>159</sup> Lisa Rossi, "Breastfeeding Baby's Mom Among Those Detained," *The Des Moines Register*, December 13, 2006.

<sup>160</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, March 14, 2012; Anna Galovich, personal interview, March 19, 2012.

<sup>161</sup> Perkins and Piller, "A Year After."

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Juliana Barbassa, "High Profile Raids Leave Immigrants in Fear Nationwide," *Associated Press*, February 18, 2007, [www.mercurynews.com](http://www.mercurynews.com), (accessed June 12, 2012).

<sup>164</sup> "Bill Summary & Status 109<sup>th</sup> Congress (2005-2006) S. 2611," Library of Congress, <http://www.congress.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d109:SN02611:@@L&summ2=m&>, (accessed June 12, 2012); "Gang of 12' Mulls Over Immigration Bill," *Associated Press*, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18842287/#.UCfVM-3N7zI>, Updated May 25, 2007.

The national media provided wall-to-wall coverage of everything immigration related, from the raids to “citizen immigration enforcement groups.”<sup>165</sup> For several years, while the nation was debating immigration policy, CCI and the Latinos in Marshalltown focused almost exclusively on local issues. After the raids, that stopped.

National comprehensive immigration reform became a top priority for CCI and like-minded groups across the nation. Organizations had been holding rallies, protests, vigils, and marches for several years, but after the raids, the crowds grew and the frequency of the events picked up in Iowa. More non-Latino CCI members started to get involved in the Latinos’ cause. For CCI, and its new Latino organizer, Erica Palmer, the solution to the many problems facing the people of Marshalltown seemed to reside in Washington D.C.<sup>166</sup>

By the time Palmer introduced herself to the Latino community, the state suffered another raid. This time it happened in Postville.<sup>167</sup> Postville, Iowa stood out from the rest of the state well before the raids. It is located in the northeastern corner of the state, has a population of just over 2,200, and from 1987 to 2008 was home of the nation’s largest kosher food producer, Agriprocessors. The Hasidic Jews that ran

<sup>165</sup> The most notable citizen immigration enforcement organization went by the name the Minuteman Project and described themselves as, “A multi-ethnic immigration law enforcement advocacy group.” The Southern Poverty Law Center claims the Minuteman Project has close ties to the violent white power extremist organization the National Alliance. Tagline, Minuteman Project Website, <http://www.minutemanproject.com>, (accessed June 12, 2012); David Holthouse, “Minutemen, Other Anti-Immigrant Militia Groups Stake Out Arizona Border: High-powered Firearms, Militia Maneuvers and Racism at the Minuteman Project,” Southern Poverty Law Center, Intelligence Report, Summer 2005, Issue Number: 118.

<sup>166</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, March 14, 2012; Anna Galovich, personal interview, March 19, 2012.

<sup>167</sup> During the more than one-year period in between the raids, CCI did fight one short-lived battle specific to Marshalltown. The police department floated the idea of signing up for a program called 287G, which would have given the local police immigration enforcement authority. After a few months scare and several cantankerous public meetings, the problem went away. Due to national public outrage, the federal government scrapped the proposal altogether. Erica Palmer, personal interview, March 20, 2012.

Agriprocessors transformed the otherwise typical small farming community. With the arrival of Agriprocessors, the homogeneity that characterized Postville, like most small Iowa towns, vanished as they recruited immigrants from across the world. This small town soon became the home of Guatemalans, Mexicans, Somalis, the ultra-orthodox Hasidic Jews, and a handful of immigrants from other countries as well. All of these religions, cultures, dietary habits, languages, and biases were crammed into a few square miles that sat nearly an hour from the closest big city (by Iowa standards) of Waterloo/Cedar Falls (home to approximately 100,000 people) and four hours from Chicago. The animosity that resulted from the bringing together of so many cultures in such a small town garnered a lot of attention. Stephen G. Bloom described these conflicts in his book *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America*, published in 2000. Bloom writes: “To understand Postville and the Jews whose business came to dominate the town was to learn about influence and power. The Hasidic Jews brought unimaginable turmoil to Postville, so much that few of the Postville elders or their children would ever forget what these newcomers had done.”<sup>168</sup>

The “unimaginable turmoil” Bloom described focused mostly on cultural conflict resulting from the fact that, according to Bloom, “the Jews had also become Postville’s ruling class. They were in charge, and the locals didn’t like that at all.”<sup>169</sup> He did not, however, describe the unimaginable conditions in the kosher meatpacking plant that helped elevate its owners to the “ruling class.” Before the raids, the state knew about

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<sup>168</sup> Stephen G. Bloom, *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America*, (New York: Hartcourt, Inc., 2000), xiv.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, xii.

Agriprocessors' habitual violations of labor, environmental, and food production laws. Regulators issued several small fines throughout the years, but the press gave the facility little attention until after the raids, so the public knew very little. After the raids, the brutal conditions of the plant saturated the newspapers. One article told the story of a Somali refugee who was "promised a bonus and a free month's rent to come [and work for Agriprocessors]." <sup>170</sup> After working 48 hours in his first week, the company paid him \$8.61. Agriprocessors refused to allow inspectors in the facility and required its employees to purchase their own protective gear. <sup>171</sup> Another article described how Carlos Torrez severed one of his fingers while separating chicken parts after working 67 hours in one week. When the same thing happened to two other workers in just five weeks, the company received a fine of \$7,500. <sup>172</sup> Governor Chet Culver penned an op-ed excoriating the company for allegedly using "child labor," "sexual and physical abuse," "nonpayment of regular and overtime wages," and "denial of immediate medical attention." <sup>173</sup> The company's repeated violations of the law had spurred the state of Iowa into opening an extensive investigation into the company's labor violations. According to an op-ed written by Professor Erik Camayd-Freixas, the raid "thwarted the state labor investigation," preventing law enforcement from pursuing the "over 9,000 state labor charges." <sup>174</sup>

<sup>170</sup> "Where's Enforcement of Labor Laws?" *The Des Moines Register*, August 1, 2008.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> Clark Kauffman, "Agriprocessors Escapes Big Fines for Violations," *The Des Moines Register*, July 6, 2008.

<sup>173</sup> Chet Culver, "Guest Column: Governor-Agriprocessors Must Operate Responsibly," *The Des Moines Register*, August 24, 2008.

<sup>174</sup> Erik Camayd-Freixas is a professor of Hispanic studies at Florida International University who came to Iowa to study and interpret the aftermath of the Postville raids. His essay, "Interpreting After the Largest

On May 12, 2008, hundreds of federal agents from ICE and the U.S. Marshals Service stormed the Agriprocessors plant to round up undocumented workers. Unlike Marshalltown, this time they brought 687 criminal warrants into the 800-employee plant.<sup>175</sup> The raid in Marshalltown focused almost exclusively on administrative immigration enforcement. In Marshalltown, ICE wanted to find undocumented immigrants and ship them back to their native country. Now, in what the *New York Times* called a “twist of Dickensian cruelty,” the federal agencies sought prison terms and felony charges for the immigrants before their deportation.<sup>176</sup> The raid resulted in the arrest of 389 people.<sup>177</sup> Federal authorities took most of the adults to a makeshift detention center they had constructed at the National Cattle Congress in Waterloo, Iowa. They took the children they arrested to detention facilities in other states.<sup>178</sup>

The political climate demanded the Bush administration show that they meant what they said about getting tough on illegal immigrants. Postville provided a perfect opportunity to carry out an enormously high profile raid that not only punished the immigrants, but also provided an example to the other immigrants of what they might have to face. As one immigration attorney put it, “Postville wasn’t meant to crack down

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ICE Raid in US History: A Personal Account,” appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* on June 13, 2008; Erik Camayd-Freixas, “Guest Column: Postville Raid a Waste,” *The Des Moines Register*, November 24, 2009.

<sup>175</sup> Tony Leys, “300 Immigrants on Lam as Arrests Hang in Limbo,” *The Des Moines Register*, June 11, 2008; Julia Preston, “270 Illegal Immigrants Sent to Prison in Federal Push,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2008.

<sup>176</sup> “The Shame of Postville, Iowa,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 2008.

<sup>177</sup> Leys, “300 on Lam,” June 11, 2008.

<sup>178</sup> William Petroski, “Union: Raid Likely Ruins Exploitation Probes,” *The Des Moines Register*, May 17, 2008.

on undocumented workers, it was a made-for-television event.”<sup>179</sup> If the massive raid made for great optics and provided a political advantage, the prolonged detention of hundreds of racial and ethnic minorities in what amounted to a rundown livestock processing facility provided the exact opposite outcome. Furthermore, just days before the Postville raid, the *New York Times* reported that 66 immigrants had died while in custody between 2004 and 2007. Any prolonged detention could potentially increase that number.<sup>180</sup> In an effort to move things along quickly, the authorities constructed a temporary courtroom by hanging up black curtains in an old dance hall.<sup>181</sup> In a matter of four days, 297 people pleaded guilty to various crimes. Of these, 270 received prison sentences of at least five months, some served more than a year, and all were deported upon release.<sup>182</sup>

For CCI, the Postville raid posed a new set of challenges, while providing its members a chance to help show leadership and offer support to another community. Erica Palmer realized the scope of what she faced the moment she heard the news. She lived and worked in Des Moines, a solid three and a half hour drive from Postville. She immediately started to hear rumors of a large detention center in Waterloo. In a way that helped; it was only a two-hour drive to Waterloo. In another way that hurt; she lived in Des Moines, the detention center was in Waterloo, and the families of the detained lived in Postville. To make matters worse, CCI had no active leaders in the far northeastern

<sup>179</sup> Matt Clark, “Panelists Criticize Immigration Raids as Business Advocate Says Enforcement Burdens Employers,” *iowapolitics.com*, June 6, 2008.

<sup>180</sup> Nigel Duara, “Protesters Show Support for Families of Detainees,” *The Des Moines Register*, May 19, 2008.

<sup>181</sup> Preston, “270 Sent to Prison,” May 24, 2008.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

part of the state. For that matter, it had very few members at all in the Postville area. Palmer drove to Waterloo and attempted to figure out what had happened. She talked to people in restaurants, bars, churches, and eventually El Centro Latinoamericano, a small nonprofit that prior to the raid primarily offered English as a second language classes a few nights a week, but after the raid became one of the help centers for family members and supporters who wanted to help. Palmer got a cheap motel room, which would become her home for the next six weeks. She shared the motel with several ICE agents.<sup>183</sup>

CCI and other organizations scrambled to help those arrested in the raid as well as their families. CCI leaders from Marshalltown and others from the Waterloo-Cedar Falls area came to lend a hand. The Center for Community Change, one of CCI's allied organizations, sent three organizers to live and help in Waterloo for the several weeks following the raid. Churches and other nonprofits in Postville and Waterloo provided food, childcare, emotional support, and help with bills. People scrambled to arrange legal advice for those who were arrested and the nearly 300 who avoided arrest at the plant but who had warrants out for their arrest.<sup>184</sup> Everyone tried to figure out the location of those arrested and how to get them in contact with their loved ones. CCI helped organize a solidarity march through Waterloo.

On Sunday, May 18, 2008, more than 400 people marched three miles from the Queen of Peace Parish to the gates of the prison on the National Cattle Congress

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<sup>183</sup> Erica Palmer, personal interview, March 20, 2012

<sup>184</sup> Leys, "300 on Lam," June 11, 2008.

grounds.<sup>185</sup> There they held signs that read, “Let My Dad Go,” and “You Are the Criminals for Leaving Kids Without Parents. Free Us.”<sup>186</sup> They also gave speeches that condemned the politicians and bureaucrats who ordered the raid, the broken immigration system that put people in this situation in the first place, and the foot soldiers who carried out what they saw as morally reprehensible orders. They also spoke to the imprisoned. Even though chain link fence and armed men standing with German Shepherds at heel stood in between the crowd and the prisoners, wives and children spoke to their husbands and fathers, even if they heard nothing in return.<sup>187</sup> Some of the speakers were from Marshalltown, and the march was led in part by a group holding a large banner that “announced they played for a Marshalltown soccer league.”<sup>188</sup>

CCI’s plan worked. The people with whom they engaged on a social and cultural basis came to understand the organization and its causes. The Marshalltown raid showed them firsthand how destructive the current immigration system could be, and their connection with CCI provided them with direct course to action when the same type of destruction hit another community. Marshalltown Latinos provided as much help as they could and provided leadership when appropriate. CCI successfully developed a core group of leaders in Marshalltown who demonstrated an ability and willingness to look beyond their immediate community to help the larger immigrant community as a whole.

The political climate quickly changed a few months later with the election of President Barack Obama. The economic collapse that hit in the fall of 2008 significantly

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<sup>185</sup> Jens Manuel Krogstad, “400 March to NCC Grounds,” *The Courier*, May 19, 2008.

<sup>186</sup> Duara, “Protesters Show Support,” May 19, 2008.

<sup>187</sup> Joe Fagan, personal interview, March 14, 2012.

<sup>188</sup> Krogstad, “400 March,” May 19, 2008.



reduced the rate of immigration into the country, and immigration enforcement also changed with the expansion of Secure Communities, which uses data sharing between ICE and the FBI to identify and remove undocumented immigrants on an individual basis as opposed to large sweeping raids.<sup>189</sup> With the recession, the media turned its attention away from immigration. CCI also modified its Latino efforts since the raid, expanding its work in order to become a larger statewide presence and working on new issues including wage theft.

Working with Latino immigrants was a natural fit for CCI. Alinsky started working with immigrants employed in the meatpacking district, and CCI had spent more than a decade working with people who had been pushed out of farming. Even with this history, CCI had a difficult time developing a strong contingency of Latino members and leaders. By focusing on the social bonds and helping during times of tragedy, CCI organizers eventually broke through the cultural differences. This does not mean that CCI was able to improve the working conditions at Swift or any other packing plant, but it does mean that some Latinos have an organization they are comfortable working with on issues of social justice. So far, it seems to have paid off. In the less than two years since CCI has been working on wage theft, organizers have recovered and returned over \$150,000 in wages owed to undocumented workers.<sup>190</sup> Most of these wages were won back by a young, aggressive organizer named Ruth Shultz who worked with Latinos in

<sup>189</sup> “Secure Communities: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement,” *Department of Homeland Security*, [http://www.ice.gov/secure\\_communities/](http://www.ice.gov/secure_communities/) (Accessed June 20, 2012).

<sup>190</sup> Personal interview, Ruth Shultz, March 16, 2012; Joe Fagan, personal interview, March 14, 2012; Ruby Shultz, “Wage Theft Database,” Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement archives, Des Moines, Iowa.

Des Moines. Her first experience with organizing occurred when she marched as a child with her father during the farm crisis.

## CHAPTER 5

## THE NEXT LEG OF THE RUN

As an organization based on the work and ideas of Saul Alinsky, CCI has spent the last 37 years fighting for justice at the local level by means of direct action and other forms of confrontational social pressure. It managed to stay remarkably true to the principles Alinsky laid out and practiced himself more than 75 years ago in Chicago. Even though the political climate and economic circumstances had grown in many ways more conservative since Alinsky's lifetime, CCI continued to pursue radical ends using radical means. At a time when activism as a whole took a conciliatory turn and activists sought compromise and cooperation as opposed to radical change, CCI stood out from its contemporaries.

During the nearly four decades of its existence, CCI has accomplished a lot. When the farm crisis demolished the economy and way of life for many people in Iowa and across the Midwest, CCI members and organizers pushed back against the bankers, bureaucrats, and elected officials. They mobilized people across the state to support the minimum pricing bill. They pressured legislators in unique ways, such as distributing flyers in the legislative chamber in the middle of the night. They also worked with other groups to hold a massive 15,000 person rally in Ames demanding action, which resulted in the bill making it to the Governor's desk before he vetoed it. Pressuring the Farmer Home Administration and the Farm Credit Services also yielded results and made more credit available to farmers in need. CCI members and organizers also went after banks like Norwest on behalf of individual farmers who were struggling to keep their homes.

This campaign resulted in well over \$5 million in loans for farmers in need. Each victory and any number of the numerous defeats that occurred during this time can be at least partially attributed to CCI's confrontational approach.

In the aftermath of the farm crisis in the U.S. and the effects of NAFTA in Mexico, CCI members and organizers reached out to Iowa's growing Latino immigrant community. After years of developing relationships with the Latinos in Marshalltown through non-confrontational, non-social justice-oriented projects like dinners, dances, and soccer leagues, CCI was able to transition its relationship with the Latino community from a purely social one to one based on fighting for change. CCI's first attempts at changing the working conditions in the Swift meatpacking plant were rocky and ultimately unsuccessful. Things did not turn around until the immigration raid on that very same Marshalltown plant. Another raid provided the Marshalltown Latino CCI members a chance to develop as leaders and help others who were experiencing what their community was still recovering from at that time. These leaders and new outreach to Latinos statewide resulted in tens of thousands of dollars in returned stolen wages as well as a growing number of Latinos who became involved in the organization. These new members have used direct action and other confrontational methods to recover their wages.

CCI found its niche in Iowa activism. It uses aggressive methods to pressure those in charge to bend to the will of the powerless. This method was handed down to Joe Fagan and the rest of the CCI members and organizers from Saul Alinsky, who in turn had amalgamated it from Capone, Lewis, and the Chicago pragmatists. Alinsky's

ideas have animated CCI for more than three decades, and therefore his thoughts on history might be illuminating. He once wrote, “History is a relay of revolutions; the torch of idealism is carried by the revolutionary group until this group becomes an establishment, and then quietly the torch is put down to wait until a new revolutionary group picks it up for the next leg of the run.”<sup>191</sup> If this is true, and if during the 30 years since the Reagan Revolution took place CCI has steadily grown from one employee to nearly 30 and from zero members to several thousand, one has to wonder what it will be able to do during the next leg of the run.

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<sup>191</sup> Alinsky, *Rules*, 22.

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