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## Progressive Jews Organize

by PETER DREIER & DANIEL MAY

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At a meeting in February at Shir Hadash, a Reform synagogue in Los Gatos, California, Larry Mitchell rose to address the overflowing sanctuary. "In 2001, my son was diagnosed with Crohn's disease," said the 55-year-old Mitchell, a synagogue member for more than twenty-five years. The room fell silent. "Our insurance went from \$700 a month, to \$800 a month, to \$900 a month. By 2005, our insurance premiums were \$1,700 a month." As he concluded and returned to his seat, the audience erupted and rose for a four-minute standing ovation. The crowd was clearly not used to hearing a member of their congregation speak so openly about such matters, generally considered private.

Marialena Valverde, a middle-age Mexican-American woman, followed Mitchell to the podium. Speaking Spanish to the largely Anglo audience, she explained that after going without insurance for most of her seventeen years cleaning chemical labs, she was finally able to get on her husband's plan two years ago. But when her premiums increased by \$85 a month, she could no longer afford the policy. "We don't mind paying something in order to have health coverage, but the costs are so high there is no way we can cover our family." As she finished, the crowd rose once again in sustained applause. Onstage, several State Assembly members and county supervisors listened politely. When congregation members asked if they would support a universal healthcare bill in California, each politician readily agreed.

Two months earlier, Mitchell and Valverde had been strangers. Mitchell is from the affluent neighborhood of South Palo Alto and owns his own business. Valverde lives in San Jose and works as a janitor. Yet through the involvement of synagogues and churches in interfaith community organizing efforts, Jews like Larry Mitchell are learning what they have in common with people like Marialena Valverde.

The assembly at Shir Hadash was organized by Peninsula Interfaith Action (based in San Carlos) and People Acting in Community Together (based in San Jose), both part of the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO), a national network. The two organizations have brought fifty religious congregations together to organize for social justice. Around the country, there are now about 200 local community organizing groups that build political power by mobilizing members of churches and synagogues. These organizations are affiliated with four major community organizing networks--the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the Gamaliel Foundation, the Direct Action and Research and Training Center (DART) and PICO.

From the early labor and settlement house movement, to the civil rights and antiwar struggles, to environmental and feminist organizing, Jews have been disproportionately involved in progressive causes. Saul Alinsky, the father of community organizing, was Jewish, but he worked primarily with Catholic and Protestant congregations, starting in Chicago in the 1930s. That legacy has persisted. The last several decades have witnessed an upsurge of congregation-based organizing on issues like housing, healthcare, education

and city services. But synagogues were only marginally involved in these crusades. A rabbi would show up at a press conference to express support or a temple's social action committee would write a letter or a check to support the organizing.

Synagogues often have many progressive members, but their social action activities are typically limited to the safer realm of charity projects like tutoring at schools or donating food to a homeless shelter. Ernesto Cortes, the IAF's Southwest director, remembers when left-leaning Jews in Texas would tell him, "You'll never get the synagogues involved in organizing."

But this picture is beginning to change. A growing number of rabbis and their congregants are no longer satisfied with the charity approach. A new wave of Jewish activists, from synagogues and other groups, seeks to challenge (and learn from) the rise of the religious right. They want to renew the Jewish ethic of *tikkun olam*--healing the world from social and economic injustice. Until the late 1990s, few Jewish congregations were involved in the burgeoning multi-issue grassroots organizing coalitions. By 2000 twenty synagogues had joined one of these local interfaith activist groups. Today nearly 100 synagogues are involved, and the number is growing steadily.

The foundation Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ) has helped catalyze this movement. In February more than 300 leaders from sixty-three synagogues came together at a JFSJ-sponsored conference outside San Jose to discuss their involvement in community organizing. They attended workshops on identifying new leaders, sharing personal concerns so they can be transformed into public issues and mapping out local political and corporate power structures.

Simon Greer, 39, a former union and community organizer who now directs the JFSJ, explains, "Jews have always supported social justice issues, but they often see those issues as affecting other people." "People may say, 'I don't know where to find affordable care for my aging mother' or 'I can't find good public schools and we're priced out of the private schools,'" observes Greer. "But they usually see those as personal problems, not political issues. Community organizing helps people see that those are political issues, too."

Fran Godine, a leader at Boston's Temple Israel, one of the first synagogues to invest heavily in organizing as a member of the IAF-affiliated Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), recalls the initial stage of the organizing process, which typically begins with one-on-one meetings and small living room gatherings. "We quickly discovered that there were people in our congregation who were really struggling," she says. "People were worried that their children could never afford a home in the area, worried about what was happening to their elderly parents. The idea that we were all comfortable turned out to be a myth."

Jonah Pesner, then the associate rabbi at Temple Israel, describes how the concerns within the congregation connected to working-class churches in GBIO. "It was astounding how many temple members agonized over the poor conditions of the nursing homes to which they had entrusted their parents," he recalls. "As we were having these conversations, nine Haitian churches within GBIO were organizing around the incredible suffering inside the nursing homes--but as workers. They were overworked, mistreated and disrespected. And that got passed on to patients."

These congregations--representing employees and patients--began a series of joint conversations. "GBIO provided a context for folks to know each other's stories across racial, religious and class boundaries," explained Pesner, recently appointed by the Reform Jewish movement as founding director of Just Congregations, which was created to bring synagogues into community organizing networks. "We discovered the shared suffering of people caring for their parents, of the neglected elderly and of low-wage immigrant workers." The congregations drafted a bill of rights for nursing home residents and workers. They met with nursing home directors and challenged them to sign it. Faced with this community pressure, many did.

The campaign culminated in a large assembly in December 2004 at Temple Salem, a Haitian congregation

that met in a formerly Orthodox synagogue in Dorchester, once a Jewish neighborhood. At the meeting--which opened with prayers and songs in Creole, Hebrew and Spanish--GBIO persuaded state Attorney General Tom Reilly to tell nursing homes that he would enforce workers' rights in the nursing care industry, a move that improved working conditions and laid the groundwork for a successful SEIU union organizing campaign.

Jews also played a key role in GBIO's successful campaign to get Massachusetts to adopt a universal healthcare plan. According to John McDonough, executive director of Health Care For All, "Temple Israel's willingness to put its faith commitment on the line to promote quality healthcare for everyone was exemplary and critically important."

In Columbus, Ohio, Temple Beth Shalom joined with BREAD, an affiliate of the DART network. BREAD identified the shortage of bus routes from low-income neighborhoods to the outer suburbs--where the area's jobs are increasingly located--as a critical problem facing the poor as well as employers (including some synagogue members). Through meetings with public officials, research reports and media attention, BREAD got the transit agency to build several new hubs to speed commuting times and brought daycare and health services to the areas surrounding the new transportation centers.

"In a synagogue of 400 families, we have hundreds of people attending community meetings," says Rabbi Howard Apothaker of Temple Beth Shalom. "And we are building real relationships with people who don't look like us."

Rabbi John Linder, of B'Nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim, a Reform temple outside Chicago, views the organizing work as fundamentally different from traditional charity. "This work is not about one person helping someone else who has less," explains Linder, who before attending rabbinical school had been an organizer for Massachusetts Fair Share and the Service Employees International Union. "It's a shift from a patronizing 'Look what I can do for you' way of operating to a 'What can we do together?' way of acting."

In 2006 The Metropolitan Organization (TMO), the IAF affiliate in Houston that includes Congregation Beth Israel, made national news organizing survivors of Hurricane Katrina who had been displaced to that city. TMO's victories immediately following the storm included getting a playground built outside the Astrodome, creating a space for the elderly and mentally unstable to be cared for in the stadium and winning the extension of cellphone contracts of those displaced by the storm.

"*Tikkun olam*--repairing the world--requires believing that we can create deep and lasting justice," says Renee Wizig-Barrios, TMO's lead organizer. "This is a faith often difficult to summon. In the moments when I doubt my capacity and act anyway, I live out my Judaism."

Synagogues that engage in organizing discover that members develop stronger ties within the institution. "Part of the excitement of organizing is finding kindred spirits in the congregation," explained Glenn Rothner, a union lawyer and former board member at Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center, a Conservative synagogue near Los Angeles. "The process of consciously engaging members of the congregation about social justice helps forge a stronger sense of community within the temple."

Parallel to the mushrooming of synagogues involved in interfaith organizing is a growing number of Jewish social justice groups involved in labor, housing, environmental and other issues. The groups' members include rabbis and synagogue members but also Jews not affiliated with congregations.

The first of these groups, Chicago's Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, was started in the mid-1960s by Jewish community organizers and progressive rabbis. JCUA's first campaign fought against bank redlining and abusive lending practices in black neighborhoods that had previously been Jewish. It was a controversial beginning. Some of the lenders that benefited most from the practices were prominent Jews who successfully

lobbied the Jewish Federation (the umbrella funding agency) to pull support for the JCUA, but the activists eventually prevailed. JCUA has persisted for more than thirty years, waging successful efforts to build and renovate affordable housing, start a worker center for day laborers and address police brutality.

Daniel Sokatch, director of the seven-year-old Progressive Jewish Alliance (PJA), which has chapters in Los Angeles and San Francisco, describes his organization's mission as being "the progressive voice in the Jewish community and the Jewish voice in the progressive movement." PJA's first campaign involved working through the Jewish Commission Against Sweatshops to mobilize liberal Jews in Los Angeles to increase government enforcement of wage and safety laws, enact a local antisweatshop ordinance and confront Jews who ran some of the nation's largest clothing companies. PJA published a guide to sweatshop activism, "No Shvitz," that included a history of Jewish involvement in labor causes since the Triangle Fire tragedy of 1911.

PJA also mobilized Jewish support for the hotel workers union's organizing campaign. More than 100 rabbis signed letters encouraging Jewish groups not to host conferences at hotels that were resisting unionization. The rabbis at one synagogue told their congregation they would not officiate at any events held at boycotted hotels. Similar groups, all started in the past decade, now exist in Washington, Boston, New York, the Twin Cities and Philadelphia.

This activism exposes tensions that rarely surface when Jewish social action focuses on charity. For example, when PJA first confronted the sweatshop issue, a number of Jewish garment manufacturers threatened to withdraw as benefactors of temples and Jewish organizations if rabbis lent their names to the activist campaign. More recently, PJA drew fire from some Jewish community leaders for launching an ambitious Muslim-Jewish community-building project with the Muslim Public Affairs Council.

Sometimes people in the same synagogue find themselves on opposite sides of an issue campaign. When Omaha Together One Community (OTOC), an IAF affiliate, threw its weight behind an organizing drive in the city's large meatpacking industry, Temple Israel's Rabbi Aryeh Azriel was approached by the owner of a major plant, a longtime congregant, who threatened to resign from the congregation if the synagogue did not pull out of OTOC. The board of the temple, which is the only Jewish institution among OTOC's thirty-four congregations, stood by the organizing effort. The plant owner remained a temple member. But the tensions have not evaporated.

"There are people who are nervous about how our involvement in OTOC is going to affect our fundraising around our new building," says Rabbi Azriel. "And I'm pleased that the leadership and board of the temple continues to support our membership in OTOC. We take ethics seriously, and the values of our tradition are not up for sale."

Organizing that brings together Catholics, evangelicals and Jews across lines of race and class can also surface political and cultural conflicts. Temple Israel's involvement with legalizing gay marriage in Massachusetts put it on the opposite side of the issue from several other congregations within GBIO. Temple Israel convened several conversations between Jewish gay and lesbian congregants and evangelical pastors and their congregants. "We didn't change their minds, but they did agree to stop gay-bashing in the press, which was a very powerful concession," explained Temple Israel's Fran Godine. "Still, it was hard going to the Statehouse and seeing people we worked with on healthcare protesting our actions on behalf of our gay and lesbian congregants."

On at least one divisive issue, however--the Middle East--these Jewish activist groups have stayed on the sidelines. "The Jewish community can be passionate about Israel, but that isn't what our organization does," explains JFSJ's Greer. "We do domestic social justice."

The mainstream Jewish organizations--which include dozens of national groups--are dominated by uncritical

support for Israel and the fight against anti-Semitism around the world. Many observers inside and outside the Jewish community believe that these groups, such as the Anti-Defamation League and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, don't reflect grassroots Jewish opinion. But the Jewish establishment's focus on these issues can put them at odds with progressive Jewish activists in terms of defining priorities. "Some people fear that we're going to squander Jewish political capital on things that don't really matter," says Greer. "But this is still a small movement, so we're not much of a threat to the established organizations. We'll see what happens when we get larger."

One factor likely to accelerate the movement's growth is the agreement by four rabbinical schools--from the Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist wings of Jewish religious life--to give students credit for taking a course on community organizing co-sponsored with JFSJ. Nearly fifty students have already completed the semester-long course. Some are now taking jobs with congregations, where they intend to implement their organizing ideas.

Esther Lederman is a fifth-year rabbinical student who recently completed an organizing course at Hebrew Union College, the Reform seminary in New York. "I came to HUC inspired to work on social action. And every week I worked to get volunteers for our soup kitchen," she recalls. "Were we helping to reduce the number of poor in our city? Were we helping others get back on their own two feet? The answer was no. I felt frustrated and powerless."

Lederman is now interning with the IAF to learn how to address root causes, not just symptoms. "Because of organizing, I'm going to be a better rabbi, who will cultivate more leaders in our community," she says. "Imagine what it will look like when a new generation of rabbis is ready to challenge our congregations to act effectively for justice."

Rabbi David Saperstein, who has led the Reform movement's social action center for thirty years, is fond of showing visitors the desk in his Washington office--the one on which President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. Like the civil rights movement, Saperstein argues, social justice work isn't mainly about policy maneuvering in Washington but grassroots organizing that links local activism and national politics.

"Change in this country is going to happen from the bottom up," says Saperstein. "And if Jews are going to be part of that change, we need to partner with those who have been organizing at the grassroots. Like Moses learned from Jethro, we need to learn from our non-Jewish brothers and sisters who have been at this for decades. Only together can we fulfill the promise of this nation."