

Economic Human Rights Educational Series

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Economic Human Rights: Born in the USA

*Written By Cheri Honkala, Director of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union
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The Kensington Welfare Rights Union was born in Philadelphia in the poorest district in the state of Pennsylvania out of necessity in 1991 as cut backs were proposed in welfare. A group of poor mothers began holding meetings in a church basement about our common efforts to try and feed ourselves and our children. Immediately we encountered problems because the church could no longer afford heat during our meetings and the church was under tremendous stress because it's food cupboard had dried up and they were no longer able to meet the needs of feeding the community. Weekly it was something new, no water in the swimming pools for the children to play in, movie theaters in the community were a thing of the past and dollar stores and check cashing centers instead of banks began to open in the neighborhood. Welfare and drugs were now the largest sources of income in our community.

We knew that we had to do something, after all we really didn't have a choice. It was either develop leaders amongst the ranks of the poor or continue to watch the deterioration of our community and attend the funerals of those we love. So we set out to try and meet the need of those who were hungry and those who needed help in the welfare offices. We would distribute surplus food outside of the welfare office while we would make trips in and out in order to assist other welfare recipients whose benefits were being denied.

Our offices changed regularly due to little or no resources. From rat infested store fronts to vacant lots to my living room, we understood the importance of poor and homeless people themselves being able to come together in a safe space to map out a plan on how to address our own basic needs while trying to figure out how to create long term change. We tried to turn obstacles into challenges, but this was easier said than done, especially when we discovered that the lack of organization amongst the poor and homeless in Kensington wasn't just due to being unorganized. Everywhere we turned, institutions and politicians were consciously and unconsciously participating in *organized disorganization*. Whenever a notion of having a right to something began to creep into a section of the neighborhood, a new charity or a new entrepreneurial project would begin once again managing poverty and getting that section of the neighborhood away from claiming their rights to instead of adjusting to a lower standard of living, now with perhaps a new shelter but not a right to housing.

Daily we fought to build organization regardless of the barriers that were put in front of us. Winning concessions at times but more importantly leaders from amongst the ranks of the poor. Although we were developing leaders, our conditions began to worsen and the concessions began to dry up. We could no longer afford to be isolated in Kensington. We began building what we call "tent cities", using scraps of wood and utilizing the massive amounts of surplus couches and household items that the wealthy throw away on a daily basis to supply our encampments. We increased our presence not only in Kensington but began to become a regular site in downtown Philadelphia. We were becoming a household word in the area, with trips to our nations Liberty Bell, the moving of homeless families into the convention center and the reclaiming of an abandoned church that had been

closed down for years for families to live in. We were breaking our isolation! Students from college campuses would come and visit us and soon we had several volunteers from all over Philadelphia.

Just when the sun began to shine a little the rain came back again. In 1995, ACT 35 became law in Pennsylvania and over a quarter of a million people had their medical assistance taken away from them. Enraged and needing to address our Governor, we marched from our tent city in Kensington to Harrisburg to discuss the impact on ourselves and our neighborhood. We walked over 140 miles, some days up to 22 miles a day. Most days we couldn't feel our feet and the pain in our legs shot through us as we laid down on blankets alongside the road each night to rest our tired bodies. People now began to link up with us from all over Pennsylvania. They would drive out and leave food along the road side for us, doctors would mend our feet in small towns and people of all colors would embrace us with tears and stories on how these medical cuts were going to hurt or kill someone they loved. Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) no longer carried the banner of the poor just from the barrio but KWRU was now carrying the banner for the poor living in rural Pennsylvania. Together the inner city and rural poor began to link together in our efforts to get up and out of poverty. This was a crucial development for there was a new storm developing on the horizon. A storm we never believed we'd witness in our wealthy country came with great speed and the amount of damage has yet to be documented.

After 60 years of having a social safety net in the United States of America, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 ended welfare as we knew it in our country. Lobby efforts on a state and national level were no longer enough. We needed to link with the poor throughout the United States and we needed outside help from our poor brothers and sisters throughout the world. We didn't know how we were going to reach others throughout the United States let alone throughout the world. We saw that welfare reform was a law that was passed that would eventually deny people the right to eat and have a roof over their heads and worst of all — people would eventually die. We knew that welfare reform was a violation of our economic human rights and that since these were human rights violations we were talking about we needed to go to the United Nations. So the first ever March for Economic Human Rights in the United States of America was spearheaded by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union. In the March for Our Lives, welfare and other poor and homeless people throughout the U.S. marched from the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia to the United Nations in New York City.

People began to contact us from all around the world. They were curious about what was happening in the US. Many people didn't know that there was poverty in the US and many more people couldn't understand why we had so many homeless people. We began to see how our local movement was beginning to play a role in transforming the international human rights movement. For so long we were seen as a country that could play a role in the human rights movement by playing a solidarity role for the landless or peasants in some other part of the world, but now we needed help. We needed human rights advocacy; we needed human rights education; we needed human rights monitors; and we needed international human rights law.

Utilizing the Peoples Decade for Human Rights Education we began to learn more about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and set out to teach everyone about it. We opened a

KWRU Human Rights Center in Kensington and began to open up human rights houses in which we house homeless families who in turn advocate for everyone to have a right to housing and other human rights. We trained people to begin to see themselves as human rights monitors and began a massive documentation project. We launched a New Freedom Bus in June of 1998 calling for Freedom from Unemployment, Hunger and Homelessness. Welfare recipients, homeless people and others who see themselves as impacted by welfare reform traveled together on a bus for an entire month documenting the stories of families throughout the country and how they've been impacted by welfare reform. The tour covered over 35 towns and cities around the country where poor people are beginning to organize. Immediately, over 8,000 people began logging onto our web page at <http://www.kwru.org>. Almost every continent in the world was learning about our growing movement for economic human rights in the US.

We began to hold tours throughout our community for people from Europe and South America and all over — showing them first hand the devastating impact of welfare reform. We began to receive invitations to speak with people from Finland, Chile, Brazil and others. From our neighborhood in Kensington, North Philadelphia we were now learning from and teaching each other about economic human rights. Throughout this process we have been working with a team of lawyers, examining international human rights law. Peter Weiss from the Center for Constitutional Rights has been spearheading that process.

This year is sure to be a difficult year as millions more are downsized and cut off the roles without a right to a job at a living wage. As millions more will line our streets, we will continue to highlight Articles 23, 25 and 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For in order to reclaim your rights, you first have to believe that you have a right to them.

In October 1998, many of the poor people's groupings that hosted the bus tour and sponsored mini marches and tribunals came to the Poor People's Summit held at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At this Summit over 40 organizations from across the United States, including Puerto Rico formed the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign and launched the preparations for the next phase of this campaign. In October of 1999, poor and homeless families linked hands once again as they marched side by side. This time from the seat of power in Washington DC to the United Nations in New York. This time marching for an entire month in what was called the March of the Americas. We are linking up the entire western hemisphere, with Canada and Latin America, calling for an end to poverty. The Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign has been born in the United States of America and the movement is building daily.

It has been a struggle to implement these human rights principles in the United States because the poor have been invisible and kept unorganized. The next generation of children depend upon us getting organized and we are determined to do just that.

The Cockroach vs. The Dinosaur

By Willie Baptist, Education Director, Kensington Welfare Rights Union

The conditions of life today, particularly for the newly emerging class of poor folks, are creating new means of struggle which are necessitating new methods of using them. Such means of struggle as housing takeovers, tent city struggles, cooperative survival projects, the poor and homeless use of newspapers and computer networks, etc are all considerations in the emerging new war to end poverty forever. The art of leadership, that is the art of strategy and tactics in this war, is the art of adapting the newly arising means of struggle to the objectives of human survival and human happiness. Leaders must be educated and trained in this art. Comparing the ways and means of the cockroach to those of the dinosaur gives us some lessons in this regard.

The dinosaurs are extinct. They could not adapt. In other words, they could not take up and use other means of survival left or placed at their disposal by new conditions. The new conditions eliminated their old means of survival and they perished.

The mass extinction of the dinosaurs took place 65 million years ago. So far most theories agree that the extinction was not a slow evolutionary process but one that was "leap-like" concentrated in a relatively short period of time. Increasing fossil evidences seem to give more scientific credence to a leading theory on how and why the extinction happened. This theory says that a cataclysmic bombardment of the earth surface by a gigantic meteor took place. This created a huge dust that blocked out the sunlight for a period estimates of which range from many months to a thousand years. The dinosaurs-the dominant life forms- were destroyed in turn as death went up the food chain starting with the plant life immediately dependent on sunlight. The cockroaches lived through this period. Their make-up and capabilities enabled them to survive and adapt to the new environmental conditions created by the cataclysmic changes.

The cockroaches are one of the oldest species still in existence. They are 350 million years old. They are most noted for their adaptability to changing conditions of life. Contributing to this highly developed adaptability is their large scale reproductive capacity (one cockroach can give birth to 400,000 descendants in a year) and the size, structure, and chemical make-up of their bodies. Their antennae and other sensory organs give them extreme sensitivity to light and air movements which contribute to their speed and maneuverability. Their ability to keenly sense tiny food nutrients in extremely varied and scarce environmental situations make them resourceful and resilient.

These capabilities constitute their main strengths and limitations and therefore helped define their "strategic/tactical" methods of survival. They operate mainly at night while most other animal species are asleep. Their main method of defense is rapid retreat. The final point of retreat are "bases of operation" created out of hidden places most difficult to access and less frequented by predators or killer sprays. The "bases of operations" serve as temporary protection for especially the impregnated females (who are capable of giving birth to 16-32 roaches per egg carried). These females reside in the center of the "bases" and produce new "soldiers" in the struggle for survival. Another effective method of defense is the ability of an entire cockroach concentration to scatter and quickly retreat to a new and harder to reach "base of operation" when the old one is exposed to direct assaults.

Few animal creatures have exhibited such abilities for extended existence. Only human beings have exhibited comparable potential abilities. They lie in their unique mental capacities. This gives them the ability to study and predict generally the changing conditions and to adopt and adapt, in the most advantageous strategic and tactical way, the means of survival and struggle provided by those conditions. Leadership is problem-solving involving the art of strategy and tactics. It is therefore necessary to human survival especially in social and political conflicts. However it's only source is the human mental process.

Let us do as the cockroach and not as the dinosaur. Let us develop, train, and use our strength of adaptability as expressed through our capacity to think and study the survival problems we face so as to solve them. The sensitive instincts of the cockroach must be matched by our mental capacity to attain scientific truth about our conditions and about the strengths and limitations of ourselves and our enemies. This is essential if we are to defend ourselves and defeat our enemies who benefit from and defend a profit-driven and human-murdering system.

The instincts of the dinosaur could not prevent it from becoming extinct. If we persist in only using short-sighted individual "instincts" in our day to day struggle for survival without thinking, without scientific knowledge that takes us beyond the surface to the substance of the matter, then those "instincts" will not add up to even those of the dinosaur. This to say nothing of the sophisticated intelligence of our enemy.

To out-fight our enemies we must out-smart them. Nowhere in world history can anyone find where a dumb force rose up and defeated a smart force. The source of smart strategy and tactics, and the most powerful and revolutionary weapon in the struggle for human survival, is the human thinking and feeling capacity. Political education and training in the skills of organizing are the keys to wielding this weapon, to acquiring and adapting the necessary means of carrying out a social struggle to eliminate poverty and to better our lives.

This is what the Kensington Welfare Rights Union Education Committee / Annie Smart Leadership Development Institute is all about. It is an education and training institute created and run mostly by poor and homeless people. In the war to end poverty we can not allow our enemy to create and provide "leaders" for us. Daily the growing struggles for survival are producing new soldiers with the potential for leadership. The Institute is about the development of these soldiers into generals. To accomplish this, our approach includes not only popular education but also intermediate and advanced education. Smart leadership not only put forth solutions to problems but also organizes the carrying out of those solutions. Generals must be educated and trained to organize a mighty army to wipe out poverty and homelessness forever.

Organizing for Economic Human Rights

Lessons from the Kensington Welfare Rights Union Education Committee

Introduction: Winning the Hearts and Minds

Without education, organization is reduced to simply mobilization. Simply mobilizing bodies, moving from one event to another is not enough to counter the sophisticated and dangerous forces arrayed against us and to stick and stay the necessary course of ending human misery. What is that course? To build a broad movement to end poverty led by the poor. This is what the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign is all about.

The so-called "welfare reform" in the United States is not only about welfare recipients and the most destitute. It is about the violations of economic human rights of everyone. We live in a big country and it's going to take a big movement to change the priorities of this nation. But the strong history of the fights for rights in this country will help us to build a movement to ensure that all people have their basic human rights. This nation's founding creed is expressed in the Declaration of Independence; "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted...deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed". Poverty, welfare reform, low wage work, downsizing, etc. violate the very creed of this nation.

We are creating organization across this country among poor and working people to change the direction of this society. About a year ago, there were three deaths that occurred in the New York Transit Depot in a week's period: the death of a dog, the death of a maintenance man and the death of a homeless man. Within that week, nearly 100 calls came in concerning these deaths. Ninety of the calls came in for the dog, one call came in for the maintenance man and no calls came in for the homeless man. This story shows the moral direction this country is going in. This moral direction reflects an economic direction where everyday more people are downsized, impoverished and made homeless. The direction is morally and economically devaluing human lives. And in order to change this direction we need to win the hearts and minds of the American people to end poverty once and for all. Each of our educational, each of our activities must keep in mind that we are building unity and organization among the poor in order to win the hearts and minds of the people.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Signed in 1948 by all member nations of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UDHR, states that all humans have certain rights they are born with including civil, political, cultural, social and economic rights. When nations join the United Nations they must agree to the thirty articles set out in the UDHR. And to this day, over 180 nations have signed on to this document.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was developed by Eleanor Roosevelt at the end of World War II. She was inspired by the founding creed of the United States, the Declaration

of Independence. The “UDHR Little Blue Books” have become the international standard for Human Rights and express the rights due every human being - including food, housing, and living wage jobs. While claiming to defend human rights, the US government has consistently undermined the growing global consensus on economic human rights. Economic Human Rights are mainly expressed in articles 23, 25, and 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These articles sum up the life and death issues and concerns of the impoverished world majority including growing sections of the US population. The United States is the richest country in the world and yet violations of economic human rights are occurring because of welfare reform, downsizing, etc. For this reason, we have focused on these three articles in our campaign.

Article 23: The right to jobs at a living wage and just conditions of work.

“Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment... Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection... Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions.”

Article 25: Right to well-being of a person and their family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special protection.”

Article 26: Right to education

“Everyone has the right to education...”

Why Documentation of Economic Human Rights Violations?

Using economic human rights to organize arose out of the idea of documenting and dramatizing the immediate issues that poor people are fighting around. In order to determine the immediate issues that people are prepared to organize around, work must be done in poor communities, welfare offices, labor pools, sweatshops, labor camps, hospitals and health care centers and any place where you can find people suffering from economic injustices and document people’s stories and the violations that are happening all around us.

We call this concept “**Mohammed Must Go to the Mountain**” We need to go where the people are at. We understand that poor people have many problems that affect their daily lives, but that only some of these problems are “issues” that people are prepared to organize and rally around. To demonstrate this principal, years ago, people were organizing in a homeless shelter in Chicago, Illinois. There were two groups of people involved in this homeless organizing, housing advocates from a social service agency and homeless people living in a local homeless shelter. The housing advocates got the idea that they wanted to gather the homeless people onto a bus to go to the state capitol to rally for affordable housing. And although the homeless people’s problems originated from the lack of affordable housing in the city, this wasn’t the issue that shelter residents wanted to organize around. What really angered the homeless people was that they were forced to wake up at 5:00 am and wait in a line to get 5 sheets of toilet paper. This

made the homeless people feel disrespected and dehumanized. And this was what the homeless people wanted to organize around. We were able to organize the homeless people first around the conditions and practices in the shelter and develop this group of homeless people into an organization that continued to fight for everyone's basic human rights.

The next principle for using economic human rights to organize we call "**2 Legit 2 Quit**". The Kensington Welfare Rights Union displays this principle on our T-Shirts. For the past two to three decades, the poor have been blamed for the problems of the country and world. Academics have written books on the underclass, politicians have debated around the "Welfare Queen", music and the media have scapegoated the poor. And our society believes it. Poor families blame themselves for their inadequacies to provide for their children. By using economic human rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we can tell other poor people that they are not to blame for their poverty, that they are not alone in their poverty. A document exists that guarantees their daily needs, and that over 180 nations in the world believe in human rights.

How to Use Economic Human Rights to Organize?

The experiences of the March of the Americas and the previous phases of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign have taught us some major lessons in terms of the poor organizing the poor. These lessons are translated into five key principles. The first principle is that documenting the violations of economic human rights occurring in one's family or community is an **act of protest** and a **means of education**. Organizing larger rallies and protests to call broader attention to these violations set the stage for deeper and wider education. And the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign even has a *legal petition* into the Inter American Commission of the Organization of American States indicting the US government for economic human rights violations occurring here in the United States.

The next principle of organizing is building a movement based **on commitment and not on compensation**. We are in the initial stages of building the largest movement this country has ever seen. But before a baby can walk, she must crawl; before a building has a roof, it must have a strong foundation. To build a big movement we must identify and develop a conscious and committed core of leaders. In our organizing we say that we are *planting seeds* and *panning for gold*. Each activity we do is an opportunity for identifying the golden leaders who will build this movement. We understand that every talented and developed leader represents twenty or fifty people ready to follow them. Our task is to educate these leaders to develop this understanding and commitment to a movement for economic human rights.

It is not easy to build a massive social movement without the funds to do so. But as poor people we do not have money ourselves. As poor people we must use our **resourcefulness to resolve our resourcelessness**. We can't wait for a grant to meet our basic needs. One of the ways we have begun to build this movement without funding and other resources is by *creating networks of support*. We talk about a movement to end poverty, led by the poor. But this movement has to involve everybody. We have involved students, religious folk, organized labor, social workers, lawyers, doctors and nurses, and politicians in our activities for claiming our economic human rights. We have consolidate these connections to form a *New*

When the Kensington Welfare Rights Union moved families into St Edward's, the abandoned church in North Philadelphia, we had no other choice. The shelters were full in Philadelphia, rats had begun to move into the tents of our tent city because of the cold, and the Archdiocese had closed nine churches in poor neighborhoods that year. We were told that we had to leave the church but we had nowhere else to go. We began distributing the extra food, clothing and toys that were brought to the church as donations to the surrounding community. We went out each day with baby buggies we bought second hand and distributed our surplus. People in the neighborhood needed it. By doing this, we were able to start to develop a network of supporters and form a phone tree. We set up system where we would ring the church bell when we were at risk of being evicted. The people in the neighborhood had the telephone numbers of other supporters in outlying areas of the city. We had developed a relationship with a group of students from a small Christian college in the suburbs of Philadelphia. They had seen us on TV and started bringing student volunteers to help with child care and support at the church. One afternoon, the police came to St. Edwards and said that they would return to evict us because we were violating fire codes. Within a matter of two hours, hundreds of people from all over the city joined us in the church. Students at Eastern College ran around the school dorms saying the "Jesus is being evicted from a church in North Philadelphia", and two hundred students came to witness with us at the church. And the homeless families weren't evicted.

All of the organizing experiences laid out here speak to one thing. We need to **organize around our strengths**. Organizing around our strengths does two things; first, we are able to get a lot more done. Second, it helps to break down the feelings and stereotypes that poor people can't do anything. So, we organize our work around the strengths of the people in the organization. Everyone's strengths are different.

We have a woman in our organization named Katie who is an expert at getting utilities turned on. Living and organizing in poor communities means that lots of people have their utilities shut off, so being able to turn on someone's heat or electricity helps build the membership of the organization. But if we were to assign Katie to working in the office, faxing and mailing to people, we would not play to here strengths, we would not have all the members recruited because of their problems with utilities and Katie would not feel she had contributed her best to the organization.

All of the organizing, protesting, rallying and marching that we do is for a reason, to **get the message out**. We don't march to City Hall just to get a better look at the architecture of the building, we march there because we want the residents of that city to know what's really going on and what we're going to do about it. But the traditional media doesn't always cover what we're about. That same Media is controlled and paid for by the politicians, corporations, and rich of the city. We have learned through our organizing that we need to develop our own means to get the word out.

We have found two areas to be particularly useful. First, we have discovered the power of music. You can say a lot more in a song that you can in six hours of lecture and at the same time you can reach the heart and soul of a person. Thousands of people all around the country

and world know the words and music to a song written by poor women on the New Freedom Bus Tour in June of 1998, called Rich Man's House.

The other vehicle to get out the message of the movement is the Internet. The Kensington Welfare Rights Union has had an award winning web page for the past four years; in fact, we have been linked to by MTV news, 20/20 news, Netaid and others. Hundreds of thousands of people in countries all over the world have followed the activities of the KWRU on the web. We have been able to put out our analysis, solutions, organizing strategies, speeches, values through the Internet instead of relying on the sound-bites of the mainstream press. (see www.kwru.org)

And, lastly, **protest activities** around economic human rights **must serve as schools** for consolidating leaders and as examples for other organizations all around the country. Marches, bus tours, tribunals and other protest activities have been used as such. In October 1999, organizations of the poor and homeless from across the Americas marched from Washington, D.C. to the United Nations in New York City. We marched in protest of economic human rights violations caused by the U.S. government around the world. We marched 20 miles a day for 32 days, sleeping in community centers and churches throughout DC, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York. Each day we held press conferences, educational discussions and events, rallies and protests, cultural presentations, etc to show the world how poor people from the United States, Canada and Latin America were coming together to build a movement for economic human rights. Through the March of the Americas, we were able to consolidate new leaders from among the member groups of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign and come up with more ideas for moving the movement forward.

Get Involved!

Organizations all around the country are developing new organizing models and strategies because the times are changing. We share our experiences and ideas with each other so we can more effectively build this movement. If you are interested in hosting an Economic Human Rights Organizing School in your town, feel free to contact the Education Committee of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union.

If you have organizing ideas and models that you want to share, get involved in the University of the Poor, a web-centered educational institution designed to share experiences in building a movement for economic human rights. This is a project of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign that came out of the March of the Americas.

Grassroots Use of the Internet

*By Chris Caruso, Chair of Kensington Welfare Rights Union's Netwar Committee,
Director of humanrightstech*

It's no news to anyone that the technology revolution that we've been living through in the past 30 years is changing everything, from globalization to the apparent rewriting of economic fundamentals by this so-called "New Economy." While the information economy has produced incredible wealth and abundance, this bounty has benefited only a small fraction of United States residents. Presently, the top 1% of Americans hold 42% of the wealth, while the bottom 80% own only 16% of the wealth. This concentration of wealth is greater than it has been since the Great Depression. More children are homeless today than during the Depression. 44 million people in the United States are without health insurance. In addition, real wages for the great majority of workers have been stagnant since the mid-1970s. The information economy has created incredible new possibilities, but this boom is leaving out poor and working families.

A potent expression of these disparities is the "digital divide". Economically disadvantaged people and communities lack access to the Internet and skills necessary to use it. A study by the United States National Telecommunications and Information Administration describes that use of the Internet is directly related to one's income level; only 12% of people at the lowest income bracket are able to use the Internet, compared with 60% of those in the highest income bracket.

Further, this research shows that the digital divide, far from closing, is actually growing wider. In the past year, the access gap between the highest and lowest income brackets grew by 30%.

I believe that the same technologies that are now causing these great disparities can be used to end them. For the past five years, I have used my expertise in the technology field to develop Internet strategies for organizations of low-income people and heal this "digital divide".

I started working with the Kensington Welfare Rights Union in Philadelphia to develop an Internet strategy in 1996. The KWRU is a grassroots anti-poverty organization located in North Philadelphia. Kensington is the poorest neighborhood in the state of Pennsylvania. In the past 30 years, Philadelphia has lost over a quarter million jobs, net. In the last 20 years, Philadelphia lost more than half of its factory jobs. KWRU was able to get a computer and software donated, and were able to raise the \$60 they paid for one year of internet access, and create an award-winning web page that has been linked to by 20/20 News, MTV News, Netaid, and many others.

We've developed a very successful Internet strategy over the last five years. All sorts of things can happen when you have a strong presence on the Internet. A couple years ago, a filmmaker in Sweden got a contract from the BBC to do a documentary on the impact of welfare reform in the US. He didn't know where to begin, so he sent out some general email to some lists, and someone pointed him in the direction of KWRU. He looked at the site, printed every page of the site out, stuffed them in his briefcase, and flew to Philadelphia. He

then proceeded to film a documentary on the real impact of welfare reform in the US, as a way to try to influence public policy in Sweden to stop the imposition of the supposedly successful “American Model” of welfare reform in his country.

Recently, I’ve begun to systematized the lessons I have learned and have formed my own non-profit organization, Humanrightstech to multiply these lessons and share them with other grassroots anti-poverty groups.

I want to talk about some of the ways that grassroots organizations can use the Internet to advance their organizing work. The Internet can be a powerful tool for breaking the isolation of grassroots organizations, allowing them to spread their message and find allies from all sectors of society. The Internet allows grassroots organizations to reach a potential audience of millions with a very small investment of resources. No other communications technology offers such possibility for low-cost access to such an enormous audience. The Internet can’t be compared to TV or radio in terms of cost of entry at all. Few grassroots organizations could afford to even buy time on the radio or television, much less start their own TV or radio station. But, any grassroots organization can start their own web site.

And of course, that’s the problem, as well. Easy of entry means that there are many, many web sites to compete with for people’s attention. Some have called this the “paradox of plenty” – people are now faced with so many choices for sources of information, it’s very difficult to stand out. Traffic on the Internet today is doubling every 100 days. One way that companies attempt to stand out amongst this information overload is to pour large amounts of money into their advertising budgets to promote their web sites. This isn’t an option for most grassroots organizations that I know of.

As grassroots organizations, we have to lean on our strengths in solving this problem. We have to tie our on-the-ground organizing work with our on-the-net strategies. I’ve found that that nexus, of coordinating on-line and off-line activities, to be a very powerful place.

I think of the Internet as a giant magnifying glass, that has the potential to let millions see what we are doing. But we need to be doing something to draw people in.

One example of successful tying of on-line and off-line organizing is humanrightstech’s work on the March of the Americas. The March of the Americas was a month-long march from Washington DC to the United Nations in New York City to protest poverty and welfare reform in the US. It was held in October of 1999. The march was organized by a group of 40 grassroots anti-poverty organizations called the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign. Humanrightstech turned a van into a mobile Internet training center. We trained leaders of poor people’s organizations in using the Internet to broadcast their struggles. This took the form of repeated educational on the possibilities of the Internet for poor people’s organizing, as well as on-going trainings of poor leaders in the mobile Internet training center. From this mobile Internet training center, we produced daily updates of the details of the days’ events as well as original digital videos of the march, pictures and stories of various poor people and organizations that attended, spoken testimonials of violations of economic human rights, digital audio files of the educational events that took place all along the march, and discussions among groups across the country and across the globe.

The march itself generated the content for us to have compelling updates of the web page on a daily basis (see <http://www.kwru.org/ehrc/moa.html>). Regularly updating a website is usually a sound method for getting people to keep coming back to your site. At the same time, we were able to advertise our website with every flyer we handed out along the whole march route. We even had signs and t-shirts with our web address that went along with the march. We estimate that 35,000 people from over 40 different countries followed the march on the web that month. We tied reporting content with education content, so as people visited the page to find out about the march, then would always have choices for educational content to help them learn about the issues and struggles facing the organizations that made up the march.

One of the main goals for this kind of web activity is for building networks of support. Feeling connected to the work of an organization tends to increase people's commitment. To be able to follow a campaign like a march day by day, with multimedia content, really makes people feel a part of something. In addition to regularly updating sites, another important practice is to find ways to make the viewers' web experience as interactive and participatory as possible.

One example of an Internet-based campaign comes from the recent letter-writing campaign sponsored by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union. The director, Cheri Honkala, was arrested during the WTO protests for peacefully expressing her views. She was charged with obstruction and assault of a police officer. She was offered a plea bargain that included a gag rule, barring her from participating in any demonstration for two years. She rejected this attempt to deprive her of her first amendment rights and prepared for a trial. KWRU launched an intensive campaign over the Internet, utilizing their web page (<http://www.kwru.org>) and a large targeted number of list-serves to encourage people to write letters to the prosecutor of the case and ask that the case be dropped. The act of writing the letter is a simple way that people can participate in the activity of the organization. Some people who encountered the letter volunteered to translate the letter into several other languages. KWRU generated over 1,000 letters from across the country as well as Ireland, France, Canada, Quebec and elsewhere. The case was recently dropped on First Amendment grounds. But perhaps as important, KWRU was able to expand its network of supporters and its influence.

Another important aspect of grassroots organizations use of the Internet is to understand the Internet as an information backbone for other forms of media. The Internet doesn't just affect people who have direct access to it. The Internet can deliver publishable documents, radio-ready audio, and soon will be able to carry broadcast quality video. One example is the work of the Atlanta Labor Pool Worker's Union. They are a union of low-wage workers who work nine hours a day doing construction and other heavy work for less than minimum wage. Somewhere between 20,000 and 40,000 Atlanta citizens work every day these labor pools, which built much of the Atlanta Olympics and Emory University, and make so little money they are forced to live in homeless shelters. Some of the leaders of the union were graduates of the mobile Internet training center on the March of the Americas. They are now training their members to use the Internet both as a research medium and as a powerful tool for organizing. They use the Internet to gain access to and print out thousands of copies of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other documents created during the March, which they distribute as part of the organizing they do in the labor pools and the shelters. The

difficulty that they face in getting this information is a testament to their value of it: their organization has no computer, and they walk to the library to access and print this information. Thus, hundreds of people that are living in shelters in Atlanta or working in labor pools are receiving printed information concerning their human rights via the Internet, many of whom have never even seen the net.

Another important aspect of grassroots use of the Internet is that the mastery of cutting-edge tools, like the Internet, is an inspiring and empowering accomplishment for people who have been denied access to the mainstream of society. It can literally open up a whole world to those whose lives have been very circumscribed by poverty. Another group that humanrightstech has worked with is the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (<http://www.ciw-online.org>). Located in Immokalee, Florida, the Coalition is an organization of migrant farm workers primarily of Mexican, Guatemalan, and Haitian descent. They mostly pick tomatoes in Immokalee. They make 40 cents for every 32 pound bushel of tomatoes that they pick. They have been paid the same rate for the last 20 years. The Coalition has many accomplishments to date, including winning hundreds of thousands of dollars in back wages, and breaking up two slavery rings that existed in the surrounding communities. .

Humanrightstech trained members of the Coalition in digital video editing in order to create their own educational videos. Videos are a principal method of their education; the Coalition goes from labor camp to labor camp, leading discussions and showing videos that encourage workers to organize. They are able to show videos of the conditions they themselves work in, and their own organized response to those conditions at the labor camps where they do their educations. Even more significant, the experience of seeing themselves and their campaigns through the eyes of the video camera is immensely powerful; it clearly and forcefully shows the importance of their struggles, and allows members to see unmistakable examples of their own leadership. The Coalition has been able to stream videos over the Internet, showing the world their struggles.

Member organizations of the Poor People's Economic Human Right Campaign who are interested in developing Internet strategies for their organizing work should contact Chris at chris@humanrightstech.org for assistance.

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