

# Organizer's Edge ▶

**Greetings!**

## **Money from the Base -- Mary Ochs**

Yes, social change organizations can and must get much of their budget from their base. It is essential that our organizations are truly “owned” by the people with whom we organize. It keeps us grounded and accountable and ensures long-term sustainability. Sure, we want and need foundation funding. But the core work we do should be



supported by our base and that means we need both their time and money. Yes, if we are organizing very low-income folks it's hard to imagine they can pay dues or raise money. But they can and will if it matters enough.

Case in point—when I first started organizing, I was working mainly with women on welfare. Often women would come to us who had been denied or cut off welfare and urgently needed help. My instinct was to help first and then ask them to join. But one of my leaders showed me how wrong that was. When Ora Lee was in the office and someone came in with a problem, she would tell them that we help people who are members and who are ready to help themselves. Of course they would push back and she would say “Honey, go borrow or find a way to make a down payment on your dues (at that time \$5.00) and we will be happy to help you.” Sure enough, many came back with a dollar or two and some became core leaders over time. Thank you, Ora Lee, for teaching me such a great lesson!

Here's another example. I was working with a board of a strong organizing group. The board was comprised of community and union allies, a few academics and clergy and a few low-income workers. In a board development session I said that an important role of all board members should be to give a meaningful (for them) gift and help raise money. I've come to expect in these kinds of discussions that at least one or more board members want to “exempt” the low-income members for giving and/or getting funds. I said, “Let's stop deciding for others what they can or can't do.” Let's support everyone to do

this. And wouldn't you know it, the first board member to give a gift and get a \$5,000 donation was Rosa a woman who cleaned homes for a living.

I have had the pleasure of working with **Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement** (Iowa CCI) a 46 -year old, speak-truth-to-power community organizing group that mobilizes and engages thousands of everyday people to put people before profits, politics and polluters. Their power comes from thousands of members from all walks of life – urban and rural, Black and white, immigrant and lifelong Iowans. [iowaccci.org](http://iowaccci.org).

CCI does many things right including raising money from its base. CCI is a shining example of a strong, kickass organization that consistently raises half or more of its growing budget from its members/base. They also own their own building in Des Moines and have a healthy reserve fund that could carry their core operations for a year to boot. They don't do events or galas. They do bold work and ask and nurture relationships and ask, and ask, and ask folks to give. Their base is not wealthy and most of their members and donors give less than \$1,000 and they usually have only one large donor who give \$10,000. In fact, one small farmer gives an annual grain gift most years. They raise close to \$600,000 annually from small donors who LOVE CCI and its non-tax exempt 501 (c)4 related organization, Iowa CCI Action. They have been serious about doing this right for about 15 years. CCI and other organizations who have been successful at raising significant money from the base share these important practices. 1.) Fundraising is distributed across the staff, board and leaders—they have a culture of fundraising. 2.) They are intentional about it. They have plans, regular check-ins and invest time, talent and are persistent and disciplined in their fundraising. And, 3). They have authentic, deep relationships of mutuality and respect with their members/donors.

Some other organizations that are also doing well at raising money from their base include: Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Transgender Law Center, Jewish Voice for Peace, Mujeres Unidas y Activas, Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights, Voces de la Frontera and Nebraska Appleseed.

**Mary Ochs** has worked as a community organizer and founder/executive director of numerous grass roots, social justice organizations. She worked in the field for over 35 years. She first became involved with community organizing when she volunteered on a campaign to organize welfare recipients. In the recent past, Mary worked as a Field Organizer and as Organizing Director for the Center for Community Change (CCC) and currently is a consultant strengthening social change organizations

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## Feedback Welcome

We want to hear from you, your reactions, ideas, what is at the edge YOUR "envelope." Just go to...

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Who else you will hear from.....

We are just starting, but so far you can expect to hear what the following people are thinking:

Jessica Tang: Boston Teachers Union, AFT

George Luse of the Mass Teachers Assn,

Scott Reed with the PICO Network, ,

Cathy Howell, in Oregon and El Salvador, formerly with the AFL-CIO,  
Caesar McDowell of MIT,

Diana Bell of Community and Labor United,

David Hernandez of the California Education Assn,

Attica Scott, State Rep Louisville, Kentucky

Walter Davis, of the Tennessee, Health Care Coalition.

Debra Askenase, of Community Organizing 2.0,

Deb Fastino, of the Coalition for Social Justice in New Bedford, MA,

Rebecca Gutman, with SEIU-1199,

Tim Dean, of SEIU-1199,

Mary Ochs, long time organizer in Los Angeles  
and others, hopefully, including YOU

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Other Useful Links

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# Building Powerful Community Organizations

A Personal Guide to  
Creating Groups that  
Can Solve Problems  
and Change the World

MICHAEL JACOBY BROWN

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Michael Jacoby Brown Training and Coaching | [mjbrown246@gmail.com](mailto:mjbrown246@gmail.com) | <http://www.michaeljacobybrown.com>  
10 Brattle Terrace | Arlington, MA 02474