

(Oregon) Rural Organizing Project Political Education Philosophy and Practice

The Rural Organizing Project conducts political education continuously: both informally and formally. Our network of 60 local, autonomous human dignity groups have memberships that vary widely in their understanding of, and commitment to, the many issues which form the concept we call "social justice." Often they have a primary interest in their point of entry issue into activism and would be inadvertently oppressive in their analysis and action on other issues. Given the depth of this lack of real knowledge and thinking on social justice issues, our core approach has been to develop the following:

1. relationships of trust with the leadership (allowing us the latitude to push a broader analysis)
2. find the relative strengths and weaknesses of groups and memberships around issues (e.g. great on civil rights but no economic analysis)
3. intentionally insert political education around missing concepts at all communication contact points.

Communication occurs through staff contact and one on one, small group, large group and email/mail discussion with ROP leadership (and membership) contacts. Written communication provides us the best avenues for comprehensive issue development. As issues become timely (e.g. late winter for discussions about school boards and the value of public education because of March school board elections), our materials look at an issue from multiple dimensions. We then encourage that this information be used in formal discussion efforts with the larger membership. In some groups this becomes the topics of regularly offered consciousness raising sessions. In other instances the conduit is the next newsletter or it becomes an item to ponder on the next meeting agenda.

Often the mechanism that seems to generate the most feedback is the percolation effect - given that most of our venues are frontier, rural or smaller town we have found that providing leadership with factual issue-specific material, encouraging them to think it through with the support of ROP peers, and then to replicate those discussions with others as they cross paths at the grocery store, little league and other basic life tasks is significant. Not only does this widen the engaged circle but it gives the leaders a chance to understand where they still lack information and to then seek that information.

Formal and informal meetings with leadership and/or membership are similarly used for deeper exploration of a relevant issue area. It is also a time to deepen the analysis when

leadership understands the connections, but is hesitant to articulate them. Our field staff make a point of having dinner before, or spending the night after, a community meeting to provide “down time” for just such discussions. Many a leader has expressed clarity about the purpose of these informally formal discussion sessions and deep appreciation in retrospect.

The ROP has also done more intentional efforts. All of our field meetings start with an overview that advances political education. As Steering Committees formed across the state and we saw clear evidence that groups would need support to acknowledge racism within their own structures and communities, commitments were gathered for each leadership body to participate in an Oppression Awareness session. We just completed a one and a half day training sessions with representatives from 20 local groups that included significant amounts of political education around institutional racism. These meetings closed with the development of one year action plans around racism on the local level. At last year’s annual gathering, the packets leading up to, and the content of the day, worked on creating more tools for approaching our work with an economic analysis. Currently, as we prepare for anti-worker, racist, anti-choice, anti-gay ballot measures we are writing into our campaign plan a four month discussion time where we provide the facilitation and other needed materials for leadership/membership to come to better comfort on issues of challenge.

The ROP’s goal is to retain the comprehensive and informal political education (which we see as being *very* effective even if not easy to quantify) while developing intentional and more formalized efforts at political education. The Enough is Enough campaign is the first such campaign that the ROP has embarked upon.

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