Introduction

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Part III. Community Organization and Fragmentation

INTRODUCTION

Despite a range of community organizing efforts in response to crisis and inequity, Buffalo remains a fragmented community. At the April 1990 conference on Buffalo Change and Community, Susan Turner described conventional economic development policies in Buffalo as a factor in continued fragmentation. Turner opens this journal section with a look at recent economic development decision-making in Buffalo, a process historically undemocratic and excluding all but a handful of selected government and private interests. Despite some apparent changes, the benefits of development continue to elude a large segment of Buffalo area residents.

Turner calls for continuing movement toward more participatory economic development planning, noting optimistically that an educated, organized, and vocal constituency in Buffalo can make a difference in policy decisions. Substantively, moreover, such planning must place greater emphasis on building human capital — good schools, transportation, and health and human services — rather than on constructing high profile downtown monuments such as hotels and sports arenas.

Organized labor has a crucial role in strengthening participatory economic development planning, as Larry Flood suggests in his article on union-community relations in Buffalo. Unions have an institutional interest in responding to economic changes, as well as the expertise, resources, and broad base to build new bridges. Flood demonstrates that unions remain a critically important part of the social infrastructure of Buffalo, through the impact of collective bargaining agreements on the middle class lifestyle enjoyed by a portion of the industrial working class and through substantial union involvement in electoral, organizational, and charitable activities.

Flood recounts several attempts at union-community coalitions. Despite some concrete contributions to the community, however, organized labor has done little to build a broad-based coalition for progressive change in Buffalo. He cites some of the reasons as a lack of adequate resources, labor’s slow movement toward inclusion of women and minorities, failure to build a mass base, and direct conflicts of interest among
different unions and citizen groups. The very integration of organized labor into mainstream institutions acts as a brake on activist challenge to dominant policy.

Flood proposes more concerted outreach to the new workforce comprised heavily of women and minorities, more attention to the role of public sector unions, coalition building as a means of strengthening local unions, and greater ties to resources and kindred spirits colleges and universities. Further, unions can bring to bear on local economic development planning their strategic perspective on the global economy and appropriate local response. If narrowly focused on collective bargaining over wages and working conditions, organized labor in Buffalo will miss an opportunity to broaden the base for economic planning and to help set the economic development agenda for the coming years.

No account of community development in western New York, site of the Love Canal neighborhood of Niagara Falls and numerous other toxic hot spots, would be complete without reference to the environment. Problems of pollution, like economic decline, require a regional response engaging an array of local institutions large and small, populist and elite. The article here by Nils Olsen reveals the daunting impact of pollution on environment and community in western New York.

Olsen documents the proliferation and concentration of commercial hazardous waste disposal facilities in this region. He describes the isolation and powerlessness felt by local residents encountering a highly technical administrative process, one dominated by industry and apparently hostile to meaningful public participation. The ongoing saga of Residents Organized for Lewiston-Porter's Environment (ROLE), fighting against the siting of a hazardous waste incineration complex in Niagara County north of Buffalo, suggests the potential for local community activism.

Such environmental struggles present a tragic irony in Niagara County, where the Tuscarora Indian Reservation is but a few miles from the site of the proposed incinerator opposed by ROLE. Extensive industrial development in the area, with a decided insensitivity to the environment, stands in stark contrast to Native American respect for the land. Concluding the journal section on “Community Organization & Fragmentation,” John Mohawk places Indian economic development in the context of a growing activism among American Indians since the 1960s. This movement has been a demand for group rights over Indian land, without outside interference — not for individual rights nor access to the marketplace.
He characterizes Indian economic development as very new, because Indians have only recently begun to gain the necessary power and control over their affairs. Indian communities, with communal values and rich separate cultures, can serve as laboratories for experiments in economic development. In this, suggests Mohawk, is an opportunity for American society to observe and learn.

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