



A GUIDE TO INSURGENCIES
FROM COAST TO COAST

By Peter Dreier

RUST BELT RADICALS

Community Organizing in Buffalo

IN 2004, SEVERAL YEARS AFTER GRADUATING FROM HARVARD LAW SCHOOL, Aaron Bartley returned to Buffalo, New York, his hometown, to become a community organizer. Many of Bartley's friends thought that his idea was naïve and quixotic. After all, Buffalo was the quintessential "Rust Belt" city, devastated by a dramatic half-century loss of blue-collar jobs and population.

Within less than a decade, however, Bartley's vision has become at least a partial reality. People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH)—the group he founded with Eric Walker, another organizer—now has an enviable track record of winning victories that have improved the lives of low-income people on the city's West Side and built a solid core of grassroots leaders prepared to contest for both political and economic power.

When Bartley, who was born in 1975, was growing up in Buffalo, the city was already on a steady downward spiral. In 1950, with 580,000 residents, it was America's fifteenth largest city and a center of manufacturing,

shipping, and grain storage. A powerful labor movement battled to guarantee that the city's workers—primarily white ethnic groups, then a growing black industrial class that arrived after World War II—had a middle-class standard of living, including decent housing, schools, and public services.

By the late 1950s, Buffalo was confronting the crisis of deindustrialization. Major industries left the city. Middle-class families fled to the suburbs or outside the region. Its current population—261,000—is less than half of its peak. With a poverty rate of 30.2 percent, Buffalo is the nation's fifth poorest city.

This former factory town still hasn't figured out a clear "post-industrial" path to prosperity, but the city has recently seen some positive signs of life. Two of the country's largest banks are headquartered in Buffalo. The expansion of the state university's downtown medical campus has triggered an upsurge of private health care construction projects. A new office district is emerging adjacent to the city's aging downtown. Middle-class families are now rediscovering Buffalo's architectural jewels, triggering a historic preservation movement. As a result, Buffalo has a fast-growing construction sector. As Bartley notes, "our goal is trying to figure out how to make sure that residents of its low-income neighborhoods aren't shut out of that growth."

After graduating from Swarthmore College in 1993, Bartley worked for the SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign in Denver as part of the Union Summer internship program. Bartley called it a "trial by fire" and a "transformative experience." He moved to Cambridge, where he did research for the Center for Insurance Research, a Nader-esque consumer organization. In the fall of 1998 Bartley entered Harvard Law School, graduating in May 2001. He was active in Harvard's Progressive Student Labor Movement and helped lead the campus "living wage" movement, including a student occupation of the administration building that triggered national headlines and forced Harvard to improve wages, health benefits, and working conditions for about two thousand janitors and security workers. After law school, Bartley worked as an SEIU organizer for three years.

He decided to return to Buffalo in 2004. "Those were my roots," he explained, "and I guess I also had a romantic attachment to my hometown. I thought there was lots of potential. So many unorganized people."

Bartley purchased a 2,600-square-foot home for \$5,000 on the city's West Side, a neighborhood with a per capita income of about \$9,000,

and home to a diverse population that includes African-Americans and recent immigrants from Somalia, Sudan, and Burma. Although it's one of Buffalo's poorest neighborhoods, Bartley saw the ethnic mix, and the influx of immigrants, as a hopeful source of energy.

Bartley spent more than a year engaged in one-on-one discussions with neighborhood residents, union activists, community organizers, leaders of religious congregations, social service providers, and professors at the University of Buffalo. The Massachusetts Avenue Project, a non-profit group that sponsors urban agriculture projects, hired Bartley as its interim director, where he grounded himself in the daily life of the community and its problems. In getting reacquainted with his hometown, Bartley met Walker, a young organizer involved with registering West Side voters. Their conversations crystallized the idea of starting a community group that could combine direct-action organizing and economic development.

That combination is often fraught with tensions and contradictions. Direct action means grassroots mobilization and protest, while development typically requires groups to get access to properties and government subsidies, obtain zoning approvals, and work with banks, foundations, and government officials. Community development groups are often gun-shy about biting the hand that feeds them. But PUSH, which began in 2005, has learned how to walk that tightrope, using protest to gain attention before eventually winning over some protest targets as allies. PUSH uses its grassroots organizing and political alliances to grab resources from outside the Buffalo area, including from government agencies and private companies, that contribute to its development efforts.

As the two organizers and local leaders canvassed the neighborhood, they heard residents complain about the epidemic of abandoned and absentee-owned homes. (Census figures

put the city's vacancy rate at 16 percent, one of the highest in the nation.) They discovered that the area's largest absentee landlord was the state Housing Finance Agency and its subsidiary, the Municipal Bond Banking Agency (MBBA). Through these agencies, the state government had taken title to about 1,499 homes and vacant lots—about two hundred of them on the West Side—after owners walked away from their properties and failed to pay property taxes. Many were rat-infested, with broken windows and pipes, exposed asbestos, and strewn debris. Like a Wall Street investment bank, MBBA packaged these buildings into securities and sold the debt to investors, using the abandoned homes as collateral. But MBBA didn't bother to collect the back taxes or repair the homes. MBBA hoped to reap a windfall, but it wasn't able to sell more than a handful of the buildings, whose visible presence reinforced the area's reputation as a blighted, crime-filled neighborhood.

PUSH waged a militant grassroots campaign to embarrass Republican Governor George Pataki into getting the state agency to take responsibility for the derelict properties. In 2006, the group's members walked through the area, nailing eight-by-five-foot pieces of plywood to the doors of hundreds of condemned MBBA-owned buildings. The plywood had a drawing of Pataki, a sentence about the problem, and a phone number for the governor's office. The protest generated media publicity, as did PUSH's action in front of Pataki's and Mayor Byron Brown's Buffalo offices, where they sang Christmas carols with new verses designed to shame the politicians to take action.

The campaign laid the groundwork for PUSH's victory when Governor Eliot Spitzer, a liberal Democrat, took office in January 2007. Looking for ways to help rebuild Buffalo's troubled neighborhoods, the state housing agency worked with PUSH to design a new approach and then committed over \$2 million to the city for a pilot program to help non-profit

groups renovate housing and create more green spaces. Under Spitzer, MBBA turned over more than one thousand properties to the city, which transferred many of the West Side buildings to PUSH. The state plan, called Block by Block, followed PUSH's strategy of concentrating resources to stabilize neighborhoods, one block at a time.

PUSH then got into the development business to make sure that the state funding wouldn't be misused by speculators or incompetent developers with no roots in the community. It created a non-profit community development corporation that could obtain private financing and deal with contractors in order to repair homes.

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PUSH's development arm has rehabbed seven housing units, with another eleven units in construction, and ten more in pre-development. PUSH's partner, Homefront, has completed an additional six homes. Several buildings are owned by residents as part of a housing cooperative. Tenants who participate in PUSH's organizing and development work get a \$75 per month rebate on their rent. PUSH hired and trained neighborhood residents to fix up the properties, and hired and trained others to manage them.

In 2008, after an extensive community planning effort that involved hundreds of neighborhood residents, PUSH established a Green Development Zone (GDZ) within a twenty-five-block area of the West Side. The goal is to improve housing, attract new residents, and create jobs by concentrating investments in affordable housing construction and rehab, housing weatherization, job training, and urban agriculture. In three years, PUSH has generated more than \$6 million of investment—including housing, sidewalks, a local park, and (in partnership with the Massachusetts Avenue Project) several community gardens and a two-acre urban farm, where residents grow food.

To keep properties out of the hands of speculators and promote orderly development, PUSH has purchased another fifty-four parcels of property. It manages the vacant properties to make sure they don't suffer further deterioration until PUSH can renovate them. PUSH also won state funds to make streetscape improvements, including new sidewalks throughout the neighborhood. PUSH got the city to invest \$350,000 to improve a neglected park in the community.

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“Buffalo's housing market is still pretty weak,” explained Carl Nightingale, an urban historian at the University of Buffalo, “so PUSH can get access to land and buildings, fix them up, and not worry that the green development zone will lead to gentrification and push poor folks out.”

PUSH's job-training efforts recruit neighborhood residents to develop skills in construction and housing rehab, insulating homes and upgrading heating systems, and removing mold, lead, and asbestos. They not only work on PUSH-sponsored homes but also help local homeowners weatherize their houses—an

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important cost saver during Buffalo's bone-chilling winters. PUSH signed agreements with five contractors to ensure that neighborhood residents get access to the new jobs at a living wage. PUSH also worked with the Laborers International Union of North America to charter a new local with jurisdiction over the residential weatherization sector. The union is also working with the contractors to develop an effective training program for new retrofit workers. The union local has signed agreements with five contractors who will be performing retrofit work through the state-sponsored Green Jobs program in Western New York. The agreement guarantees that workers will be paid a living wage.

PUSH involves members through its job training and community gardening programs. It holds film screenings, parties, fundraisers, leadership training meetings, and planning summits that bring the diverse residents together to find common ground. But PUSH's most exciting work comes from members' participation

in its community organizing efforts to wrest concessions from people in power.

In 2010, PUSH led a campaign that involved other community groups in New York State to persuade Governor David Paterson and the state legislature to create a Sustainable Neighborhoods Program. Persuaded by PUSH's success with the Block by Block program, the politicians allocated another \$2 million to help renovate vacant properties around the state, including \$300,000 for PUSH's GDZ. PUSH brought members to Albany, the state capital, to lobby the legislators.

PUSH's biggest victory, so far, followed its organizing crusade against National Fuel, Buffalo's largest private utility company. Buffalo is one of the most expensive cities to heat because of its aging and poorly insulated housing stock, its extremely cold weather, and the chilly winds off Lake Erie. The company, with \$1.7 billion in revenues, is required by the state Public Service Commission (PSC) to run a Conservation Incentive Program (CIP) to improve energy efficiency, funded by a surcharge on customers' bills. PUSH uncovered that National Fuel spent an excessive amount of money on advertising to promote the company's visibility (in one year alone, National Fuel ran 2,053 commercials with CIP funds) and skewed its program toward affluent suburban customers, offering (for example) rebates for new high-end energy-efficient appliances.

In 2009, PUSH pulled together the National Fuel Accountability Coalition to wage a campaign to get the company to revamp its program. The campaign involved a mix of press conferences, petitions, lobbying in Albany, meetings in homes and churches, and protests. For a year, PUSH and the coalition tried to arrange a meeting with David Smith, National Fuel's \$7 million a year CEO, but he rebuffed their efforts. So, much like Michael Moore in the film "Roger and Me," the coalition stalked Smith at various public events and at National Fuel's

headquarters, triggering media attention that vilified the company.

Last October, the PSC required National Fuel to *increase* its low-income weatherization budget to \$4 million a year. Moreover, the PSC insisted that those funds come directly out of National Fuel's advertising budget.

To build on that victory, the Coalition has continued to push National Fuel to make it easy for low-income households to get access to the weatherization funds and to ensure that poor people are trained for and fill the jobs. In November, Occupy Buffalo joined forces with the Coalition at a "Fuel the 99%" protest at National Fuel's offices.

PUSH has about 350 dues-paying members who elect its board and establish priorities, and many more people who participate in some of its activities. It has an annual budget of about \$1 million and fifteen staffers, including four organizers, two development specialists, a job-training director, five staffers for the weatherization program, a communications director, and a finance director.

PUSH works closely with the Partnership for the Public Good, a Buffalo-based non-profit that serves as a research center for PUSH and other activist groups. PUSH works with environmental groups, churches, other community organizations, unions, and Buffalo First (an advocacy group for small businesses).

Bartley and PUSH's leaders recognize that the changes they want can't all be won in Buffalo, so they joined forces with several statewide and national groups, including National People's Action, mobilizing for broad policy changes.

"Our local work involves gaining community control of key resources," explained Bartley. "But the big goal that motivates PUSH is economic and social justice."