The Progression of Community Organizing in Southern West Virginia

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Abstract

Southern West Virginia is one of the most impoverished regions in the United States. It is often also considered one of the most isolated. The region’s strong historical ties to the coal mining and railroad industries as well as its deep religious and union heritage has placed the area in a unique position with respect to the examination of community organizing. In the modern era of political change (e.g. increased ideological polarization and the transition of Southern West Virginia from a democratic to republican stronghold), cultural change (e.g. continued progress for marriage equality and increasing power of ethnic and racial minorities), and technological and economic change (e.g. globalization, social networking) Southern West Virginia community organizations are serving as means through which communities and residents can find their voice, adapt to these changes and fight for their rights in the face of threats to their continued marginalization. This paper examines the transitioning cultural values of Southern West Virginia, the continued social and economic problems facing the area and civic organizing techniques being employed to unite the two.

Key Words

Community Organizing; Appalachia; Rural Studies; Community Development

Introduction

Community organizing is a process by which individuals and groups organize themselves to fight for community well-being on a variety of issues (e.g. gentrification, jobs, crime, education, environment). The methods through which communities organize are diverse and ever-changing. Across the United States, nonprofit organizations, neighborhood groups, churches, and other collective agencies have formed with the goal of ensuring the resident voices are included as a key part of decision-making processes in local communities. These community organizing efforts often find themselves standing in opposition to large, well-funded and staffed corporations, businesses and government agencies that do not often have the best interests of and/or knowledge about local neighborhoods and their needs. As a result, policies, projects and programs are often designed and implemented without the input of or investment in affected areas. Community organizing assists these communities/areas and the local residents by creating a structure which affords opportunities to become part of the policymaking conversation and implementation. Over the past century, as the country’s economic and social structures have changed so have community organizing methods. One example of these concurrent changes are the economic and community organizing changes that have taken place in Southern West Virginia.

Southern West Virginia relied historically on union-based community organizing due to its economic reliance on the coal mining industry. As coal mining employment declined, and continues to decline, Southern West Virginia has diversified its community organizing strategies,
techniques and infrastructure; thereby, employing a variety of methods aimed at alleviating economic and social problems while promoting the strong cultural heritage of the area and its people. This chapter reviews Southern West Virginia’s history of community organizing and the current state of community organizing efforts in the sub-region while exploring the cultural and social influences on those efforts.

Community Organizing

Community organizing became a hotly-contested, controversial part of the public sphere during the 2008 United States Presidential Election when then candidate Senator Barack Obama was revealed to have worked as a community organizer in the Southside of Chicago in the 1980s. The association of community organizing as a practice with its “founder”, and alleged socialist, Saul Alinsky, created a contentious debate amongst political commentators and ordinary citizens as to the role of community organizing in American society and the potential influences of community organizing on the nation’s political and social ideologies.

While community organizing was debated as a controversial practice during the 2008 election, the reality is that organizations of all political and ideological stripes engage in community organizing in towns and cities across the nation. Simply, community organizing is, “…a process by which people are brought together to act in common self-interest…in the pursuit of a common agenda.” The mission of community organizing is “to build power and create change.” From the national and local Tea Party movements to the protests and marches surrounding the Trayvon Martin case, community organizing is alive and well in the United States. It is important to note that community organizing differs from other strategies to assist local communities such as social service delivery and advocacy in that it focuses on development of citizens from the local community (those directly affected) and not outside parties to engage in change making. While outside parties may, and often do, assist in the development of the community organizing structure, success relies on the mobilization of the local citizens. Community organizing does not view local citizens as needing to be saved or helpless.

There are a variety of typologies guiding community organizing work. A basic dichotomy in practice is the separation of community organizing strategies that help citizens succeed with in their existing context and those that seek to change the context. For example, community building seeks to help local communities, “develop legitimacy by building on the assets of the community.” Community building helps citizens maneuver, through organizing, within the social, political and economic realities of the larger society without calls for transformative change. Community building occurs, for example, when local communities are able to successfully organize to prevent the construction of a prison in a local neighborhood or to gain new bus routes to serve residents. In these cases, community organizing helps citizens “win” but radical changes is not asked for and does not occur. Conversely, social action seeks to, “develop a broad-based movement for social change” that “radically restructures power and institutions.” An example of social action community organizing is the Civil Rights Movement (CRM). The CRM changed the laws and policies surrounding race relations in the United States by integrating public schools, changing voting regulations, and ending Jim Crow. The CRM brought transformative change.

All community organizing strategies (community building and social action) want to help constituencies build power, develop relationships, grow leaders, educate, create strategies for change, mobilize citizens, take action, and “win” victories.4

While some may think of community organizing as a primarily urban endeavor, rural communities are actively engaged in community organizing efforts. As with many activities, however, rural areas face unique challenges, barriers and opportunities in community organizing practice. Southern West Virginia is one such rural area.

Southern West Virginia

For the purposes of this chapter, Southern West Virginia is defined as thirteen counties in the southern portion of the Mountain State. The Counties of Boone, Fayette, Greenbrier, Lincoln, Logan, McDowell, Mercer, Mingo, Monroe, Nicholas, Raleigh, Summers and Wyoming constitute the area of study. The total population of the sub-region is 438,433 persons. The two largest cities in this sub-region are Beckley (Raleigh County) with a population of 17,614 and Bluefield (Mercer County) with 10,447. The sub-region is the home to nine institutions of higher learning, four television stations, and several key historical and tourist-oriented landmarks and businesses (e.g. New River Gorge, The Greenbrier, Winterplace Ski Resort). These institutions help form the backbone of the changing economy of southern West Virginia—one focused on tourism and customer service.

In West Virginia, 93.9 percent of the residents are white and the median age is 42.6. The median household income is $40,400 and 17.6 percent of residents (24.6 percent of children) live below the official poverty line.6 Overall, the area is whiter, older, earns less, and has a higher poverty rate than the United States as a whole. Counties in Southern West Virginia face unique challenges as the region continues to transition from its former mining and railroad-dominated economic system to a modern knowledge and service-based economy. The Appalachian Regional Commission has labeled two counties in Southern West Virginia as economically distressed, five as at-risk for economic distress, and six as transitioning.7 The transition from a mining and railroad-based economy has resulted in substantial losses of middle class jobs and those businesses that supported them (e.g. services). The majority of new jobs created in the area are service jobs, or those with low wages and little to no benefit options. Harry Braverman (1974)8 argues that this “deskilling” of labor is part of the process of capitalism—to maximize profit by paying lower wages for a workforce employed in low skill jobs. The transition of Southern West Virginia from a unionized to service sector labor force is a result of capitalist forces. Due to the lack of middle class job opportunities, the region faces the dual issues of population decline and of an aging population. Obesity, heart disease, declining school infrastructure, and substance abuse/addiction are additional issues faced by regional organizers. The discussion of social action in Southern West Virginia begins with the coal mining industry and the contentious struggle by labor unions to organize the industry.

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4 Changemakers, “Community Organizing – What do we Mean?”
6 Ibid.
History of Union Organizing

The first form of large scale community organizing in Southern West Virginia was union-based organizing. The role union-based organizing played in the history of region is an essential component of examining current community organizing methods and the issues on which they organize. The following section briefly discusses the history and role of union-based organizing in the sub-region.

The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) labor union was formed in 1890. At the same time, coal mining was growing at a rapid rate in Southern West Virginia. By 1932, the Appalachian coal mining industry employed 705,000 miners. Coal mining was the dominant economic force in the region. Coal companies had successfully gained deeds to the majority of land and minerals in the area (through the bribe of a federal judge); thereby becoming the driving economic and employment force for not only miners but ancillary businesses which served miners and their families (e.g. stores, restaurants, schools). The local economy was intertwined at every level with coal companies.

While the coal industry provided jobs, it came at a price. Many coal miners and their families resided in company towns owned by the coal companies. The companies owned the homes, stores, and churches within company towns, essentially controlling every aspect of their workers and their paychecks (i.e. pay went directly back to the company when families bought food, clothing etc. at company-owned stores). Moreover, coal mining was dangerous and miners faced significant health and occupational hazards which led to sickness and death. “Between 1890 and 1912, West Virginia had a higher mine death rate than any other state.” Finally, many miners contended that they were not paid at the rate promised and benefits were nonexistent. The dominance of the coal mining industry, the control they held over their workers coupled with the lack of other opportunities in the isolated area, created harsh working and living conditions for many Southern West Virginia residents. They were dependent economically on coal. Rank-and-file coal miners began to understand that their condition was a result of the lack of control they held over their own lives—their jobs, their wages, their housing. They were powerless. The owners of the coal mines owned everything as a result of aforementioned capitalist process—the process of increased power in the hands of owners at the expense of workers in order to maximize profit.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, in response to the substandard working and living conditions faced by employees in industries across the country, union organizing efforts began to grow. The UMWA began to test the organizing waters in Southern West Virginia in the 1890s. The decades that followed were an intense and violent time for miners, their families, and the local

coal communities as coal companies paid local law enforcement and/or the Baldwin-Felts detectives to prevent union organizing by any means. This resulted in bloody and deadly battles including the 1920 Battle of Matewan in which, …seven detectives, including both Al and Lee Felts, Mayor Testerman, and two miners were dead or dying. The battle made Sid Hatfield a folk hero for miners throughout the nation. Fifteen months later, the Baldwin-Felts detectives retaliated by killing Hatfield on the McDowell County courthouse steps at Welch, in a murder so brutal that it touched off an armed rebellion of 10,000 West Virginia coal miners in the largest insurrection this country has had since the Civil War [Battle of Blair Mountain].15

The Battle of Matewan represents the difficulty the UMWA faced in organizing in the isolated, economically dependent foothills of Southern West Virginia. The loss the miners enduring at the Battle of Blair Mountain even temporarily suspended UMWA organizing in the area. At the same time, however, the UMWA was successful in gaining important pay, safety, and benefit rights for Southern West Virginia miners including federal Black Lung benefits.

The Changing Union Perspective

The UMWA and other unions (e.g. Service Employees International Union–SEIU) are still active in Southern West Virginia. Union membership in West Virginia today has fallen to 12.1 percent or 81,000 workers; the twelfth highest rate in the nation. As with the rest of the nation, however, union membership has been dropping steadily across the state in recent decades (in 1985 22.7 percent of all West Virginia workers were union members).18 The UMWA has also faced dramatic declines in membership. “By 1998 the UM had about 240,000 members, half the number that it had in 1946. As of the early 2000s, the union represents about 42 percent of all employed miners.”

The dramatic decline in union membership and changing social and political climate in Southern West Virginia (and the entire nation) has changed the perspective on unions. Whereas, unions were originally seen as a necessary means through which labor needed to organize for basic rights, a common thread in political discourse today is to blame unions for the decline in manufacturing economic growth and as greedy organizations out to prevent capitalist profit. While unions currently boast a 54 percent approval rating, in 1956 the union approval rating stood at 75 percent. 20 In Southern West Virginia, as in many other areas of the country, unions are increasingly seen as a political arm of the Democratic Party. This is problematic for labor unions because while West Virginia has traditionally been a Democratic stronghold, this has been rapidly changing over the past twenty years. The Republican presidential candidate has won West Virginia the past four election cycles. While, Democrats remain in power in state government,

16 West Virginia Division of Culture and History, “West Virginia’s Mine Wars.”
19 Maier Fox, United We Stand, The United Mine Workers of America 1890-1990 (United Mine Workers of America, 1990).
largely due to the historical strength of the Democratic infrastructure machine, the values of the political culture closely align with national conservative movements. These are the very national conservative movements (with assistance from conservative media and advocacy groups) that strongly oppose unions and helped establish significant skepticism of community organizing during the 2008 election. Unions have increasingly become fodder in a polarized political landscape pitting former union strongholds (West Virginia) against the party most aligned with union leadership (Democrats). The Republican Party has successfully grabbed former Democratic voters by focusing less on economics and on cultural, social, and moral political discourse.

In Southern West Virginia, the UMWA faces another challenge (in addition to its declining membership and troubled public perception); finding balance between the fight against the coal industry, support for local communities, and maintenance of coal-related jobs. The practices of the coal industry which spurred the first widespread community organizing efforts in the sub-region are now often defended by the UMWA due to the membership’s need to keep their jobs. In short, if the coal industry’s destructive environmental practices are ended, coal jobs may be lost. In response to the Obama Administration’s changes to the process for the issuance of mountaintop removal mining permits, the President of the UMWA stated, “the UMWA will continue to fight for our members’ jobs, their livelihoods and a secure future for their families. And we will do so without regard to who we have to fight with.”21 The environmentally destructive mining practice, mountaintop removal, has changed the organizing landscape as the traditional organizing backbone in Southern West Virginia—unions—now stand opposed to other groups engaged in organizing campaigns.

Mountaintop Removal

While union-based organizing formed the foundation of community organizing efforts in Southern West Virginia, today coal mining plays a much smaller employment role in the area; however, coal companies still maintain high levels of political and economic control relying on the use of new mining methods. These mining methods are the focus on the majority of community organizing efforts in the sub-region and often pits union members and other residents against one another.

During World War II (1941-1945) coal companies began to mechanize the industry in response to war-related demands for increased efficiency and to reduce their growing union-related labor costs. A solution was found in the form of strip mining. Strip mining entails the removal of soil and rock above a seam (particularly coal), followed by the removal of the exposed mineral.22 Strip mining allowed access to seams of coal not available through the underground, manpowered mining process. By the 1970s coal companies had mechanized the industry while, concurrently, inventing new forms of strip mining; namely, mountaintop removal.

Mountaintop removal mining is the practice of blasting off the tops of mountains so machines called draglines can mine coal deposits (Waters, 2006). The Office of Surface Mining federal regulations officially defines mountaintop removal as, “surface mining activities, where the mining operation removes an entire coal seam or seams running through the upper fraction of a

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mountain, ridge, or hill… by removing substantially all of the overburden off the bench and creating a level plateau or a gently rolling contour…”

The mechanization of the coal mining industry has had dire economic, health, and environmental consequences in Southern West Virginia. For example, in McDowell County (one of the ten poorest counties in the nation),

[the residents] relied so heavily on the coal industry, there was no available work for unemployed miners. [Moreover], the subsequent migration of McDowell County’s youth resulted in an upward shift in the average age of its population. The best and the brightest migrated, causing the county to become in many ways, a dependency of the federal government.

In addition, there are widespread issues with environmental degradation and health related to mountaintop removal. Due to the dumping of valley fill into local hollows near mine sites, over 1,200 miles of waterways have been buried. Moreover, 75% of West Virginia’s rivers and streams contain pollution caused by mining processes.

One of the most devastating mining processes is the disposal of coal sludge. “The washing process generates huge volumes of liquid waste, while the mining process generates millions of tons of solid waste. The cheapest way for coal companies deal with the waste is by constructing dams from the solid mining refuse (that is, rocks and soil) to impound the liquid waste.” These dams, on average, contain 500 million gallons of sludge and pose both environmental and human risks if breakage occurs. When breakage occurs local ecosystems and human residents are at risk for toxic pollution exposure and, due to sludge flooding, health and structural damage. On February 26, 1972, a sludge impoundment in Buffalo Creek, West Virginia broke, spilling 132 million gallons of black waste water in to the local hollow causing 125 deaths and the displacement of another 4,000 residents.

In addition to flooding, mountaintop removal causes other destructive human impacts. The blasting of the mountain peaks often causes local homes and buildings, many of which are old, to be rocked off of their foundations. The blasting and mining processes also create substantial health impacts in these communities. The coal dust settles on local buildings and in the lungs of residents. Asthma and cancer rates in Central Appalachia are among the highest in the nation. Marsh Fork Elementary School in Raleigh County, West Virginia, for example, is located directly below a mountaintop removal site. The school reports that, on average, 30 out of the school’s 100 students are dismissed from class early on any given day due to asthma-related illnesses. These realities have driven local residents and communities to community organizing.

**Mountaintop Removal and Community Organizing**

As the region’s coal realities have shifted, so has its community organizing base; mountaintop removal stands as the central battleground in this changing reality. The methods employed

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by the anti-mountaintop removal groups provide insight into the diverse methods of organizing now taking place in Southern West Virginia. From the traditional direct action methods used by unions and coal miners to online coalition organizing, Southern West Virginia is utilizing organizing to fight the continued dominance and associated destruction of King Coal.

Coal River Mountain Watch (CRMW) is a nonprofit organization located in Raleigh County dedicated to organizing against mountaintop removal. By combining online organizing methods, policy advocacy, coalition building, and direct action organizing, CRMW has, at this time, successfully stalled the efforts of Massey Energy to engage in mountaintop removal on Coal River Mountain. CRMW has the dual mission of stopping destruction and encouraging sustainability. This duality ensures that the organization’s organizing methods are not only responsive but proactive. One key example of this is the Citizen Enforcement Project.

“We [CRMW] provide resources to the community and empower citizens to fight back effectively against irresponsible coal industry practices and force regulatory agencies to do their job.”

This project actively engages local citizens (including the fight to assist Marsh Fork Elementary) and develops citizen leaders in the fight against destructive practices. This empowering method maintains key features of traditional community organizing while utilizing new technologies (i.e. social media) to spread access.

CRMW is part of a broader coalition of activists dedicated to ending mountaintop removal as part of the ilovemountains.org campaign. The “I Love Mountains” (ILM) campaign brings together twelve organizations and thousands of online participants in a participatory and action-oriented forum for change. ILM uses political action, mobilization (on the ground and online), leadership development, and storytelling to organize citizens across the Appalachian coalfields including those in Southern West Virginia.

Appalachian Voices (AV) is a member of the ILM coalition. AV is a regional Appalachian organization which conducts anti-mountaintop removal activities in Southern West Virginia. AV focuses on organizing residents through their organizational infrastructure to push for federal policy change to end and/or reduce mountaintop removal while, concurrently, working with Google Earth to demonstrate, through visual aids, the harsh impacts of the practice on the West Virginia landscape. CRMW, ILM and AV each showcase the diverse community organizing efforts taking place in Southern West Virginia. From local (CRMW) to regional (AV) to national (ILM) campaigns employing traditional direct action, online organizing, visual storytelling, and leadership development, the anti-mountaintop removal community organizing efforts are the most demonstrative display in Southern West Virginia.

Barriers to Community Organizing in Southern West Virginia

While mountaintop removal organizing has received scholarly and media attention, the movement has not attracted large numbers of Southern West Virginia residents. Shannon Elizabeth Bell writes in reference to mountaintop removal, “…these activists only represent a small number of the individuals who have been directly affected by irresponsible mining practices.

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Most of the affected population remain uninvolved in the environmental justice movement, despite SMO efforts at outreach.31 Overall, John Gaventa argues that residents in the Appalachian region face barriers to organizing including a spaced-out, isolated, low population, and a cultural attachment to fatalism.32 In West Virginia there are low rates of social capital and this low social capital has consequences for residents as it affects a community’s “capacity for action.”33 Finally, mountaintop removal, despite its destructive impacts, has not served as a unifying issue for the area’s residents. Resident ties to coal mining coupled with the changing political climate (more conservative, anti-union) have made it difficult for large anti-mountaintop removal movements to take hold.

The Southern West Virginian subculture is rooted in familial kinship, Christian Protestantism, community pride, and fatalism. Faith, family, and fatalism are strong. “Fatalism and religious fundamentalism developed to deal with the harshness of the land, the consequences of poverty, and the physical isolation.”34 “[The] pattern found throughout the history of the Appalachian Valley” in which grassroots challenges “to the massive inequalities [residents] face have been precluded or repelled, time and again, by the power which surrounds and protects beneficiaries of the inequalities.” This pattern of defeat has created and reinforced a sense of powerlessness among many in the population, often misinterpreted by outsiders as the “fatalism of the traditional culture.” The cumulative experiences of defeat, occurring and reoccurring throughout history, have taught many in Central Appalachia to anticipate future failure. Thus, the powerful in this region are able to maintain their power precisely because the powerless have learned to remain silent.35

Community Organizing the Southern West Virginia Way

These cultural and social legacies and the cultural changes do not, however, mean that community organizing is not taking place across Southern West Virginia. Building on the strong ties local residents have to their Appalachian and West Virginian heritage as well as their religious faith, organizations and groups in the area are utilizing tools that bring residents together around these common connections. One notable method being utilized is empowerment through creative arts.

Cultural Organizing

Appalshop is an organization based in Kentucky (also serving residents in Southern West Virginia) whose programs aim to, “…support communities’ efforts to solve their own problems in a just and equitable way.”36 Through the use of photography, storytelling, music, and other associated tools, Appalshop residents find common, and proud, bonds on which to organize and develop. Bell also found that using creative storytelling methods assisted organizing efforts in the region. Through the use of Photovoice—a tool that allows local residents to use photographs

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32 Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*.
35 Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*; Bell, “Photovoice as a Strategy.”
to tell their stories and the stories of their communities—citizens can foster personal empowerment, build civic pride, and develop social capital. The community organizing strategy used by Appalshop and Photovoice is referred to as cultural organizing.

“Cultural organizing is about integrating arts and culture into organizing strategies. It is also about organizing from a particular tradition, cultural identity, and community of place or worldview to advance social and economic justice.”

Cultural organizing identifies the strengths of local communities and builds strategies for empowerment through the ideas of residents. It relies on the emotional connection people have to the arts and creative expression rather than solely on specific issues or concerns.

The J.R. Clifford Project is another cultural-based organizing effort in the area. The project, located in Charleston but operating statewide, focuses on “increas[ing] awareness of the life and works of John Robert “J. R.” Clifford. The programs reflect Clifford’s opposition to racism and highlight the supportive role West Virginia has played in upholding American civil rights.”

The Project uses storytelling and reflection to discuss West Virginia’s civil rights history and the current state of racial relations across the state. For example, one of the Project’s first programs was a play about the life of J.R. Clifford which was taken on a statewide tour (including Bluefield State College in Mercer County). Each stop included activities highlighting the underappreciated role of West Virginia in America’s Civil Rights Movement.

**Faith-Based Organizing**

Southern West Virginians highly identify with their religious convictions. As a result, community organizing acts through faith-based organizations and/or with a faith-based foundation are common.

“Faith-Based Community Organizing is a model of social change where members of faith institutions build the leadership and power to effect change on concerns that are broadly and deeply felt. The foundation of faith-based community organizing lies in building relationships among congregants to allow people to identify their common values, concerns, and passions.”

Big Creek People in Action (BCPA), a community development and organizing agency located in War (McDowell County), West Virginia partners with over thirty diverse congregations across the country. Through these partnerships, BCPA is able to help meet their mission of assisting local residents in enhancing personal empowerment and self-sufficiency.

**Direct Action Organizing**

“Direct Action Welfare Group (DAWG) is a statewide grassroots organization comprised of current and former public assistance recipients, low wage workers, people living in poverty, and concerned individuals who come together to share information and ideas and to advocate for each other, their neighbors, and themselves.”

The vast majority of the anti-mountaintop removal groups take direct action approaches to community organizing.

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37 Bell, “Photovoice as a Strategy”


Youth-Based Organizing

Southern West Virginia has faced and continues to face issues related to youth poverty and young adult outmigration. Several community organizing projects focus on the development of youth as the central focus of their work. For example, BCPA has several programs serving youth and young adults including youth leadership development, service learning, and literacy projects.

Community Organizing Themes

The diverse community organizing taking place in Southern West Virginia has three overarching themes related to community organizing practice.

The first theme is that community organizing in Southern West Virginia is almost exclusively focused on community building not social action. There are little to no calls for transformative change. There are calls to end mountaintop removal, to develop youth leaders, to highlight cultural heritage, and to empower persons in poverty, however calls to change policies to overwhelmingly alter the economic and social landscape that have created the conditions faced by residents are few and far between. This reality is related to the decline of labor as a centerpiece of organizing in the region as well as the concurrent rise of political discourse rooted in a platform and associated ideology supportive of the economic and social landscape. This focus is reflective of most community organizing efforts nationwide.

The second theme is that online organizing can be an effective tool to organize rural communities; however, a concerted effort must be made to have face-time with local residents. ILM has been primarily successful at organizing individuals nationwide who are concerned about the effects of mountaintop removal. In order to better target the residents of Southern West Virginia, online organizing should be seen as a secondary or subsequent tool. Having a face-to-face conversation cannot be replaced, even for youth, by online organizing that leaves many confused, feeling disconnected, and/or unable to truly join an organizing movement.

The third theme is that the changing political culture in West Virginia coupled with the national dialogue disparaging community organizing has created additional barriers for the empowerment of local residents. Even community organizing efforts aimed at empowerment through culture and heritage are taking place within a national dialogue suspicious of organizing. This is especially difficult in areas where the increasingly polarized political sphere has resulted in extreme suspicion of anything associated with liberalism and discussion of reducing poverty and inequality.

The fourth and final theme is that the past and current labor market are the foundation of past and current community organizing trends. The transition from union-based to non-union-based community organizing reflects the cultural transition of Southern West Virginia’s labor market. The transition of the region politically has contributed to the shift of organizing’s role from worker rights to social and cultural issues. As West Virginians have increasingly joined the ranks of the Republican Party, the party’s platform of low taxes, business-friendly regulation, and corporate welfare have created a cultural dichotomy between unions and their former geographic territory. The Republican Party has successfully created political discourse which blames the government, not industry, for the decline of coal mining (e.g. environmental regulations); thus, facilitating a distrust of government and, concurrently, creating a sense of cultural identity linking West Virginians to their cultural background. Traditional labor organizing has been replaced by non-union organizing thus focusing on the creation of a strong cultural identity which, in many ways, serves to further disconnect the identity itself from the strong union base of its coal mining legacy.
Solutions

Many of the barriers to community organizing in rural, economically-depressed areas have been tackled in other regions across the United States. With the increasing integration of technology and the day-to-day lives of many individuals, technology is a core component of any solution. The aforementioned ‘I Love Mountains’ organization, for example, brings together activists across the globe to fight against mountaintop removal in Central Appalachia. Other groups have also made great strides organizing online including those in the Black Lives Matter movement and the Fight for $15 minimum wage campaign. One strategy for those affected by conditions in Southern West Virginia is to mount an online campaign targeting “ex-pats” from the region. Bring those who have left into the organizing fold to support residents on the ground. Through the building of networks, which likely span the globe, the issues important to residents can spread. Relationship building between current and former residents is a good starting point to create trust as there is a natural connection. Through the online platform leaders often emerge (see Black Lives Matter) which translates into the spread of movements. Moreover, many local colleges and universities in Southern West Virginia serve local residents. Efforts at engagement (online and face-to-face) on these local campuses would help build a base of organizers. These campus efforts would potentially be able to partner with national organizations to provide funding, facilitate training, and start the process of local organizing.

Conclusion

Community organizing is a part of the political and social landscape in Southern West Virginia. From anti-mountaintop removal to faith-based groups, community organizing efforts are taking place to help empower residents in one of the most traditionally isolated and impoverished areas of the nation. Residents face significant barriers to progress, however, as traditional values related to fatalism and contemporary political discourse related to conservative ideology place community organizing outside the mainstream among local communities. As Southern West Virginia continues to face the realities of the changing economic landscape it will be important for local residents to adapt and/or mobilize; the changing community organizing efforts in the area should continue to serve as a backdrop for the study of Appalachia and its continual change.

References


