

# Schools of Door Knocks

A new generation of organizing academies asks:  
Does making the good fight your life's work  
have to be a one-way ticket to martyrdom?



Illustrations by ALR Design

By Tracie McMillan

A FEW YEARS AGO, as I prepared to leave college enthusiastic, politicized, and yearning for a better world, the obvious option was community organizing. But after four years of full-time work, full-time studies, and part-time organizing—and the attendant vending-machine diet, absence of social life, and borderline poverty—a better world didn't seem nearly as important as my nutrition, rent and mental health.

Ten, 15 years ago, organizing came with certain lifestyle demands. Incredibly long hours that vied with the most fierce workaholics on Wall Street. Compensation matching that of the Wall Streeters' maids. Skimpy benefits. If you worked for a national or even regional organization, heavy and unpredictable traveling from campaign to campaign, often alone. It all boiled down to a culture of sacrifice, where you gave it all up for the struggle. And if you couldn't or wouldn't—well, *you* were the weakest link.

You still have the diehards. You still have unions that will uproot you on a day's notice for a campaign on the opposite coast. At some organizations, you still have low salaries and brutally long hours. But there's also a growing understanding that people organizing for a better world—from Chicago mothers reinventing their family-work relationship to striking ACORN staffers in Seattle—want to live in it, too. "There is a slow shift, even with the most hardcore organizing directors I know," muses Krisann Rehbein of the Organizing Institute, the AFL-CIO training school. "Now, some unions have the rule that you have every other weekend off, which was unheard of even five years ago."

Nobody, not even the Bureau of Labor Statistics, tracks comprehensive numbers on the working conditions of organizers. But anecdotal evi-

dence, and more than five dozen organizers interviewed by *City Limits*, agree that the culture of sacrifice is on its way out.

Most credit the reinvention of organizing to changing demographics. "As more women have come into organizing, as more folks with children have come into organizing," says Timothea Howard, a senior organizer with the National Organizers Alliance, "it's had to shift from being this lone cowboy, solitary male work culture, to a culture that has to absorb people who have children, have other partners."

The stereotypical organizer, who blew into town and rabble-roused his way to success, still exists, but he's immersed in an increasingly diverse field. "Sixteen years ago, while there was an increasing amount of organizing in communities of color, there were very few organizers of color leading that work," explains Danny HoSang, a senior organizer with CTWO. "At that point," agrees Howard, "organizing was pretty much all white males."

In the 1970s, as organizations grew to realize that a powerful movement would have to cross class, race, and gender lines, organizers began to experiment. "For a while, everyone thought that the professional organizers were old white guys, and 'the people' were colored folks and women," explains Makani Themba-Nixon, former director of the Grass Roots Innovative Policy Project (and a *City Limits* board member). As organizers began to see that other models existed, both in the U.S. and abroad—liberation theology, Latin American *basismo*, grassroots faith-based organizing—organizing schools became hothouses for changing the movement from within. "If it wasn't for them, it would've been really hard for people to get through that," says Themba-Nixon. "The role of organizing schools was really important."

Most of the 15 schools examined here report that women make upwards of 60 percent of their classes. Chicago's Community Organizing and Family Issues, which mounts campaigns around public schools, even developed a "family focused" organizing model.

"There's a very conscious and intentional effort to support the staff as parents so that they have time to be with their kids," says cofounder Ellen Schumer. "The message that 'Your personal life is your own problem, go deal with it,' is not one we promote in communities or in the organization." The racial divide is also under attack. An increasing number of organizing schools are run by people of color. Those that aren't keep a close eye on the racial composition of their programs, and reach out to communities of color; some also offer anti-racism training.

Most every school covers the same basic organizing skills: strategically designing a campaign, working with media, home visits and door-knocking, building a volunteer base. What sets them apart is not just how they organize, but why—what they prioritize, and the politics behind their work.

The best of them are places where organizers can creatively refashion the profession—and make organizing a profession they wouldn't mind doing for the rest of their lives, not just until they burn out. "Our priority is that the people see this work not as a six-month program," says organizer Cynthia Rojas of the National School for Strategic Organizing, "but see it as their life's work."

(Next page: *The City Limits* guide to organizing schools)

# Basic Training: The City Limits Guide to Organizing Schools



## Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) training academies

**Founded:** 1970  
**Length:** 6 days a week for 4 weeks  
**Frequency:** 40 academies annually  
**Stipend:** \$1,000 for 4 weeks  
**Housing:** none provided  
**Student:Organizer ratio:** 3:1  
**Location:** across the country  
**Class size:** 10  
**Girl:Boy:** 1:1  
**Racial mix:** varies widely depending on location, anywhere from 10-90 percent white  
**Dropout rate:** 50 percent  
**Recent college grads:** 60-70 percent  
**Most likely accessory:** knuckles skinned from door-knocking  
**Required reading:** "A Union in the Community" by Cesar Chavez

ACORN is famed for its heavy emphasis on individual sacrifice, no bones about it. ACORN made headlines earlier this year when two of its local offices—one in Seattle, the other in Philly—went on strike with demands of guaranteed lunch breaks, timely paychecks and at least two weekends off each month.

One of the few national community-based organizations that offers its own training academies—"boot camps," as Field Director Helene O'Brien calls them—the four-week internship mixes classroom learning with a grueling workout.

Recruits spend most of their time going into poor neighborhoods and knocking on doors to enlist people. They come in at noon and hit the doors by 3 p.m. Organizers meet one-on-one with students about the day's events when they return around 7 o'clock to start evening phone trees or plan actions. Saturdays are shorter, with folks clocking in from 10 to 2, but everybody's expected to pitch in with demonstrations and rallies. It's a baptism by fire that just half of the new recruits make it through.

Starting salaries hovered in the mid-teens for years before bumping up to \$18,000 in January. Most senior staff

top out in the \$30,000 range. "You can pay me \$50,000 or \$60,000 a year, or you can pay me \$30,000 and use that other money to hire two other people," says 12-year veteran O'Brien.

It's all part of organizing a poor people's movement, say recent program graduates. "There is a culture of sacrifice, but we've all agreed to it," says Jenny Lawson, 25, a Portland, Oregon, ACORN organizer. "Financially, it's the only way it's going to work."

## Jewish Organizing Initiative

**Founded:** 1997  
**Length:** 1 year  
**Frequency:** annual  
**Stipend:** \$18,000/year + benefits  
**Housing:** not provided  
**Student:Organizer ratio:** 1:1  
**Location:** Boston  
**Class Size:** 10  
**Girl:Boy:** 4:1  
**Racial mix:** not available  
**Dropout rate:** 0  
**Age range:** 22-30  
**Most likely snack:** bagels  
**Required reading:** Pirke Avot, "Sayings of Our Fathers"



Faith-based training for organizers may still be rare, but the Jewish Organizing Initiative explicitly links Judaism and social justice. "It was an amazing experience to start looking at Jewish scripture through an organizing lens," says 1999 graduate Tom Levinson. "Looking at Exodus as not just a story about Passover, but as an archetypal organizing story—how to look at Moses as an organizer."

Participants' faiths range from conservative to nonobservant, so the level of discussion is perfect for some, not enough for others. Similarly, the basic organizing training provided during this fellowship program's one-week orien-

tation might be too elementary for experienced organizers.

After orientation, fellows spread out to their individual organizing placements. JOI sends them to Boston organizations ranging from unions to interfaith committees on worker justice to reproductive rights groups.

Every Friday, they reconvene to discuss their experiences, as well as things like Jewish identity and Judaism. Each class does a group project; Levinson's held a social justice seder, where the class wrote their own haggadah (the book used to tell the story of Passover).

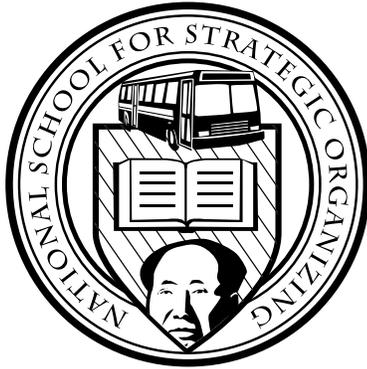
The explicit goal, says founder Michael Brown, is to keep people in the field for the long haul. "I've worked as an organizer for 30 years, and people who have some religious or spiritual or moral core tend to stick around in the business a lot longer than folks just trying to get someone elected. If you don't have that, you'll be screwed."

## Movement Activist Apprenticeship Program

**Founded:** 1985  
**Length:** 7 weeks  
**Frequency:** twice a year (summer and fall)  
**Stipend:** \$200 a week  
**Housing:** provided  
**Student:Organizer ratio:** 1:1  
**Location:** orientation in Oakland; then around U.S.  
**Class Size:** 10-15  
**Girl:Boy:** 2:1  
**Racial mix:** 30% African-American, 20% Asian, 50% Latino

**Dropout rate:** 3 percent  
**Recent College Grads:** 66 percent  
**Required reading:** *Women, Race & Class* by Angela Davis  
 Famed among organizers of color, the 16-year old MAAP program at the Center for Third World Organizing takes itself pretty seriously. MAAP's rep is so good, in fact, that while the program is based in California, activists from all over battle to make it into the program—last year, there were three applications per opening. (Bushwick represents: Taina Gonzalez, an up-and-comer with Make the Road By Walking, got in last year.) Program applicants must complete a three-day Community Activist Training (CAT); if accepted they journey to a four-day training in Oakland before being sent to community organizations all over the country.

As well as outstanding organizing skills, MAAP stresses political analysis. "CTWO really brings an emphasis on understanding the way that racism affect communities," says 2000 graduate Angela Chung, now an organizer with People United for a Better Oakland, "and that really helps you to understand the root causes of issues and develop better responses."



### National School for Strategic Organizing

**Founded:** 1995  
**Length:** 6 months  
**Frequency:** twice a year  
**Stipend:** \$125-\$150 a week  
**Housing:** provided if from out of town  
**Student:Organizer ratio:** 2:1  
**Location:** Los Angeles  
**Class Size:** 5-8  
**Girl:Boy:** 3:2  
**Racial mix (last class):** 4 Latino, 2 mixed ethnicity  
**Dropout rate:** 0  
**Median Age:** 25  
**Most likely accessory:** clipboard and monthly bus pass  
**Required reading:** *City of Quartz* by Mike Davis

Known for its relation to Los Angeles' formidable Bus Riders Union, NSSO combines a lengthy internship with political education classes where readings range from Mao to historian Robin D.G. Kelley's take on the new working class.

The political education is coherent, radical, and cross-cutting. Held twice a week, classes grapple with race, class, and gender, as well as revolutionary theory, at fairly sophisticated levels. "I wanted to be immersed in political ideology, and I was," says Jacqueline Campos, 19, who graduated from the program last year. "It's an intense learning process."

For all the work that NSSO requires, the organizers understand the importance of culture. The BRU is known for its use of cultural politics—ranging from a joint effort with the San Francisco Mime Troupe to dance-a-thons. Staff are careful to impress upon interns the need to have time for themselves apart from organizing. But Campos isn't so sure: "Didn't Huey Newton say, 'If you surrender yourself to the revolution, you'll have eternal life?'"

### School of Unity and Liberation Summer School

**Founded:** 1996  
**Length:** 8 weeks  
**Frequency:** once a year  
**Stipend:** \$2,000  
**Housing:** not provided, but assistance given  
**Student:Organizer ratio:** 6:1  
**Location:** Oakland  
**Class Size:** 10-13  
**Girl:Boy:** 3:4

**Racial mix:** 92 percent people of color  
**Dropout rate:** 3 percent  
**Age range, median age:** 15-26, 21  
**Most likely accessory:** *No More Prisons!* CD  
**Required reading:** *Marx for Beginners*

Part of California's youth movement against prisons and police brutality, SOUL is run by a largely female, queer, of color, and twentysomething staff. And, like many groups in the anti-prison movement, they use cultural expression—most explicitly hip hop—both to teach and organize. "It's part of the way they teach organizing," says Rory Caygill, who took part in the program in 1999. "They really train on using culture."

Though SOUL doesn't do cultural work on its own, it works closely with organizations that do—pulling in youth who often get left behind when organizing focuses on college students. "Using hip hop and spoken word helps to bring those people—working class youth and youth of color—into the organization in a way that wouldn't happen otherwise," says Genevieve Gonzales, SOUL's Bay Area director.



SOUL trainees spend 30 hours a week interning at a community organization. What keeps them around, though, is the rigorous political education: 10 hours a week at the SOUL offices, centered on community-based revolutionary movements. "It was really an incredible program," says Caygill. "We really talked about using organizing as a tool not just to make changes in our communities—though we do need those reforms—but as way of transforming the way power and wealth are held, and building revolutionary change."

### Southern Empowerment Project

**Founded:** 1986  
**Length:** 3 weeks  
**Frequency:** every summer  
**Cost:** \$2,400, or \$850/week  
**Housing:** provided  
**Student:Organizer ratio:** 3:1  
**Location:** Maryville, TN  
**Class Size:** 15-20  
**Girl:Boy:** 3:2  
**Racial mix:** 50 percent white  
**Dropout rate:** 0

**Age range, median age:** 20-50, 31  
**Required filmstrip:** "The Color of Fear," circa 1975

One of the few schools known for providing intensive education and training on "the isms"—racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, to name a few—the summer program at SEP lasts for three weeks: one week of organizing training, one of fundraising training, and one on the isms.

The school will set you back a bit; organizers are quick to note they do provide scholarships. But students can sign up by the week, taking only the courses they need. Because SEP is a membership organization, most students have sponsors. But the occasional college student, someone changing careers, even organizers looking to broaden their knowledge and skills on their own time come in as well.

Held on a small rural campus, the program has a collegiate vibe. Participants stay in the dorms, eat in a dining hall, and have access to the campus gym. "It's kind of like being in school," muses Chetan Talwalkar, Interim Director of the Democracy Resource Center in Kentucky, who attended SEP in 2000. "But they use a variety of popular education techniques. It's definitely not, 'Read a book and discuss a chapter.'"

But the political education is SEP's standout. "I think a lot of times, there's either an apolitical or strictly power-oriented perspective in these kinds of trainings, or there's a ranking of oppressions," says Talwalkar. "SEP was one of the first training programs to actually include racism, and sexism, and heterosexism, and classism, in its program."

### Training Institute for Careers in Organizing

**Founded:** 1996  
**Length:** 12 weeks  
**Frequency:** twice a year  
**Stipend:** \$920/month  
**Housing:** provided at low cost  
**Student:Organizer ratio:** 3:1  
**Location:** New York City  
**Class Size:** 12-15  
**Girl:Boy:** 2:1  
**Racial mix:** 38 percent white, 32 percent African-American, 21 percent Latino, 7 percent Asian, 2 percent other/mixed  
**Dropout rate:** 50 percent  
**Median age:** 23  
**Most likely accessory:** housing regulation book  
**Required reading:** "Alinsky Discovered Organizing like Columbus discovered America" by Rinku Sen

Known for its rigorous trainings—comparisons to ACORN are common—TICO was in the unfortunate position of being leaderless a year ago. But with the hiring of Director Blanca Ramirez, the scrappy organizing school, a joint project of ACORN, Mothers on the Move and the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, is restructuring. "TICO's been very oriented towards the technical skills," says Ramirez. "I like to think that we're training a new generation of organizers that are critical thinkers that can do the social analysis, the political economy."

Interns are placed with one of the three sponsoring organizations, then return to the TICO office for an afternoon

of training twice a week. "They really try to wear you out, and you always have to have this extroverted energy and devote most of your life to a cause," says Stanton McManus, who participated in 1998 and decided that organizing wasn't for him. "I didn't know if I had that that kind of fire in me. And I just wanted more of my own life, too, I guess."

But Ramirez has a change up her sleeve: a more flexible schedule. "Anybody doing this work needs to have a social life outside of their organizing," she says. "Organizing shouldn't be a cult."

### Training School for Strategic Consulting

Founded: 1998

Length: average of 4 months

Frequency: 12-15 in federal election years, 4-5 during off years

Stipend: \$100 a week. Must have a car.

Housing: provided

Student: Organizer ratio: 15:1

Location: all over

Class Size: 10-15

Girl:Boy: 2:3

Racial mix: not available

Dropout rate: 10 percent

Percent recent college grads: 50

Most likely accessory: headset for phone banking

Required reading: *The Godfather*

For those who find union organizing too dreary and community organizing too idealistic, there's always a future as a political operative. Every year, TSSC runs five to 15 campaign schools, turning young, politically-minded folk into formidable campaign organizers.

Students spend a week learning the nuts and bolts in a whirlwind course on mail pieces, targeting voters, calculating turnout, developing field plans, and organizing their base. When the smoke clears, they emerge en masse and descend on a specified campaign, primarily working for progressive Democratic candidates.

It's not unusual to work from 9 a.m. to 2 a.m., and back at it again the next day. "I think my shortest day was a Sunday when I worked 13 hours," says Molly Farrell, who enrolled in the program last year. The intense schedule, low pay, and focus on electing a candidate seem to draw more men than women—unusual for organizing schools. Most recruits are political science or "news junkie" types, not activists. And though TSSC doesn't track its racial balance, participants say it's mostly white.

Along with concrete tactical skills, the schools also give young politicians a taste of real politics. "The man I volunteered for was a Democrat, but very pro-life, and the area I covered was conservative, so I had to keep pushing that he was pro-life," recalls Farrell. "But as a woman, it was hard to rectify that."

The schools boast invaluable political connections upon graduation, along with a job placement program. Most go to work on other campaigns, and a few find their way to Capitol Hill as aides. "I have to say, peo-

ple really see us as high quality," says Farrell. "I can tell you, we were all offered jobs on other campaigns."



### Ruckus Action Camp

Founded: 1995

Length: 1 week

Frequency: 4 times a year

Cost: \$75 per person; no one turned away

Housing: camping—bring a tent and sleeping bag

Student:Organizer ratio: 2:1

Location: varies

Class Size: varies, generally 50-100

Girl:Boy: 1:1

Racial mix: depends on camp

Dropout rate: 0

Age range, median age: 14-90, 26

Most likely accessories: U-locks and climbing ropes

Required reading: Duffy Littlejohn's "Hopping Freight Trains in America"

Everyone agrees: when it comes to learning direct action, Ruckus is the place to go. An outgrowth of the radical environmental movement, the Ruckus Society are the folks who brought—or rather, didn't bring you—last year's NAFTA, GATT and WTO meetings. Last March, the Rainforest Action Network teamed up with Ruckus to train activists for its anti-Citigroup campaign.

Locations vary—each camp is conducted with a different organization—but the training is always heavy on tactics. Organizers learn everything from climbing 10-story buildings to banner drops to locking their necks to front doors. The centerpiece is a six-story climbing wall and ropes. "The tactical skills training is better than anything else I've been to," says Peter Chung, an activist with CUNY's Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM).

Last summer, its preparation camp for the Democratic National Convention got derailed when participants of color called out other activists on racism. To its credit, Ruckus shifted gears and broke the camp into impromptu caucuses. The Citigroup camp also featured a Challenging White Supremacy workshop. Clearly, Ruckus is aware that its style of organizing speaks most clearly to white activists.

Nonetheless, camp culture is glaringly white. "I remember being in my tent and hearing 'Sweet Home Alabama'—I mean, there are some straightforward attacks on antiracism in that song," says SLAM's Chris Day. "It's a very white culture."

But when it comes to learning how to climb a six-story building to drop a banner, alternatives to Ruckus are few. "It's the best option if you want to gain good direct action skills," admits Chung. "I'd just recommend that they pick and choose the trainers."

## Meet the Alinskys

Few names loom as large in community organizing as Chicago's Saul Alinsky, author of *Rules for Radicals*. Several schools cast themselves as part of the Alinsky tradition of strategic campaigns, nonpartisan community-building and ruthless analysis of power. Among the most revered Alinsky schools are the faith-centered Industrial Areas Foundation, the 33-year-old Gamaliel Foundation and the more youth-oriented Midwest Academy.

Though IAF decided years ago to fly under the radar—organizers revealed little more than the fact that it runs a 10-day training program every year for its member organizations—it remains a widely known player in organizing circles. Training focuses on developing progressive political leadership within churches, teaching church leaders how to make broad-based appeals for civic participation, and convincing religious organizers, taught to wait for a better world on the other side, that it's important to try and change this one. "Basically, it appeals more to middle-class religious folks," says Bill Lipton, an organizer with the Working Families Party, "especially to leaders who are told not to participate in the world as it is."

Gamaliel, another faith-centered school, has a similar mission. College kids aren't exactly turned away, but like IAF, Gamaliel mainly trains church leaders and congregation members from 50 affiliates in 17 states, four times a year in the U.S., once a year in South Africa.

Gamaliel pushes for an analysis of the problems of urban sprawl and the attending concentrations of poverty and race. Aimed primarily at experienced organizers, Gamaliel's seven-day trainings revolve around the art of making demands. "At Gamaliel, people are made to realize that the government is not our bosses, we are their bosses," says Detroit pastor Joseph Barlow. "I shouldn't be afraid to tell my mayor that I'm not satisfied with what's going on."

For college activists, the place to go is Chicago, where the Midwest Academy offers summer organizing internships. The 28-year-old group also conducts strategic training weekends with the U. S. Student Association.

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## Union Dues

"I think it was Saul Alinsky who said that union organizers are addicts," muses Krisann Rehbein, Midwest Regional Recruitment Coordinator of the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute. "We're addicted to the kind of adrenaline that comes with union campaigns."

Union organizing centers strictly on one kind of victory: a union election. While community organizations build up research and long-term campaigns, union battles take place on a schedule ranging from six weeks to six months. When the campaign ends, organizers often shift gears—and addresses—to wage another one.

Much of the work is typical of any kind of organizing: house visits, phone calling, posters, leaflets and demonstrations. What surprises new organizers most is the vicious opposition they face, including harassment and threats.

Politics often take a back seat to workers' rights, an emphasis that can be difficult for inexperienced organizers. "In a union situation, you have people that are very different in many ways—racially different, people with much more conservative beliefs—and that's a difficult transition to make," adds Rehbein. "It really requires this broad vision that to make change for workers, you have to work within the structure of the labor movement—and it's not perfect."

One bonus for union organizing: it pays fairly well, with benefits and often travel or car allowances. Starting salaries are in the mid-to-upper 20s, and many salaries increase rapidly.

### Organizing Institute

Founded: 1989

Length: 3-day evaluation + 10 week field internship

Frequency: 40 sites annually

Stipend: \$400/week + health benefits

Housing: provided

Student:Organizer ratio: 1:1

Location: all over

Class Size: 3-6 for internship

Girl:Boy: 3:2

Racial mix: 45 percent white, 55 percent nonwhite

Dropout rate: 55 percent eliminated by end of the 3-day evaluation

Recent college grads: approximately 33 percent

Most likely accessory: "Kicking Ass for the Working Class" bumper sticker

Required movie: *Norma Rae*

Almost 12 years ago, the AFL-CIO started the OI to give its rank-and-file members organizing skills. Over the years, it evolved into a series of workshops where fresh college grads mingle with motivated steelworkers. First comes a three-day evaluation and training, followed by 10-day and three-month classes—for those who make the cut.

"It's very, very competitive," says Geoff Bruen, 23,

who went through the program last year. "It's like a theater audition." The three-day training teaches house calls, demonstrations, even how to negotiate strategy with other organizers. "You go out in the morning, come back at night, debrief, get a drink, and pass out. It was great—except for the stress levels," says Bruen.

Rank-and-file union members go home after the three days; outsiders looking for a new job, if they make the cut, stick around for grueling house visits. If organizers make it through the 10-day internship, they're placed into a 10-week program where they work as organizers on a campaign. Upon graduation, there's a 95 percent job placement rate.

Younger organizers like Bruen, who joined out of political commitment, may find the workers don't always match up with their politics. "I remember this intern telling me she had to try not to cry at a house visit because the woman was saying, 'This is bullshit. This union is for black people and I don't want to be a part of that,'" says Bruen. "I talked to organizers about it, and the thing is, you know people are going to be prejudiced—but once you get them into the union, you have to have faith they'll learn more tolerance."

### Union Summer

Founded: 1996

Length: 4 weeks

Frequency: 12-15 sites each summer

Stipend: \$210/week

Housing: provided

Student:Organizer ratio: 10:1

Location: all over

Class Size: 10-15

Girl:Boy: 5:3

Racial mix: 45 percent white, 23 percent African-American, 14 percent Latino, 9 percent Asian, 17 percent other/mixed

Dropout rate: 2 percent

Age range, median age: 18-50, 22

Most likely accessory: T-shirts from union locals

Required movie: *Bread and Roses*

Unlike its older sister, the OI, Union Summer focuses almost exclusively on introducing college kids to the union world. Because it's a paid internship, the program attracts plenty of folks aside from campus radicals. "I filled out my name on a piece of paper 'cause I heard the word 'internship,'" says Ha Nguyen, 23, who participated in the program in 2000. "I was chased down by a recruiter and I told her 'I go to school, I go to work, I ride my bike—and you want me to do what?'" (It was a good call; Nguyen now works for SEIU's International.)

Groups of 10-15 students are assigned to four-week field internships. The "organizers in training" spend a week together doing intensive training, then hole up in a hotel for three weeks and go to work organizing workers, from poultry processors in Omaha to

retail clerks at Disney World. "It's a great program," says Nguyen, "for people who have no idea about the labor movement."

### Seminary Summer

Founded: 2000

Length: 10 weeks

Frequency: once a year

Stipend: \$215/week

Housing: provided

Student:Organizer ratio: 1:1

Location: all over

Class Size: 30

Girl:Boy: 1:1

Racial mix: 66 percent white

Dropout rate: 0

Age range, median age: 23-50, 28

Required reading: *Organized Labor and the Church* by Monsignor Higgins

From the 1930s through 1950s, Catholic churches routinely ran "labor schools" out of congregations' basements. Now Seminary Summer wants to rekindle that commitment by immersing seminary students in the fight for workers' rights.

Seminary Summer, a joint project between the AFL-CIO and the National Interfaith Committee on Worker Justice, sends seminary students out to work with unions on campaigns and mobilize the local religious community to support workers.

The program is open to all faiths—Catholic and Protestant seminarians, along with rabbinical and Muslim *madrasa* students, went through the program in 2000, its inaugural year. Few have much formal organizing experience, but most already have a commitment to social and economic justice—"and a sense that the charitable work of the religious community is not sufficient to meet those ends," says Kim Bobo, director of the Interfaith Committee.

Seminarians try to reach a delicate balance: uplifting workers, while using the language of spiritual faith to appeal to management's sense of humanity. "We were meeting with wealthy congregations that had CEOs as members, and we were meeting with the workers," says Jenkins. "Being in the middle of the dialogue, and helping to expose the reality—that was very uplifting."

For some students, it's an invigorating experience. "It was great," says Alan Jenkins, who spent ten weeks in northern Arkansas on a poultry plant campaign. "But some of the seminarians didn't have a positive experience because the unions didn't understand what role they could play—they got stuck doing office work."

The divide is often a racial one, says New Orleans union organizer Martha Blackmon. "To be straight honest, the majority of ministers who get involved with worker justice issues are minority, because they have the workers," she confides, all Louisiana drawl. "The white churches mostly have the management."