

Designing an Activist Organization

by Dan Sullivan

A frequently recurring theme among Georgists is that we need to be a "movement" of Georgist "activists." While the sentiment is valid in a general sort of way, we have never succeeded in having a Georgist activist organization, and I think we never will, because Georgism is a philosophy, not an agenda.

It has been said that we are often a solution in search of a problem. I think it might be more precise to say that we are a solution to an underlying problem, and that most people are focused on more superficial problems. We naturally want these people to take on the underlying problems, but that is not what **they** want to do, and organizing is primarily about unifying people who already agree on something, rather than persuading people to change their minds. The mind-changing might be a long-range tactic of the organization, but it is not "organizing" per se.

An activist organization defines itself in terms of a specific agenda. The new organization will either win a substantive victory during its first six months or it will probably wither and die. Therefore, its initial agenda should be a highly winnable issue, not a deep, fundamental one. When it accomplishes its first goal it either disbands or redefines itself to take on a new agenda. If it acquired strength and power in the campaign, it will be able to take on a more ambitious program — ideally an expansion of the first agenda. That way, supporters of the first agenda will be more likely to stay on board.

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Participants might bring with them a variety of individual agendas! They do not have to be compatible with each other. For example, a hot issue in Pittsburgh is opposition to various corporate-welfare development schemes. An activist organization with Georgist influences, but having a primary agenda of opposing corporate welfare, would flat-out oppose these subsidies. People would be attracted by their opposition to the subsidies, not by a fascination with land value tax. They would accept LVT, not as a great good unto itself, but as an effective alternative to the proposal they already oppose.

One must assess the political climate at every step. Do we adopt corporate welfare as an issue because we are fond of that issue? Well, one reason why we are fond of it is because the public is ready

to take it on, and because we can organize people from across the political spectrum, while the existing left and right organizations are hamstrung by previous alliances. In this case, for example, the right has alliances with the corporations involved, and the left has alliances with construction unions that want jobs building the subsidized projects.

Next, we must ask, who will we be helping and who can best help us? And even before that, we must ask, what do we need to win? We are making a sales pitch, and our objective is to close the sale — but if we don't know what we want from people, and what we intend to give them for helping us, there is no sale to close.

What we will be asking people for, I think, falls into three categories: money, talent, and influence. We need money to pay for the talent and the overhead. As for talent, we need not just advocates, but researchers, fundraisers, negotiators, publicists, administrators, and a talented organizer to keep everything in sync. Influence is about people who might do very little work, but who have the ears of those who will make the decision that gives us our victories.

Because we are ideological, our first instinct is to go to other ideological organizations. For example, in fighting Pittsburgh's stadium tax referendum, we got support from the Libertarian Party, because the proposal was anti-free-market, and from left-leaning organizations like Just Harvest, who saw corporate welfare as related to the drying up of aid for poor people. Both camps opposed the stadium tax, but their organizational agendas competed with our own. They were unable to make much of a contribution financially, and after we won the referendum battle, they had to go back to tend their separate agendas. This left us with little energy to combat the ongoing lobby, and so the stadiums are being built with public money anyhow.

As I look at the next hot issue, which is a heavily subsidized renovation of a section of the Pittsburgh's downtown, I am looking toward other groups. Unlike the case of the stadiums, there are easily identifiable businesses who would be victimized by these developments. Private city businesses, who have been paying higher business taxes (and higher land taxes) than suburban businesses pay, are furious that tax money is being taken from them and given to giant corporate competitors who will drive them out of business. The core of support, then, could come, not from the ideological organizations, but from these merchants who are being doubly

wronged by the whole corporate welfare process. We would ask the ideological people to give us their talent and experience, but we would get money and power from these merchants.

So far, I have said nothing about structure, because, in a successful organization, form follows function. The whole question of membership, dues and structure depends on the nature of the campaign, and on the political landscape. I stress this because people have tried to create a network of Georgist activist organizations from the top down, setting goals of having many chapters in various locations across the country, without analysis of what the best structure for such a chapter would be. It was simply noted that many successful organizations have chapters, so we must have chapters. To me, this is like saying that successful armies have tanks, and that we

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must also have tanks, without regard to whether we will be attacking across a desert or through a swamp.

In any case, once we decide who we are going to approach for support, we will need a core group, a structure, a strategy, and, last of all, a name. The core group for a task like the one described above should include some expert Georgists, but also some publicly notable figures, some energetic volunteers (probably from the same sources as fought the stadium tax) and some leaders from the business community. The structure should be one that keeps a balance, especially between left and right, that has very little overhead, and that is very action-oriented. Strategies should be thought out beforehand — but must be acceptable to the major players involved. For example, if merchants are uncomfortable with a go-for-the-throat attack strategy, the group will have to decide whether the support of these merchants dictates a milder strategy, or whether to keep the hard-ball strategy and lose the support of some merchants.

Finally, the name is important. In fighting the stadium tax, we picked "Good Sports" to illustrate that we were not anti-sports at all, and to stand behind the charge that the subsidy was not only bad for the economy, but bad for sports. The name was very successful in both regards.

For a general campaign against corporate welfare, with an underlying Georgist alternative, I like the name "Productive Taxpayers." It not only suggests the theme that productivity is overtaxed, but identifies the group as a coalition of highly productive people, who have always produced wealth with their own resources, as

opposed to people who are less productive, in that they will only produce wealth if subsidized.

The name "Common Ground," although it would be acceptable to most of the left, would be a horrific obstacle for reaching merchants and for involving conservatives and libertarians. To less ideological people we would like to organize, "Common Ground" not only suggests an agenda well beyond the actual campaign, but raises all sorts of questions. Time spent answering these questions would kill our ability to organize support, especially in the early stages of a campaign.

The most difficult stage of any organization is the initial stage, where it must reach critical mass to become effective. It is a lot like getting a kite in the air, because the winds are much stronger higher above the ground, and will keep the kite aloft if you just tend it. But, one must expend a great deal of energy running with the kite to get it up in the first place. What American Georgists did was try to get chapters started in many cities at once, which is like trying to run many kites into the air at the same time. When we started having successes in Pennsylvania, our failure was to pick one of these cities and build a self-sustaining activist organization there. (It is my failure particularly, as I live in Pittsburgh, which has perhaps been the ideal choice.) I have been learning activism (which is much trickier than learning Georgism), and I think I now have a good handle on what it takes. The key is not to "have an activist organization." Rather, it is to pick a battle and win. If the activist organization is viewed as an end — rather than a means to a clearly defined end — it will probably be just another tank stuck in the swamp. (7)



IF YOU GIVE A MAN A FISH, HE WILL HAVE A MEAL.
IF YOU TEACH HIM TO FISH, HE WILL HAVE A LIVING.
IF YOU ARE THINKING A YEAR AHEAD, SOW SEED.
IF YOU ARE THINKING TEN YEARS AHEAD, PLANT A TREE.
IF YOU ARE THINKING ONE HUNDRED YEARS AHEAD, EDUCATE THE PEOPLE.
BY SOWING SEED ONCE, YOU WILL HARVEST ONCE.
BY PLANTING A TREE, YOU WILL HARVEST TENFOLD.
BY EDUCATING THE PEOPLE, YOU WILL HARVEST ONE HUNDREDFOLD.

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