

RICHARD A. CLOWARD: 1926-2001

Bill Pastreich

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We organizers generally think that organizers are a pretty great bunch, but Richard Cloward didn't always share the admiration we have for ourselves. He and his wife and collaborator, Fran Piven, wrote in the introduction to *Poor People's Movement*, "When workers erupted in strikes, organizers collected dues cards; when tenants refused to pay rent and stood off marshals, organizers formed building committees; when people were burning and looting, organizers used that 'moment of madness' to draft constitutions." That's a sample of the clarity and honesty that changed the history of welfare activism in this country.

When I first met Richard, in 1968, I had just begun organizing for the Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization. He and Fran were already the intellectual conscience of the movement, frequently appearing at National Welfare Rights meetings and conventions, where they were free to wander into any meeting or workshop. Richard was always smarter than anyone else in the room (except perhaps Fran), so his criticism counted with all of us.

We organizers were proud of our success in turning out large numbers of welfare "ladies" for demonstrations and obtaining tremendous quantities of furniture and clothing for them. Richard was less impressed, arguing forcefully that we were missing the boat in two ways: we were organizing the welfare recipients instead of the far larger population of potential welfare recipients – working men who were eligible; and we were not disrupting the system enough – we needed to cost the government a lot more and to demonstrate a lot tougher. I

think our demonstrations included enough large-scale civil disobedience and arrests so that Richard forgave me, and perhaps even liked me.

In 1969 he convinced me to organize working men in Massachusetts to get them on welfare to collect on special grants. He and Fran advised and funded the venture and arranged that Mike MacDonald (Dwight MacDonald's son) cover the event for the *Village Voice*. That project became the very successful New Bedford Wage Supplement Organization.

Over the next 30 years of my organizing career, Dick was always there to push me to work with welfare recipients and to encourage me and countless other organizers to move people into the streets.

Professor Richard Cloward supported and encouraged our movement with a loyalty that never wavered. His prestige as a scholar, and his articles and speeches, gave us a standing in the world well beyond anything we could get in the streets and welfare offices. In my work, and in the work of countless others, his warm, tough, and incredibly intelligent spirit kept us striving, always fearful that we might become, for him, just "organizers." He is gone now, but that spirit will continue to live at the heart of the battle for social justice.

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