Fighting for Seats at the Table: A Poor People's Movement in a Rustbelt Town

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By Jack Shuler (/author/itemlist/user/50572), Truthout | Report

In this painting by community organizer Allen Schwartz, people line up to get school supplies for their children in Newark. (Artwork: Allen Schwartz)

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When Chris Wills got out of prison, he could not find a job. He applied, but no one would hire him because of his record.

And then he started using drugs again.

In a moment of desperation, he went to talk with a friend who ran programs in the local jail. His friend didn't tell him to just get clean. He didn't tell him to just get a job. He gave him some advice that, in the moment, Wills thought was just weird. His friend told him to go meet with some community organizers from a group called the Newark Think Tank on Poverty.

The Think Tank is an organization started in 2014 that is modelling a new approach for addressing poverty. Based in Newark, Ohio, the town where Wills lives, the group is made up of people currently struggling with poverty, or who have struggled in the past. The group's goal is to have their voices heard by people who make decisions.

Wills told me in a recent interview that he has three families now. His piercing blue eyes lit up as he named them: "My friends in recovery, my church, and the Think Tank."

After years in and out of jail, Chris Wills says his work as an organizer with the Newark Think Tank on Poverty "gives me a reason not to go back." (Photo: Jack Shuler)

As the Republicans gathered in Cleveland to discuss supporting that guy who wants to build a wall, Wills woke up every morning at the men's shelter where he lives, two-and-a-half hours away in Newark. He went to work, focused on recovery and built his new life. He was also organizing for change in this Rust Belt town.

This is no small task.

Newark, population 48,000 plus, is a red city in a red county. It's about 45 minutes from Columbus and on the outskirts of Appalachian Ohio. One of its claims to fame is an enormous building in the shape of a basket, just off Highway 16. Since 1997, the basket (http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36797849) has served as an office space for the Longaberger basket-making company. Layoffs have led the company to move staff out of the building to another site. About a week ago, the last remaining employees left.

Fadhel Kaboub, an economist at Denison University and president of the Binzagr Institute for Sustainable Prosperity, says that Newark is a microcosm of the American economy -- a once prosperous industrial city that has felt the effects of neoliberal free-trade policies. As industry moved away in the 1970s and 80s, nothing replaced it. In a sense, it's a mini Detroit.

Kaboub says it took some time for people to recognize that this change was permanent. He says, "There wasn't a recalibration of the skills expectations, the education expectations." It has taken time for people to realize the need for a different economy, a different set of skills -- not just in Newark, of course, but globally.

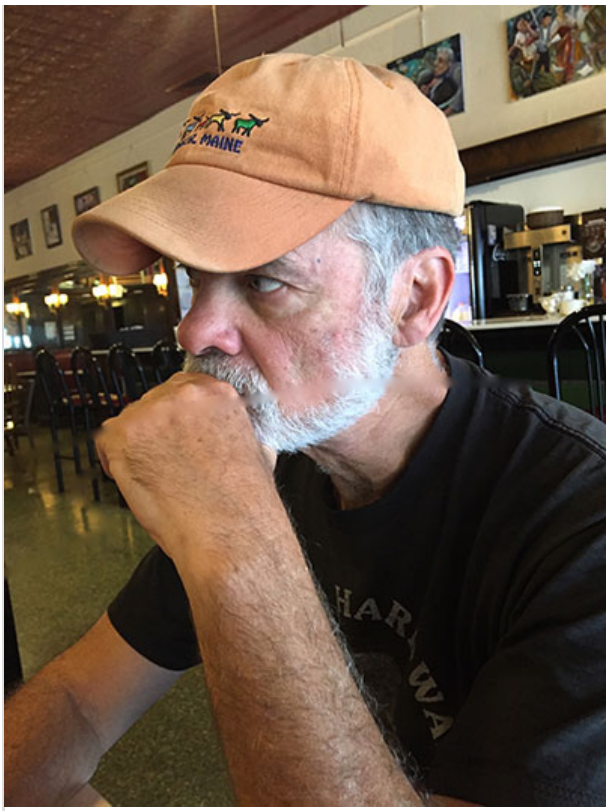
Part of this "recalibration" is the people in a community figuring out how to address the damage done by the economic system and trying to fill the gaps. Citing economist Karl Polanyi, Kaboub says the creation of free markets is not natural. In the wake of the damage produced by neoliberal policies, resistance is inevitable. Sometimes, he says, it comes from NGOs. Sometimes it comes in the form of labor activism. And sometimes what happens is a political movement.

A People's Movement

Lesha Farias and Allen Schwartz are sitting in a booth at the Sparta Restaurant, a downtown Newark diner that hires formerly incarcerated people, as well as people in recovery from addiction. It's one of the places trying to fill the gaps in this community.

Community organizer Allen Schwartz helped to convene the Newark Think Tank on Poverty to enable people struggling with poverty to have "seats at the table" and make decisions about how poverty is addressed in their town. (Photo: Jack Shuler)

Both Farias and Schwartz are seasoned community organizers who, a few years ago, grew frustrated with how poverty was being addressed in Newark. There were many charity organizations doing important work offering



immediate and much-needed assistance. But charity only stanches wounds, they say. It doesn't fundamentally change the system or promote justice.

Farias and Schwartz felt that in order for systemic change to begin to happen, people who were struggling should actually become the decision makers -- they should have "seats at the table," when it came to how poverty would be addressed in their town.

Schwartz has a salt-and-pepper beard, a goofy grin, and a ball cap that never comes off. Chris Wills affectionately calls him "Pa." Like Farias, he speaks with determination and intention.

"Poverty is the big invisible in the US," Schwartz says, "the thing we want to make invisible. We try to ignore it by saying things like, 'This is the land of promise; or, if you really want to work, there's no reason you shouldn't; or, if you're poor, it's your own damn fault.'"

Farias and Schwartz want to change that narrative.

Farias says that the first meeting of the Think Tank was empowering. "For people to come together who share the same struggles, the same stories -- there was a sense of belonging." The group received a grant from the St. Vincent de Paul Society and used it to pay attendees for their time as consultants.

The Think Tank moved quickly to address an issue that affects many members -- how to get a job when you have a criminal record. One in six Ohioans, over 16 percent of the state's workforce, has one. The Ban the Box movement (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ban_the_Box) was gaining traction in Ohio and the group made it their issue. With the help of Columbus-based organizer Wendy Tarr, they lobbied state representatives to pass a bill banning the box for public employment and then encouraged their local council members to ban the box in Newark. Ultimately, both efforts succeeded.

These were concrete victories, but now the Think Tank is trying to build a platform for addressing systemic concerns. Rather than being an issue-specific movement, the group aims to become an integral part of community decision-making.

The Real Job Numbers

The street in front of the Sparta Restaurant is being ripped up as part of a multimillion-dollar renewal project (http://www.downtownnewarkoh.com/streetscape.php). A block away, the county courthouse is under renovation and new restaurants, yoga studios and loft apartments are popping up around the courthouse square. Couple this development with the most recent unemployment numbers (http://www.newarkadvocate.com/story/news/local/2016/06/21/county-employment-labor-force-reach-all-time-highs/86184696/) (Licking County: 4 percent; Ohio: 5 percent) and it feels like good things are happening here.

"If you look out the window from where we are," Farias says, "it's all glorious." But the reality for most working-class people is more complicated. She notes that the businesses coming to downtown Newark are mostly providing services that the working class, or the 22.1 percent of the community living in poverty, can't utilize.

Schwartz chimes in, "It's the Republican vision. You support the middle class that can still pay. Create a market that way. They'll say that either we build for that sector, or nothing will happen. Maybe so. Within their market-defined world, it works."

Besides, he says, the working class and the middle class live in two different worlds -- even in a small town like Newark. Most middle-class people are sealed off from working-class poverty and avoid seeing it firsthand.

Wills says he's never seen homelessness so bad in Newark. He has one friend living in a tent, and he hears of folks sleeping "in the weeds" by the railroad tracks and others sleeping in cars, on couches, or in budget motels.

Official employment numbers may be up, but the industrial or distribution center jobs that do exist, Schwartz says, are unstable and have poor working conditions (http://ehstoday.com/training/20-years-osha-violations-now-342-million-proposed-fines-ohio-auto-parts-manufacturer).

"The norm is people working with unstable schedules," Schwartz says. "People are treated as expendable, and then they begin to feel expendable."

Responses to a recent article (http://www.newarkadvocate.com/story/news/2016/07/08/amazon-seeks-hire-thousands-new-etna-facility/86871454/) about a new Amazon (http://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/life-and-death-amazon-temp/) distribution facility in the Newark Advocate underscore Schwartz's assertions, as well as the trouble with employment in the community. Facebook comments from previous employees mention the sporadic hours and the fact that while some people would love to work with the company, they lack transportation. Indeed, there are no fixed public transportation routes in the area.

According to Kaboub, in Rustbelt towns like Newark there are many people who have looked for work for a very long time but aren't technically counted as unemployed. The Bureau of Labor Statistics calls these people "discouraged workers." If you add in those numbers, and the number of involuntary part-time workers, the unemployment number in Ohio doubles to almost 10 percent. That number, he says, doesn't include people who aren't working because of long-term illnesses, a lack of adequate child or elder care, or a lack of transportation. "So you can imagine the extent of the true cost to society," Kaboub says.

Addressing all these issues has been made even more difficult for Newark because of budget cuts and tax changes by the administration of Ohio Gov. John Kasich (http://www.cleveland.com/datacentral/index.ssf/2016/03/ohio_tax_changes_under_gov_joh.html?appSession=648913335970934805212764874431760391255715338327147820700132326613677584300). On the campaign trail, the former presidential candidate claimed that he had solved Ohio's budget issues even as municipalities around the state, including Newark, struggled to pave streets and pay for public safety. The Plain Dealer estimates that Newark lost almost $1.7 million in state funding since 2011. Over 70 cities across Ohio have lost more than $1 million.

Recreating Democracy, Ground Up

It's a gorgeous July day, yet there's a big crowd gathered for a Think Tank open meeting at the Newark Public Library. There are several dozen Think Tank members, as well as a handful of people from local nonprofits who are starting to pay attention to what the Think Tank is doing.

Farias calls the meeting to order, then Think Tank member David Lee stands up to talk about what happened on this day in history. He explains that on July 9, 1917, federal authorities raided the IWW Hall in Yakima, Washington, arresting 24 Wobblies and confiscating pamphlets after local leaders tipped them off. Those in power, Lee says, were terrified of working class organizing efforts.

The Think Tank needs to share narratives of resistance, Lee tells me. As a Saponi, he takes his strength from his own cultural and historical narratives of resistance, he says, especially "both Wounded Knees, the second in particular (http://www.history.com/topics/native-american-history/wounded-knee)."

"People who are in the struggle have to come together to tell these stories and to re-energize spiritually and to get ready to go back out there," Lee adds. "Otherwise, it's so lonely. We have to acknowledge the current hopelessness and then organize for a better fight."

Jill Beeler Andrews, deputy director of Appellate Services at the Ohio Public Defender Office, tells the group that there are over 51,000 people in Ohio prisons, just shy of record numbers. She also talks about having criminal records sealed or expunged -- valuable information, because employers and landlords can't see sealed records.

Next come reports from the local farmer's market, a group addressing predatory lending, and an organization dealing with addiction issues -- in particular, the opioid crisis.

At the end of the meeting, there's a request from a local transportation advocate for the Think Tank to consider advocating for fixed route transit, such as regular bus routes.

The power of the Think Tank is that its members have experience with poverty, and so their recommendations come with an understanding that many policy-makers lack. Some people in powerful positions are starting to recognize this fact -- though not always.

When Andrews tells about a forthcoming report from a state legislative committee on recommendations for streamlining criminal justice statutes that would bring about some major changes to the state's criminal justice code, Schwartz immediately asks: "Are there any returning citizens on that committee?"

Everyone in the room knows the answer.

To some, Schwartz might come off as that overenthusiastic kid in the classroom -- persistent to a fault. But to others, he's spot on. He's asking for seats at that table.

Economist Kaboub says, "What the Newark Think Tank is doing is recreating democracy. In the United States, participation has come to mean voting for the elites every two or four years." The Think Tank offers a different model because it assesses the methods used to address problems, and then actively participates in transforming those methods.

"We see this model in other countries," Kaboub says. "In Brazil, for example, there's participatory auditing, participatory budgeting. And it's done in almost an Occupy Wall Street kind of way. There's no leadership, but citizens are plugged into government agencies and they say, 'You have to hear our voice. You work for us.'"

Think Tank member Mary Sutton is one of the people making this model happen in Newark. She says she's still inspired by the group's first work on banning the box because it impacted her directly, but she wants to do more. Sutton works as a janitor at a local university and has been with the Think Tank since its inception. She appreciates the organization's participatory model.

"We've had discussions about having a president and so on," she says, "but that's not us."

The Think Tank's organizational structure is simple -- there are monthly open meetings and smaller working committees focusing on food, reentry and housing. Sutton chairs the food committee and one of her goals has been to gain a seat on the board of directors for a county-wide food network. She was recently told that that was impossible.

So she's creating a citizen's committee -- a group of community members who use pantries -- that will report their collective concerns to local pantries and to the board. Sutton knows the pantries well because she uses them. "I work, but I can't afford certain things," she says. "I'm not lazy. I work, but sometimes I just can't."

Sutton's the expert that people in power need to hear from. As also Eric Lee, a formerly incarcerated man who now has a seat at the table with the county's re-entry program. And Linda Mossholder, a retired educator and child and family counselor who is helping the Think Tank's housing committee mobilize to ban the box on housing applications and challenge exorbitant housing application fees.

Having Hope, Making Connections

Born in 1977, Wills' childhood coincided with the worst economic times in recent memory for Newark and the Midwest. His father was absent, and he was raised by a single mom. In his teens, he got involved with drugs and gangs and dropped out of school.

"I used to always wake up and feel like I had nothing to live for and I had to have some drug to make me feel motivated," Wills says. "I wake up today and don't feel that. After so many years of going in and out of jail. Losing everything. Getting it back. Losing. Getting it back. I was tired of that constant cycle and I just didn't know how to get out of it. That's where the Think Tank helps; it gives me a reason not to go back and to do something positive."

The true center of his motivation, though, is a deep and abiding love for his son, whose name is tattooed on the top of his hand. He wants to be with his son, to rebuild that relationship. So he's channeling his frustrations into productive actions. He's holding down a construction job, attending recovery meetings and staying committed to the Think Tank.

"There's never been another time in my life when I felt and knew that my voice mattered like this," he says. "It's always been, 'Just lock him up and throw him away.'"

Wills says he's active in the Think Tank not in spite of, but because of the fact that he's still struggling. Despite being out of prison for over a year, he's only just now able to pay his full child support obligation. "I wanted to pay," he says, "I think people should support their kids." But he couldn't

because he could not get a job and was dealing with addiction issues.

One popular American narrative is that poor people are lazy, that they're not trying hard enough. But Wills is full of "try hard" and then some. He wishes he could tell his story to people running for office. He'd tell them "straight up" that when he got out of prison, he couldn't get a job. That's when he went back to using. It's that simple. "If you don't have hope, you lose all will," he says.

A month ago, Wills went to a local festival and to sign people up for the Think Tank. He talked to everyone that walked by. "I let them know that I was a felon, recently back in the community, and that I struggle with addiction. People were responsive. Now we just need to get them to meetings so their voices can be heard."

Wills' friends in the Think Tank say that he's a born organizer. He wasn't afraid to speak to anyone -- he just walked right up to passersby and shared his story, started building connections.

Schwartz told me that the Think Tank is about helping people like Chris Wills find a community and a place where they won't be judged. "If that's all we do," he said, "then we will have done something."

They already have done something.

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