# Democratizing Cleveland: "e Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-198

by Randy Cunningham · Language: EN

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## Overview

Democratizing Cleveland: The Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985 is a detailed historical account of a decade-long effort to build a grassroots, citywide community organizing movement in Cleveland. Randy Cunningham, a participant in the movement, chronicles the formation and evolution of the Cleveland Community Organizing Institute (CCOI) and its successor, the Cleveland Organizing Project (COP), which sought to unite neighborhood groups, churches, and labor unions into a powerful coalition capable of challenging the city's corporate and political elites. The book traces the movement's early successes in winning concessions on housing, utilities, and neighborhood services, as well as its internal debates over strategy, leadership, and the balance between local issue campaigns and broader structural change.

The narrative arc moves from the optimism and energy of the mid-1970s, when organizers like Cunningham and his colleagues believed that a democratic, multi-issue coalition could transform Cleveland, to the gradual fragmentation and decline of the movement by the mid-1980s. Cunningham attributes the fall to a combination of external pressures—such as the city's fiscal crisis, deindustrialization, and the rise of conservative politics—and internal tensions, including disagreements over whether to prioritize neighborhood empowerment or citywide political power, and the difficulty of sustaining a broad coalition with diverse interests. The book is both a memoir and a critical analysis, offering a candid look at the challenges of building a lasting progressive movement in a post-industrial American city.

Why it matters: Democratizing Cleveland is a valuable case study for activists, historians, and students of urban politics. It provides a rare insider's account of a community organizing effort that aimed to give ordinary citizens real decision-making power, and it offers lessons about the possibilities and pitfalls of such movements. The book is also a contribution to the history of Cleveland, documenting a period when the city was a laboratory for innovative organizing strategies that would influence national debates about community empowerment and democratic participation.

## Key Takeaways

• Community organizing can achieve tangible wins on local issues, but sustaining a citywide coalition requires continuous attention to internal democracy and leadership development.

• The Cleveland Community Organizing Institute (CCOI) and the Cleveland Organizing Project (COP) were pioneering efforts to unite neighborhood groups, churches, and labor unions into a single progressive coalition.

• External forces like the 1978 Cleveland fiscal crisis and deindustrialization can quickly shift the political landscape and undermine organizing gains.

• Internal conflicts over strategy—such as whether to focus on neighborhood issues or pursue citywide political power—can be as damaging as external opposition.

• The movement's decline was not due to a single failure but to a combination of resource exhaustion, burnout, and the difficulty of maintaining a broad, multi-issue coalition.

• The book demonstrates that community organizing is a long-term process that requires patience, flexibility, and a willingness to learn from setbacks.

• Cleveland's organizing efforts in the 1970s and 1980s offer lessons for contemporary movements seeking to build grassroots power in urban areas.

## Chapter Summaries

**Introduction: The Promise of Community Organizing**

Cunningham sets the stage by describing the social and economic conditions in Cleveland in the mid-1970s, including white flight, deindustrialization, and a sense of powerlessness among residents. He introduces the idea of community organizing as a way to give ordinary people a voice, and he outlines the book's purpose: to tell the story of the rise and fall of a specific organizing effort, drawing on his own experience as a participant. He also acknowledges the challenges of writing about a movement he was part of, aiming for both honesty and critical reflection.

**The Origins of the Cleveland Community Organizing Institute**

This chapter traces the founding of the CCOI in 1975, which was inspired by the work of Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation. Cunningham describes the early meetings, the key individuals involved, and the initial goal of training local leaders to run effective neighborhood organizations. The CCOI was designed to be a training ground, but it quickly evolved into a more ambitious effort to build a citywide coalition. The chapter also discusses the challenges of securing funding and the tensions between professional organizers and grassroots volunteers.

**Building the Coalition: Churches, Neighborhoods, and Labor**

Cunningham details the painstaking work of bringing together diverse groups—Catholic and Protestant churches, neighborhood associations, and labor unions—into a single organization. He describes the negotiations over issues, the importance of building trust, and the role of the

CCOI in facilitating dialogue. The chapter highlights the early successes, such as winning improvements in housing code enforcement and utility rate relief, which helped to solidify the coalition. However, it also notes the underlying tensions, as different groups had different priorities and levels of commitment.

**The Cleveland Organizing Project Takes Shape**

In 1978, the CCOI transformed into the Cleveland Organizing Project (COP), with a more explicit focus on citywide campaigns. Cunningham explains the strategic shift, which was driven by a desire to have a greater impact on city policy. The chapter covers the COP's first major campaign, which targeted the city's housing policies and led to a significant victory. It also discusses the internal debates about whether the COP should become a permanent institution or remain a flexible coalition, and the challenges of maintaining momentum after initial wins.

**The Fiscal Crisis and Its Impact**

The 1978 default of the City of Cleveland, under Mayor Dennis Kucinich, created a severe fiscal crisis that reshaped the political environment. Cunningham describes how the crisis diverted attention away from neighborhood issues and forced the COP to respond to immediate threats, such as service cuts and layoffs. The chapter argues that the crisis exposed the limits of community organizing when facing a city government in turmoil, and it strained the coalition as members disagreed on how to respond. The crisis also marked a turning point, as the movement lost some of its momentum.

**Internal Tensions and Strategic Debates**

This chapter focuses on the internal conflicts that began to erode the COP. Cunningham discusses the disagreements over whether to prioritize local issue campaigns or to build a broader political force capable of electing candidates. He also examines the tensions between paid organizers and volunteer leaders, and the challenges of ensuring democratic decision-making within the organization. The chapter includes candid reflections on the difficulties of sustaining a multi-issue coalition, as members became fatigued and some groups left to pursue their own agendas.

**The Decline and Fall**

By the early 1980s, the COP was in decline. Cunningham describes the factors that led to its eventual dissolution, including funding cuts, the loss of key leaders, and the changing political climate under the Reagan administration. He also notes the impact of burnout and the difficulty of replacing experienced organizers. The chapter traces the final years of the COP, as it attempted to regroup but ultimately could not overcome the accumulated challenges. Cunningham reflects on the lessons of the decline, emphasizing that the movement's failure was not inevitable but resulted from a combination of external pressures and internal weaknesses.

**Conclusion: Lessons for the Future**

In the concluding chapter, Cunningham steps back to offer broader reflections on the meaning of the Cleveland organizing experience. He argues that while the movement did not achieve its grandest goals, it did produce important local victories and trained a generation of activists. He also draws lessons for future organizing efforts, such as the need to balance long-term vision with short-term wins, the importance of building sustainable institutions, and the necessity of adapting to changing political and economic conditions. The book ends on a note of cautious optimism, suggesting that the spirit of community organizing can be revived.

## Themes

- Community empowerment
- Coalition building
- Urban decline
- Democratic participation
- Organizing burnout
- Political economy

## Notable Quotes

- "The goal of community organizing is to build power for people who have none." — Cunningham states this as a core principle early in the book, summarizing the mission of the CCOI.
- "We were trying to create a democratic organization in a city that was not democratic." — Reflecting on the challenge of building a grassroots coalition in Cleveland's political environment.
- "The fiscal crisis was a turning point, but it was not the end." — Discussing the impact of the 1978 default on the organizing movement.
- "We learned that building a coalition is easier than keeping it together." — Cunningham's reflection on the internal tensions that contributed to the movement's decline.
- "The movement died, but the lessons live on." — In the conclusion, Cunningham summarizes the enduring value of the organizing experience.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**What is Democratizing Cleveland: The Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985 about?**

The book is a historical account of a community organizing movement in Cleveland during the 1970s and 1980s. Author Randy Cunningham, a participant, details the formation of the Cleveland Community Organizing Institute and the Cleveland Organizing Project, their

campaigns for neighborhood improvements, and their eventual decline. It examines the challenges of building a citywide coalition of churches, neighborhoods, and labor unions.

**Is Democratizing Cleveland: The Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985 worth reading?**

Yes, for anyone interested in community organizing, urban history, or social movements. It offers an insider's perspective on a real attempt to democratize a city, with honest analysis of both successes and failures. The book is well-researched and provides practical lessons for activists, making it a valuable read beyond just Cleveland's history.

**How does Democratizing Cleveland: The Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985 end?**

Spoiler: The Cleveland Organizing Project dissolves in the mid-1980s due to a combination of external pressures like the fiscal crisis and funding cuts, and internal tensions over strategy and burnout. However, Cunningham ends on a reflective note, arguing that the movement's legacy lives on in the skills and lessons learned by its participants, and he offers hope for future organizing efforts.

**Who should read Democratizing Cleveland: The Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985?**

This book is ideal for community organizers, activists, students of urban studies and political science, and anyone interested in the history of Cleveland or grassroots movements. It's also useful for those studying the challenges of coalition building and the impact of economic crises on social movements. General readers interested in social justice will find it engaging.

**How long does it take to read Democratizing Cleveland: The Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985?**

At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, the book, which is approximately 250 pages long, would take around 6-8 hours to read. This can vary depending on how closely you read and whether you pause to reflect on the material. It's a manageable length for a weekend read.