The Vermont Breakthrough: Grassroots Organizing Moves a State towards Health Care for All

Written by JONATHAN KISSAM

On May 26, Vermont’s new governor signed a universal healthcare bill that promises to be truly universal, in contrast to the federal Affordable Care Act. While the passage of the bill itself has received attention from the national media, few have told the story of the grassroots organizing that made this breakthrough possible, changing what is “politically possible” through a massive campaign that has engaged tens of thousands of working-class and low-income Vermonters as political actors.

More than anything else, this bill owes its passage to the Healthcare Is a Human Right campaign, spearheaded by the Vermont Workers’ Center (VWC). Founded in 1998 by a group of young, low-wage workers in Central Vermont, the Workers’ Center’s mission is building a democratic, diverse movement of working and low-income Vermonters to achieve an economically just and democratic Vermont. We seek a Vermont in which all residents have living wages, decent health care, childcare, housing, and transportation. For over a decade, the VWC has worked to build working-class power through livable wage campaigns, union solidarity, innovating organizing, coalition-building, community campaigns, and direct action.

The VWC launched the Healthcare Is a Human Right campaign in 2008 as a natural outgrowth of our mission to build working-class power. Healthcare had emerged as an issue across all our work — as one of the main issues in strikes, as one of the biggest costs driving public-sector employers to want to cut and/or privatize services, and as one of the biggest issues for unorganized workers in sectors like retail which make up a huge proportion of jobs in Vermont. It is an issue with great potential for unifying the working class, as nearly everyone has had experiences with the dysfunctional U.S. healthcare system, or has had family or friends who have. As a statewide political issue, it offers all Vermonters a chance to participate. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it was a campaign that allowed us to go on the offensive, and demonstrate that grassroots organizing can actually achieve victories which improve the material conditions of the working class as a whole — instead of the pattern which we had been stuck in, of defending past victories.

Inspired by the International Worker Justice Campaign led by UE Local 150 in North Carolina — a campaign to repeal the state’s ban on collective bargaining in the public sector which uses international human rights standards as its framework — we adopted the human rights framework for our healthcare campaign. By keeping human rights at the center of our campaign, we developed a campaign language that connected with working people at the level of values, rather than through the abstract and often confusing language of policy. The human rights framework also encourages movement-building discussions of how healthcare intersects with other issues such as domestic violence, racism, immigration, war, privatization, and attacks on the public sector.

The first phase of the campaign had three main components. We developed a “human rights survey” as a grassroots organizing tool, which allowed us to engage over a thousand Vermonters in a conversation about healthcare which began with their experiences and their values. We also worked to frame the healthcare crisis as a human rights crisis, and to build relationships with other movements and sectors, through human rights hearings held around the state which allowed people to tell their stories, a human rights report released on International Human Rights Day, December 10, and a human rights conference held the following weekend which drew over 500 people. The third component of the first phase was building for a mass rally at the statehouse on May 1st, 2009, which fell on a Friday. Choosing to focus on a direct action, rather than legislation, meant that we had to have conversations with our growing base about the nature of political power, to expand our collective understanding of “politics” beyond elections, online petitions, and polite lobbying of legislators — the “low intensity” democracy that is taught in high school civics classes.

Well over a thousand people showed up at the statehouse — the largest weekday rally in Vermont in recent memory. The HCHR campaign had succeeded in establishing a statewide network of organizing committees, including committees in the traditionally more conservative rural areas of the state.

On the opening day of the 2010 legislative session, dozens of Vermonters in red “Healthcare Is a Human Right” t-shirts delivered thousands of postcards to legislative leaders demanding that they hold hearings on H.100, a bill that outlined a single-payer healthcare system for the state. In addition to collecting postcards, the campaign had been busy in the fall holding “People’s Forums” around the state, to showcase working-class people’s often moving stories of struggling to get the care they need for themselves and their loved ones, and to ask legislators to commit to supporting five Human Rights Principles for healthcare reform.
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The Vermont Workers Center (VWC) played a key role in the success of the Universal and Unified Health System Act of 2010 (H.202). The act, which became law in May 2011, mandates a single-payer system for all Vermont residents. The success of this campaign is a testament to the power of grassroots organizing and the importance of valuing human rights.

The campaign started in May 2008 with the Human Rights Campaign for Health (HCHR) and expanded through the Vermont labor movement to support the billing and the organizing campaigns. The campaign gathered support from labor leaders, community leaders, medical professionals, and ordinary Vermonters.

Legislative hearings were flooded with over a dozen sites throughout the state, generating grassroots pressure on the legislature. The key components of the campaign were:

1. Mass Organizing: At every stage of the campaign, the VWC had a large number of people participate in the campaign in a small but tangible way. They provided opportunities for people not only to support the campaign but also to feel like they have contributed to it.

2. A Struggle over Values: Using the human rights framework and keeping the actual experiences of working-class people with the healthcare system central to the campaign has kept us connected to our base at the level of values about what they hold most dear.

3. Real Leadership Development: One of the biggest barriers to building movements for fundamental social change is the belief that change comes only through elections, or comes only through “practical” single-issue campaigns, or – most commonly - is not possible at all. Developing leaders who understand and consciously work to undo these ideas, and address the underlying systems of patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism that produce them - is one of the most pressing tasks for our movement.

The success of the Vermont Breakthrough is a clear example of the power of grassroots organizing and the importance of valuing human rights. The campaign demonstrated that with the right strategies and tactics, even the most difficult issues can be addressed and resolved.
The Workers’ Center is under no illusion that this will be an easy struggle, but we believe that we are on the right path, and we look forward to working with allies in other states and fighting on other fronts of struggle, so that more of our movement can go on the offensive towards winning the world we wish to see.

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