

Public Issues Committee

Abe Markman

Would Felix Adler Be Proud?

The PIC Experience: A Brief Summary

PIC Members: Joshua Adams, Nancy Ambruster, Virginia Arnold, Pat Berens, Pat Cohen, Maria Fridman, Ken Gans, Alan Gardner, Phyllis Harrison-Ross, Jim Hyland, Pearl Katz, Pauline Kravath, Lee Loshak, Jo Ann Mason, Carol Rost, Barry Snider, Eric Volpe and Beth Zucker.

Other members of NYSEC who were crucial to whatever success we had: Bonnie Bean, Carol and Jerome Chamlin, Charles Debrovner, Michael Kriegh, Henryka Komanska, Barbara Levenson, Andra Miller, and John Gurney.

All of our Leaders were supportive and were there for us often at a personal sacrifice of time.

The Ethical staff was highly efficient and attentive to our needs.

Introduction

The mission of the Public Issues Committee or PIC was well within the ethical culture tradition of fellowship and vision. We recruited members determined to work together despite differences in political philosophy. Starting in February 2006, we wanted to develop ideas that could influence the national elections of November 2006 and 2008. We focused on finding common ground among those on both sides of the cultural divides. We tried to bring out the best in each other and the best in society.

We recognized that many working class people were deeply upset by the social revolutionary changes of the 1960s — and were not prepared for the civil rights, women’s rights and anti-war movements. They blamed liberals and were antagonistic to anything that appeared to be supported by liberals. They held to this position even if it meant voting against their own economic interests.

Because of their unabated anger over a forty-year period, they were easily influenced by the way corporate conservatives framed the issues. “The government is not the solution, it is the problem.” “Lower taxes for the wealthy.” “Don’t penalize those who are successful as they will bring more prosperity to the whole country.” “If you work hard you can become wealthy yourself.” With the success of these multi-media and well-financed propaganda campaigns, funds for progressive programs were severely curtailed.

Sociologists like George Lackoff were highly effective in showing how issues were framed to exploit people’s anger at liberals. Our task was to convince the “swing voter” that there were common ground issues that were of vital interest to them. If we could identify such issues, a new coalition for a more progressive, humane future might be within the realm of possibility.

We identified positions that working people felt compelled to support. Paid Family and Paid Sick Days became signature issues for us. Why? Because, in the economy since the 1950s both mothers and fathers usually needed to work. Hence, families became hard pressed to balance care for children and at times elderly parents while holding taxing jobs. We found that paid leave had more support among conservatives than among liberals.

In addition, we recognized that the war in Iraq had become very unpopular and that children's health care, global warming and stem cell research were widely popular across the cultural divides. Through a process, which is thoroughly "ethical culture," we recruited experts from among our membership, researched the issues, wrote position papers, and submitted them to the Board. At the 2007 Annual Meeting, the members ratified five of the issues overwhelmingly. Marc Bernstein called it an historic vote for the ethical culture movement

Once these policies were adopted, we became advocates. Over a two-year period, we sent out weekly action alerts on Ethical's large email list serve. They covered not only PIC's seven positions but also all positions of the Society including our strong opposition to the death penalty (since virtually repealed) and the Rockefeller Drug laws (since markedly reformed.) In addition, we organized some hard copy mailings to elected officials. A short article about PIC was printed in AEU's *Dialogue*, and Abe participated in a workshop at an AEU Assembly.

On Iraq, we showed up in considerable numbers on several anti-war marches. Abe wrote to Leon Panetta, a member of the Iraqi Study Group, and received a very positive response. Phyllis Harrison-Ross in her position on the Amsterdam News Editorial Board met with candidates for national and state office and promoted our positions. We began to see our positions on the web sites of Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Elliot Spitzer, and David Patterson. Abe and Carol Rost were able to speak to David Patterson in person as well. NYSEC joined the NY State Paid Family Coalition, several of us went to their planning meetings, and three of us, including the Society's president, Andra Miller, drove to Albany for a lobbying day for paid days.

In preparation for our breakfast forum in November 2008 on paid sick days, Pat Berens, Maria Fridman, Lee Loshak and Abe met with Councilwoman Gale Brewer at her local office. JoAnn Mason and Virginia Arnold visited the offices of their elected officials. Phyllis Harrison-Ross, Jerome Chamlin, and Barry Snider met with local business leaders, and all City Council members were contacted by hard copy mail. Julie Blutstein did a wonderful job with the publicity and with the aid of Bonnie Bean a PIC sub-committee, headed by JoAnn Mason, who wonderfully decorated and catered the affair. (The catering was fully financed by PIC's fund-raising events.) As a result, both advocates and business leaders joined the forum and sixty participants representing elected officials, womens' and union groups attended.

We also conducted three and a half years of monthly Sunday afternoon events and two years of summer documentary films. They deepened our knowledge of our positions with expert speakers. In addition, the cabaret style films showings proved to be successful fund-raising events.

We were fortunate in having Alan Gardner, as a member. Alan gave us brilliant historical and scholarly analyses of our deliberations. We attended several conferences on labor and single-payer health coverage. Abe was invited to do five yearly summer platforms and a NYSEC

conducted WBAI radio program. He chose subjects that supported PIC's mission. We set up web pages highlighted with videos of our events. Pauline Kravath and Barry Snider put together notebooks of up-dated data on elected officials for hard copy mailings. Finally, Pat Berens not only performed marvelous secretarial and editorial functions, she kept us focused and sane.

How We Started and How We Proceeded

Several of the Public Issues Committee members got to know each other during the latter years of Ethics in the News, a long running Sunday afternoon program led by Mary Ellen Goodman. Mary Ellen challenged us with ethical issues once a month for nine years. We first realized that we could influence the policies of the Society when we recommended to the Board that the United States should take a stand against going to war with Iraq. That policy was adopted and several members wearing NYSEC caps enthusiastically joined the February 15, 2003 rally. We stayed in the freezing weather for five to six hours. When we got home, we learned that we were among ten million people around the world who took to the streets.

After the war began, we were successful in influencing the AEU/NYSEC position on Iraq. Then in February of 2006, we got ambitious. We decided that we would develop a public issues agenda with hopes that we could influence the candidates in the November 2006 national elections. At that time, Mary Ellen asked Abe Markman to take over the program. Although Mary Ellen didn't attend meetings, she was full of ideas and suggested two of the positions that we decided to delve into global warming and stem cell research. She also recommended members who could be the chief investigators of these issues.

Our fellowship morphed into our vision. We became so well informed that we could advocate for our positions with clarity and authority. Whether we had success in our endeavors is hard to measure but all of our positions are front and center in the new administration in Washington.

We do not know whether the Obama administration will be successful in implementing these policies but we do know cultural divides have eased considerably. Our vision was that progress would not be possible unless people who were antagonistic toward liberals saw that some of their needs were the same as those of liberals.

The Seven Positions Initiated by PIC

Here is the status of the new NYSEC positions initiated by PIC: These positions in brief and in full can be accessed by clicking on:

On Iraq ---- Maria Fridman and Abe Markman

Besides urging the government to leave Iraq as soon as possible we had two ideas that might elicit more support from the community of nations. We were against the U.S. maintaining permanent bases in Iraq. And we were for a policy whereby the U.S. would not have priority rights to Iraqi oil.

President Obama has stated that the U.S. will not maintain permanent bases. Even though the Bush administration was successful in the privatization of Iraqi oil reserves, it looks like U.S. companies are having to bid for contracts on an even playing field with the oil and gas companies from around the world.

On Iran ---- Eric Volpe and Abe Markman

We strongly recommended a multi-national and bi-lateral diplomatic initiative. Many pundits agreed that by promoting diplomacy, Obama did influence the moderates in Iran to fiercely contest the recent election.

We also took a position firmly against military intervention as being counterproductive. Nevertheless, it looks like Obama is keeping such an option on the table.

On Stem Cell and Therapeutic Cloning Research — Charles Debrovner, MD.

Obama has given the go ahead for federal stem cell research but not for therapeutic cloning.

On Global Warming — John Gurney and Ken Gans

Al Gore thought the bill passed by the House of Representative was a good one. However, PIC members have serious questions about the provisions in the bill to fund “clean coal” and “safe nuclear energy.” At a June PIC event Curt Collier challenged the validity of these concepts.

On Child Health Coverage — Phyllis Harrison-Ross, MD, Dr. Patricia Cohen, and Abe Markman

Strong bills were passed on the federal and state levels.

On Paid Leave — JoAnn Mason

The New York State Paid Family Leave Coalition influenced the enactment of a paid leave bill in New Jersey. Coalition leaders have indicated that there is a good chance of passing one in New York. NYSEC is a member of the eleven-state coalition.

On Paid Sick days — Abe Markman

During and after the campaign both the President and First Lady made strong statements in support of policies to ease the burdens of workers who must balance family and work responsibilities.

Since PIC’s breakfast/forum:

1. Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum, introduced a bill against discrimination toward those workers who have need to take sick days. Three of her staff members

attended PIC's breakfast and Andra and Abe went to her City Hall Press conference on this issue.

2. City Councilwoman Gale Brewer held a press conference on paid sick leave, July 29, 2009. She intends to introduce a bill in August, 2009.
3. Congresswomen Carol Maloney introduced a paid sick leave bill for the entire U.S. in 2009.

Self-Critiques:

1. Except with paid sick leave, we could have done much more to bring in and hear from representatives on both sides of the cultural divides.
2. We failed to engage NYSEC members as much as we would have liked.

Recommendations:

1. The "PIC Process" should be followed as often as possible when developing issues for ethical action. We have members who have the people skills for an action-oriented fellowship, the expertise for research, the contacts to attract speakers or choose relevant documentaries, and a wide array of advocacy skills. In addition, issues become so well crafted that members become knowledgeable and effective advocates.

Without such a process, ethical actions may prove to be short-lived. (Whenever practical, the process should be used when we support, collaborate or co-sponsor events using the NYSEC facilities.)

2. We should not assume that positions that appear to be within ethical boundaries are automatically Ethical Culture Society positions. For example, before advocating for issues like single-payer health coverage, they should be brought to the Board for adoption.
3. NYSEC should continue its affiliation with the New York State Paid Family Coalition. In the name of NYSEC, PIC has made unsolicited contributions of about \$350 over the last three years. However, there should not be a need to contribute again. For the most part the coalition is funded by unions.
4. *Be careful not to take on too many issues at once. It may tax new leadership.*
5. Feel free to use the notebooks of data on contacting elected officials. They are located in a file cabinet in the Membership Director's office.

Life After PIC (by former members of PIC)

1. Abe Markman has been designated NYSEC's representative to the New York State Paid Family Leave Coalition.
2. Maria Fridman is planning to recommend to the Board endorsing a Single-Payer Health Care Plan. Alan Gardner is helping with the research. Pat Cohen, Phyllis Harrison-Ross, and Pat Berens are members of organizations promoting this cause.
3. Abe and Alan are members of the Advocacy Forum.

Other members are volunteering for other committees.

An Assessment

PIC members have on the whole a good feeling of what we have accomplished. However, we had our differences. Some wanted us to be more radical and less political. Nevertheless, we did address issues that proved to be those that the public voted for in the last election and that have become the platform of the new national administration. In addition, some of PIC's positions have been adopted or are being seriously considered by the city and state governments. And that was what we hoped would happen.

We will never know whether this confluence of PIC's vision with events on the ground was anything more than serendipity. Nevertheless, we should be proud of what we accomplished and proud that we set an example by forming a wonderful fellowship. It was a fellowship with a shared vision --- one that based ethical action on a foundation of knowledge.

In all humility, we believe that Felix Adler would have been proud of us as well.

Written by Abe Markman with input by and approval from PIC members and chair, Andra Miller, President, NYSEC.