

# From Protest to Progress: The Lesson of the Opportunities Industrialization Centers

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## *Introduction*

The Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OIC) program has been helping unemployed people since its inception in 1964. OIC was a response to a national need to train and motivate the urban poor. Starting with one center in Philadelphia, OIC has expanded to nearly 100 centers in cities across America, and can now claim one of the best records for providing training and jobs to the poor and the unemployed. I have been involved with OIC since its beginning, and I intend in this article to set forth some of the history, structure, and philosophical underpinnings of the program.

## *The Prelude to OIC: The Need Arises*

The origins of OIC can be traced back to the early days of the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, when blacks and other minorities were seeking job opportunities which had been denied them because of their color. As late as 1960 less than two and a half percent of the managerial jobs in the United States were held by blacks.<sup>1</sup> At that time a large proportion of blacks worked in service occupations, and many were still employed as domestics.<sup>2</sup>

Since jobs in private businesses were severely restricted, blacks entered the labor market in other areas. The best employment for them was to be found in government jobs, as postal service employees, as clerical workers, and as lower-paid public servants. There were also a limited number of opportunities in traditional professions such as teaching, medicine, law, and the ministry. Blacks seek-

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1. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, U.S. DEP'T OF COMMERCE, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES 229, Table 308 (1964).

2. While in 1960 the percentage of blacks who were blue collar workers was only slightly greater than the figure for whites, in that year the percentage of blacks in service jobs was over three times greater than the figure for whites. In 1960, 31.8 percent of blacks held service jobs, and nearly half of those were blacks working as private household servants. *Id.* at 228, Table 307.

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ing jobs at banks, insurance companies, corporations, and retail stores just did not have a chance. The doors were closed.

A group of 400 black ministers in Philadelphia, myself among them, finally found a way to pry open those doors. Beginning in 1958, during the era of civil rights protests and demonstrations, these ministers launched one of the most successful boycott campaigns of the period. They organized an effective boycott designed to eliminate employment barriers against black workers in the city. Using their pulpits as a common base, the ministers persuaded the Philadelphia black community to use its purchasing power against companies who refused to comply with their request for job opportunities for black youths. The ministers said: "We cannot in good moral conscience remain silent while members of our congregations patronize companies that discriminate in the employment of our people." The ministers called their boycott campaign "Selective Patronage."

The boycotts lasted three years, from 1958 to 1961. The ministers formed small visitation committees, paying calls on targeted companies to tell them about the black community's needs. These committees were chosen on a rotating basis, to provide broad leadership participation among the ministers in the various company campaigns.

These ad hoc committees, acting on behalf of the group of 400 ministers, asked top company executives to provide a certain number of jobs in specific categories of employment from which blacks had been previously excluded: clerical, secretarial, draftsmanship, sales, and managerial. If within a certain period — usually a month — the company had not met the ministers' demands, the 400 ministers would hold a meeting. Meetings were usually scheduled for midnight, at one of the churches. Members of the press were barred, in order to allow the ministers the freest possible expression. On the recommendation of the ad hoc committee, reporting to the "400," a vote against the company was taken and selective patronage was called.

The next Sunday, from 400 pulpits all over Philadelphia, the announcement went out against the recalcitrant company. By Monday morning, 300,000 black people in the city of Philadelphia had heard the message, without the use of television, radio, or daily newspapers. They stopped buying certain items, commodities, or brands, or they stopped patronizing certain establishments.

The impact of the ministers' message was formidable. Under the leadership of the 400 ministers, the black community of Philadelphia successfully boycotted twenty-nine companies, while many other firms met our demands without a boycott. In addition, as a result of our efforts, in 1963 some 300 firms in the Philadelphia Delaware Valley area agreed upon a policy of fair employment practices.<sup>3</sup> For the first time, blacks began to appear in "good" jobs in private industry, in ever-increasing numbers, throughout Philadelphia.

In time, thousands of jobs opened to black workers as the message spread throughout the Philadelphia business community: "Get your house in order and employ blacks, because the ministers are coming." It became good business to hire black workers to fill jobs in Philadelphia. The ministers had broken employment barriers. A new day had come for blacks in the City of Brotherly Love.

But another problem soon developed. Although jobs were now open to us, we did not have enough skilled workers to do those jobs. Blacks in America had never been trained or prepared for the kinds of industrial employment made available by the boycotts. In the past, once blacks left the state employment offices, those offices threw applications in waste paper baskets. We now had the jobs, but we discovered that integration without preparation was frustration.

It was essential to begin training people for these newly available jobs. This training had to be done on a massive scale and had to be qualitatively effective. We were faced with a new kind of challenge and our training programs thus had to be organized in a new way. The programs had to be developed within the communities where the unemployed people lived. They could not be called schools, because in the minds of the people, schools had already failed them. So, we decided to call the new programs "Centers." Because we realized the importance of stressing opportunity, we decided to name them "Opportunities Industrialization Centers."

### *The Program Begins*

The OIC conducted its training in two phases in order to serve its purpose most effectively. The first phase, called the "Feeder Program," stressed attitude. We had discovered that, for the unemployed and poor people who had lost hope in the system, the keys to

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3. L. SULLIVAN, *BUILD BROTHER BUILD* 76-77 (1969).

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learning were motivation, the development of self-esteem, and the formation of positive attitudes. People had to be motivated to improve themselves, emphasis had to be placed on self-respect, and people had to get rid of distrust, anger, revenge, and hopelessness. Towards these ends, the Feeder Program consisted of courses ranging from the study of black history to the study of etiquette, hygiene, and basic grammar, all designed to inspire trainees to lift their sights above their present condition and aspire to a better quality of life.<sup>4</sup>

The second phase of the program dealt with skills training for jobs that we knew existed in the community, or jobs that could be created there. We knew that if we trained people for jobs that did not exist, these people would be no better off than they had been before. Therefore, the training program was designed to train only for employment opportunities where jobs were waiting for successful trainees. We concentrated on reaching, motivating, training, and placing people. Then we followed up, to ensure that the trainees maintained a high level of performance and remained on the job.

There was no federal money for this sort of job training in 1964. We therefore looked to local government, business, and citizens to push our idea toward reality. Ours was a self-help strategy by necessity. With some lobbying, we convinced the City Council to rent us an old abandoned jailhouse in a poor section of Philadelphia for \$1.00 a year, and this jailhouse became our headquarters. We sought and received equipment for skills training from local companies and agencies.<sup>5</sup> I secured money contributions from my own congregation at the Zion Baptist Church, as did black ministers throughout Philadelphia. A \$50,000 gift from an anonymous do-

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4. In the early years of OIC, I attempted to capture the spirit of the Feeder Program in these words:

The wave of student aspiration is perhaps the real great strength of OIC. . . . Even when teachers would relax from their best efforts, students, by the effort of their desire to learn, push them on like a wind moving the arms of a windmill; like a stream pushing the wheels of a water wheel round and round; like the wind filling the sails of a sailboat. The surging power of OIC is the will of the people to become more than they have been, to prove to themselves and to others that they can achieve.

L. SULLIVAN, *supra* note 3, at 107.

5. By the end of its first year of operation, the Philadelphia OIC had received \$550,000 worth of contributions in cash and equipment from private industry, philanthropic institutions, and the local community. See N.Y. Times, Feb. 15, 1965, at 21, col. 1.

nor<sup>6</sup> and a second mortgage on my house provided additional seed funds.

Active community involvement was crucial to the success of OIC. We assembled a board of community leaders, which chose the staff that initiated the program. Of course, we also depended heavily on local volunteer counselors and teachers in the early years.

On the morning of the last Sunday in January, 1964, the 400 ministers who had led Philadelphia's boycott movement announced the opening of our center, and that afternoon one of the largest crowds ever to assemble in Philadelphia gathered at the old jailhouse-turned-job training center to wish us well. The next day our first students, 135 men and 165 women, filled the classrooms. Our waiting list quickly swelled to more than 3,000.<sup>7</sup>

This first center trained students in typing, drafting, electronics, and machine tooling, as well as in the more traditional service jobs such as waiting tables and cooking.<sup>8</sup> Our students strove to learn and to develop these skills as quickly as possible, so that they could enter the workforce as quickly as possible. And they knew that they had to be diligent, because ten people waited for every seat they occupied.

Although their average age was twenty-five, the average educational attainment of our students was less than ninth-grade level. Most of our students were unemployed and on welfare.<sup>9</sup> Yet, despite their impoverished backgrounds, these young adults attacked their studies with great enthusiasm and with a strong sense of solidarity. Groups of students created brotherhood funds, gathering dimes, quarters, and dollars to help each other secure the food, clothing, and bus fare essential to their success in the program. I remember that some trainees walked as far as five miles to and from the center each day. There was little absenteeism; our students knew what they wanted and worked to achieve those goals.

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6. The "anonymous donor" was the William Penn Foundation of Philadelphia, which has donated over \$1.5 million to OIC over the past two decades.

7. By 1967 the waiting list had more than doubled in size, to over 7,000 names. See Philadelphia Tribune, July 1, 1967, at 1, col. 6.

8. The first center offered courses in ten subjects, with varying lengths of study: machine tool operations, electronics, cooking, and sheet metal work each took forty-seven weeks of training; chemistry lab technician training took forty-four weeks; drafting took twenty weeks; and power sewing machine operation, industrial cutting, restaurant practices, and teletype operating each took eight weeks. See N.Y. Times, *supra* note 5.

9. At present, 56 percent of OIC trainees do not have a high school degree, 43 percent are on public assistance, and 31 percent are single heads of households with dependent children. OPPORTUNITIES INDUSTRIALIZATION CENTERS OF AMERICA, INC., 1985 ANNUAL REPORT 9 (1986) [hereinafter 1985 ANNUAL REPORT].

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Remarkably, 83 percent of those first trainees soon secured jobs,<sup>10</sup> and through them the OIC began to develop a reputation for training the best, most dependable and effective workers in town. It was true that many possessed criminal records which before had given prospective employers pause. However, once these men and women had passed through OIC, their pasts no longer mattered. In the eyes of employers they had become new people.

Right from the beginning, we had expected our program to expand throughout the city. A little more than a year after the first center opened, a second was established in West Philadelphia. Fundraising for three additional centers began that same month.<sup>11</sup> It was not long before OICs were located in every section of the city. OIC had become a powerful movement among Philadelphia's unemployed poor people. The program's slogan was "We Help Ourselves," and the symbol was a key upon which was the message, "To Open Any Door."

### *The Nationwide Success of OIC*

In June, 1967, I received a call from the White House. President Lyndon Johnson had heard of the OIC program, and he wanted to see it for himself. OIC's success had enabled it to secure some small federal grants, and early in 1967 the Office of Economic Opportunity had allocated \$6.5 million to further our expansion.<sup>12</sup> On June 29th President Johnson arrived and toured two of the several centers which were by then operating in Philadelphia. At the old jailhouse the President put his hand on one of the cells which still remained and said to America, "Having been here today, I think we are going to make it."<sup>13</sup> That day the nation learned about OIC and

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10. Of the 150 graduates in the first year of operation, 125 found employment, while an additional thirty-nine had "dropped out" during the course of training to accept industry jobs. See N.Y. Times, *supra* note 5. By 1967 some 3,000 jobs had been secured by OIC graduates, so that over the first three years of the program nearly 90 percent of graduates were placed. TIME, Mar. 3, 1967, at 25.

11. See N.Y. Times, *supra* note 5.

12. See N.Y. Times, June 30, 1967, at 15, col. 2.

13. See Philadelphia Tribune, *supra* note 7. President Johnson later described his impressions of that trip:

I saw men and women with pride in their eyes instead of defeat. I saw men and women whose shoulders were held straight and high, whose chins were up, and whose faces reflected courage and hope. I saw men and women whose self-respect was beginning to burn inside them like a flame, like a furnace that would fire them all their lives.

L. JOHNSON, THE VANTAGE POINT 86 (1971).

its achievements, and the President began to put the full force of his Great Society program behind the OIC efforts.

The time had come for OIC to assume a national role.<sup>14</sup> The same urgent need which had sparked OIC's development in Philadelphia was present in all the cities across the United States. As a result of selective patronage, boycotts, and other civil rights efforts such as the new equal opportunity laws,<sup>15</sup> countless jobs were now open to blacks and other minorities. OIC filled the essential role of preparing people for the work to which they could now aspire. In a few years, OIC programs were established in nearly 100 American cities.

From the 1960s to the present OIC has continued to thrive, so much so that today, twenty-two years after its inception, it is the nation's largest skills training program for unemployed and underemployed people. It has expanded from its black origins to serve disadvantaged persons of all races, colors, and creeds. In the West, many of the trainees are Hispanic and Asian; in Appalachia, most are rural whites; in the deep South and in the northern and eastern urban areas, the majority of trainees are black; and in the Midwest, many trainees are American Indians. Its successes, born of the spirit of the early civil rights movement, did not falter with the changing social or political context, or with its expansion into other ethnic communities. Rather, OIC's emphasis on instilling pride and imparting skills has proved successful through the years and across racial lines.<sup>16</sup>

As the program has grown, it has adapted to the changing needs of the workforce and to the heightened aspirations of those it serves. The nearly 100 OIC affiliates throughout the nation now offer

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14. The November 1967 opening of an OIC center in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn marked the thirteenth city into which OIC had extended. See N.Y. Times, Nov. 7, 1967, at 53, col. 1. By the end of 1968, OIC operated centers in eighty-two American cities. See L. SULLIVAN, *supra* note 3, at 185-86.

15. See, e.g., the Equal Employment Opportunity provision, Title VII, of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241, 253-66 (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. §§ 2000e-1 to e-17 (1982)).

16. OIC has also proved successful across international boundaries. OIC International, begun in 1969 at the request of an African physician, now operates in eight African nations, Canada, and England. Three new programs will soon be opening in other African nations. In Togo, OIC International developed one of the most successful demonstration farms in all of Africa. On it, hundreds of young men and women have been trained in new agricultural methods and skills, and have returned to their tribes and villages where they share their new agricultural skills with others. As one teaches ten, ten teach 100. Similar self-help farms are being planned for nations across Sub-Saharan Africa. Also, skills centers which train Africans to be mechanics, typists, carpenters, brick layers, electricians, and entrepreneurs are opening a new era of opportunity for the trainees, their families, and their communities.

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courses in such areas as data and word processing, bookkeeping, and paraprofessional health care. In addition, the High Tech Training Center of New York offers a sixteen-week course which includes classroom instruction in advanced math, business English, and hands-on training with word processing equipment. OIC has also, since 1975, provided training for both management and supervisory positions, through the Opportunities Academy of Management Training.

Since its beginning, OIC has trained 900,000 Americans for useful employment, and 700,000 have been put to work. These people are earning more than nine billion dollars a year, and as a result OIC-trained workers have added hundreds of millions of dollars in tax revenues to the U.S. Treasury. Even with recent cutbacks of federal funds, OIC continues to provide a cost-effective and beneficial way to address this nation's employment problems.

### *OIC Relations With the Public and Private Sectors*

One of the keys to OIC's success has been its ties to both government and business. An example of OIC's government connection is the Urban Mass Transit Human Resources Training Program, a joint venture of the national OIC and the Department of Transportation. Through this program these two organizations have provided career ladders and training in vehicular maintenance for underemployed transit workers. Another link between OIC and the federal government has been OIC's Office of Government and Legislative Relations. This office serves as our ambassador to Washington, D.C., keeping in touch with key officials in the legislative and executive branches, and keeping OICs informed of developments which affect the employment and training field in general and OIC in particular.

Because we at OIC believe that the poor are entitled to public assistance, we have tried to obtain public funding for our program. However, given the exigencies of both liberal and conservative politics, our results have been mixed. After five years of lobbying, OIC was included, along with other community-based organizations, in the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973 (CETA).<sup>17</sup> While many local affiliates prospered under CETA funding, others were unable to adapt their comprehensive training pro-

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17. 29 U.S.C. §§ 801, 802(4), Pub. L. No. 93-203, § 3, 87 Stat. 839 (1973), *repealed by* Job Training Partnership Act, Pub. L. No. 97-300, § 184(a)(1), 96 Stat. 1322, 1357 (1982) (codified at 29 U.S.C. §§ 1501, 1592 (1982)).

gram to CETA's decentralized and often fragmented model. Some OICs with unassailable records of effectiveness found themselves in a prolonged struggle with CETA officials in their jurisdictions. These problems were partially alleviated by the CETA Amendments of 1978,<sup>18</sup> and the Youth Employment and Demonstration Projects Act of 1977 (YEDPA),<sup>19</sup> the latter of which gave special consideration in its funding provision to OIC and other community-based organizations.<sup>20</sup>

In 1982, however, the passage of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA)<sup>21</sup> marked a shift in priorities with the change from the Carter to the Reagan Administration. This Act, which repealed both CETA and YEDPA,<sup>22</sup> decentralized the authority and responsibility for employment and training, and assigned a dominant role to the private sector and to local educational agencies. While OIC and other community organizations were named in the legislation,<sup>23</sup> JTPA effectively turned employment training over to the very institutions which had for the most part failed to reach our constituency in the past.

The tide shifted back again in 1984 with the passage of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1984.<sup>24</sup> This law provides for a strong partnership among businesses, vocational education programs, and community-based organizations. The Act has two primary objectives: to improve the quality and amount of available vocational instruction, and to expand access to the vocational education system for all persons, particularly those who have in the past not been part of that system.<sup>25</sup> Title II, § 252 of the Act further stipulates that only community-based organizations are eligible for vocational education funds.<sup>26</sup> This is a historic breakthrough for the national OIC in that money for vocational education has never before been available on an exclusive basis, nationwide, to commu-

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18. Pub. L. No. 95-524, 92 Stat. 1909 (1976) *repealed by* Job Training Partnership Act, 29 U.S.C. §§ 1501, 1592 (1982).

19. Pub. L. No. 95-93, 91 Stat. 627 (1977), *repealed by* Job Training Partnership Act, 29 U.S.C. §§ 1501, 1592 (1982).

20. YEDPA, *supra* note 19, at § 348(b), 91 Stat. 645.

21. 29 U.S.C. §§ 1501-1781 (1982).

22. *See supra* notes 18-21. The demise of CETA meant a two-thirds cutback in the level of federal funding for OIC.

23. 29 U.S.C. § 1503(5).

24. Pub. L. No. 88-210, added by Pub. L. No. 98-524, § 1, 98 Stat. 2435 (codified at 20 U.S.C. § 2301 (Supp. 1986)).

25. *Id.* at § 2301(1) and (2).

26. *Id.* at § 2352(a). Title II, § 252 (20 U.S.C. § 2342(b)) provides that the only organizations which may qualify for state allocation of federal funds under the Vocational Education Act are community-based organizations.

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nity-based organizations. Whether the funding for vocational education will return to its former level, however, is still uncertain.

OIC has also maintained close relations with the business world. The OIC National Industrial Advisory Council, consisting of thirty CEOs and senior officers of some of the nation's largest companies,<sup>27</sup> serves both as a conduit between OIC and the technical and financial resources available in the private sector, and as an advocate for OIC in the public and private spheres. OIC also sustains its close ties with the business world by entering into joint job ventures with private firms. For example, a number of local OICs have established High Tech Training Centers through partnerships with private firms such as IBM; similarly, the Learning Opportunities Centers, computer-based vocational training programs, were born of a partnership between OIC and the Control Data Corporation.<sup>28</sup>

Most importantly, OIC's connection with the business community provides local affiliates with comprehensive and current appraisals of the job needs of local businesses. As in the early days, OICs only train people for jobs that exist, or that can be created, in the community. Towards this end, all OICs receive information on business job needs from Industrial Advisory Committees associated with local OIC affiliates. These committees, composed of local businesspersons, give OICs an inside view of the community's business sector, thus allowing the local affiliates to train specifically for available jobs. In addition, OIC pools information with other private job training programs, as well as with federal, state, and local job placement agencies.

While OIC operates on a national level to maintain these connections with the public and private sectors, the leadership structure of OIC reflects a commitment to serving local communities. All the chairpersons of OIC local boards sit on the national OIC Board of Directors. Under the direction of the Board, the National Auxiliary and the National Clergy Support Committee serve to broaden the base of community participation at the local as well as the national level.

Local OICs are for the most part autonomous entities. Their organizational structure very nearly approximates the national OIC model, and they have similar ties to industry, clergy, and commu-

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27. The present chairman of the National Industrial Advisory Council is Richard J. Ferris, Chairman and CEO of United Airlines. The full membership of the Council may be found in the OIC's 1985 ANNUAL REPORT, *supra* note 9, at 12-13.

28. The other partners in this enterprise were the Ford Foundation and the Remediation and Training Institute.

nity. These connections on the local level provide the structure and support for local OIC programs. The local OICs adopt the basic Feeder Program/skills training structure, receive technical assistance provided by the national OIC, and partake of federal funds earmarked for OIC. Because affiliates remain free to use these building blocks in whatever way they feel will best address the needs of their local community, the community-based aspect of OIC, so vital to its success, has been maintained.

### *Conclusion*

We believe in the inherent dignity of human beings. There must be an economic floor, a level of degradation and humiliation beneath which no American citizen must be permitted to fall. Therefore, we are fighting for the opportunity of black and poor people to earn a decent living. The right to work is a fundamental entitlement which must be protected by the federal, state, and local governments.

But while we prevail upon government, industry, and the community to help the poor, we recognize that self-help has been the key to OIC's effectiveness. Without inner resources — motivation, discipline, and the will to succeed — no amount of external support will make a trainee independent and self-reliant. For this reason, we discourage training stipends. By extension, we are convinced that community-based organizations must eventually become self-supporting in order to institutionalize the principle of self-determination among black and Third World peoples.

Self-help, however, does not mean selfishness or exclusiveness. The story of Jesus' miraculous multiplication of the loaf and the fish is the guiding light of our mission.<sup>29</sup> Time and time again, members of the OIC family are renewed by the returns from their shares in the business of developing human resources. The entire history of OIC has reaffirmed our faith in the miracle of sharing.

Like myself, many OIC staffers come from poor and working class backgrounds. We have risen above poverty because family members, teachers, and ministers have helped us to help ourselves. Now it is our turn to participate in the miracle of sharing.

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29. *Mark 6:34-44.*