

Community Union

A Year and A Half

by John Peterson

In recent years the people of Champaign - Urbana have witnessed the emergence of an exciting new form of community action and involvement. It consists of community people getting together to deal with problems that effect all of us.

Initial Consumers Union Leaflet
April 1972

This began what many originally considered to be one of the highest level organizing efforts undertaken in some time. As the name indicates, the Consumer's Union was an attempt at general community organizing. It was an outreach program sponsored by the alternative business community but consciously not limited to it. Its potential base resides in the white middle and working class and student groups. It would ignore the field of partisan politics on the structural level, but give support to issues bearing on the essential affairs of local residents. Organization was conceived around functioning research and service collectives. It therefore avoided the "talk to 'em" mass organizing of the sixties. In order for the union to be viable, the membership had to be actively committed. The union org-

actively committed. The union organizers, like many in the alternative collective economy, rejected the co-op mode of membership making demands on the core work force. They preferred that the Consumers Union be an energy center, pulling in those activities that were on-going, and by constructively interposing the creative processes, generating more efficient attempts at finding solutions to people's needs.

* * * PURPOSES * * *

The original brochure focussed on this general purpose and listed four areas of immediate concern: health, a community-based credit union, a research oriented newspaper and a central office. People volunteered to take responsibility in each area. General policy group meetings were held over the summer of 1971, to coordinate efforts and evaluate progress. But by the fall, the groups started to disintegrate. Much preparatory work had been done, but little had been finalized. Many of those who had been working were discouraged and drifted away. Since the office was not being staffed, no continuing organizing was possible. By the end of the year, only three or four people were working with it.

Those of us who continued to relate to it, decided that time had come to reevaluate the whole concept. We took a careful look at all of the major projects. The credit union had the bulk of the original 350 supporters. The Consumers Union idea originally came out of discussions of a community-based credit union. A group of twenty people met regularly for most of the summer, then submitted a hastily prepared and incomplete federal application. It was returned for clarification in September, in need of a substantial rewrite. The committee was rather bummed out by the experience, and left the revamping to those people deeply committed to other projects. There it sat.

The Fair Share newspaper started with almost another twenty people; published until November. It reported comparative price surveys, local news and cultural pieces. Distribution reached over a thousand at the final issue, which was probably its best. But a lack of voluntary support, especially writing, made its production a burden on all those active with it. The situation was not helped by a number of people bad-rapping the results without contributing materially to its growth. After several reorganizational efforts, the paper retired.

* * * HEALTH * * *

An alternate Health Insurance system was another motivating concept upon which the union was founded. Much of the research needed for the credit union tied into this effort. As the credit union bogged down, so did the insurance work. But the primary obstacle to immediate realization of the program was that the idea of basing insurance on a community basis, rather than work-situation, had never been approached in quite this manner. We aimed for the rates commonly accorded labor unions, but were only offered the substantially higher association plans. As we realized that private companies could not do an adequate job of supplying low-cost insurance to people who could not normally afford it, we were forced into initiating our own non-profit plan. That of course, presents some major difficulties.

The time period we have been covering is up to the end of December. A discussion of the office takes us into the current activities of the staff. Our original office was simply a room in the basement of Channing Murray. Attempts to staff it with a consumer information service and switchboard failed miserably. Minimal interest was shown the consumer research aspect of the Consumer Union, although it was there that its greatest outreach could potentially be felt. A couple of people kept the idea alive.

In January, a few of us got together and assessed the situation. To make the union go, two conditions had to be satisfied: 1) We needed an office that drew people to itself. Something had to be happening inside of it. 2) We needed a staff that could physically populate the office so that work could be pursued and someone would be "home" when a person wanted to reach us. Everyone working in the union was doing something else for a living. Somehow we had to find funding for at least one full-time coordinator. That meant money for both a salary and rent.

* * * OFFICE * * *

The union had enough money from its membership drive to sustain an office for several months. We got the office in January at 406 N. Lincoln, Urbana, with an additional two month's rent for moving out two large steam processing ovens. That was the easy part, we had four months in which to make it go.

We held the first general meeting since September in the empty office complex. Tenant Union had expressed willingness to function in an off-campus setting, and to occupy one of the four rooms. The switchboard took another. The possibility that a center was developing encouraged people to look again at starting up a newspaper. We contacted everyone we knew had ever worked at media before and sought out support. The newspaper would pay its staff and contribute to the rent payments. It would help to energize the building, but its information gathering and dissemination functions. We realized it should be organizationally distinct, but this

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would not preclude significant interaction among the groups working in the complex. The *Prairie Dispatch* resulted. New people continue to come into it, and it is growing into financial solvency. Although not many of the people are the same, the union and the paper have experienced much of the constructive interchange for which the Consumers Union was founded.

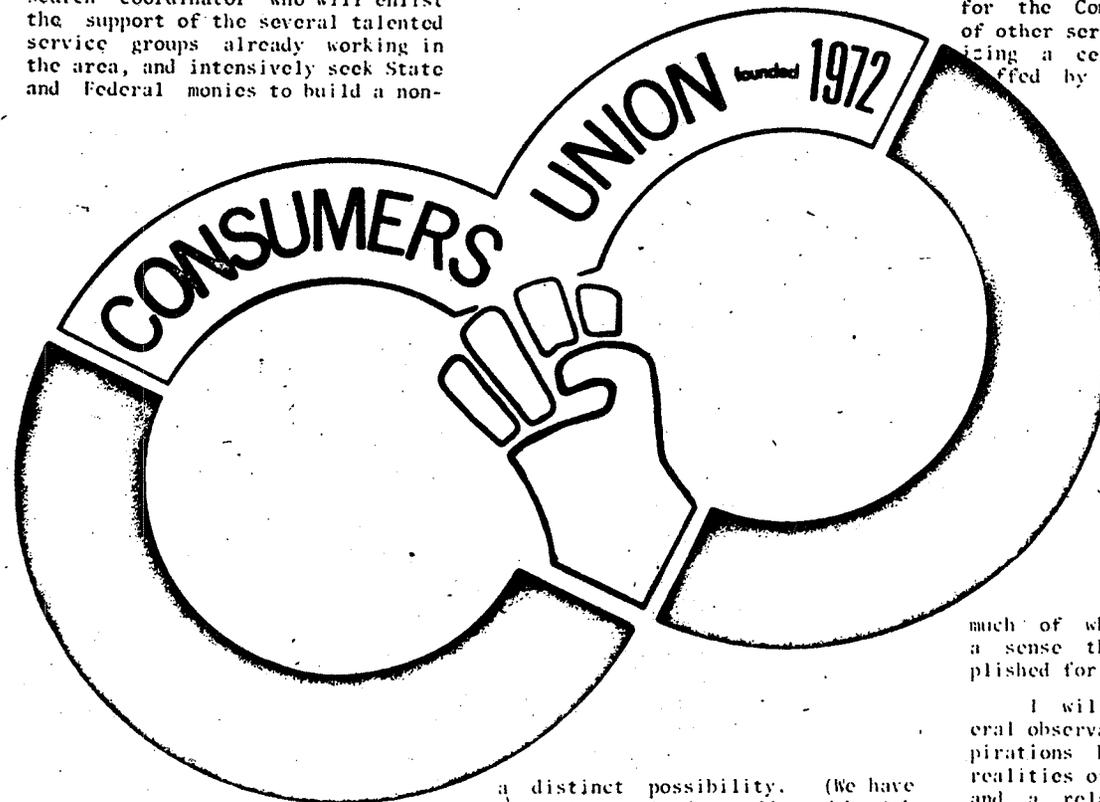
During this period of reassessment, we realized that the projects we felt capable of continuing, were not adequately described as simply "consumer affairs." We were about the business of building social services. This coupled with a terse letter from Consumers Union, International, publisher of *Consumer Reports*, resulted in the more accurate identification of *Community Union*. Fortunately we made that decision two days prior to painting the outside wall signs. Getting something done on time, was an indication for encouragement.

As the experience of the paper indicates, the initiative of a few individuals and some planning can make some projects go. The earlier efforts had no lack of enthusiasm, but were poorly carried out. When they met failure, the participants became disenchanted. This is a characteristic of inexperienced people doing difficult organizing requiring sustained initiative. The *Community Union* was conceived as and has proved to be an educational experience. It has also made a lot of contacts with social service groups over the past year. This is an important consideration when assessing its current initiatives.

* * * H M O * * *

Our efforts are concentrated on establishing a community-based and subscriber-controlled Health Main-

tenance Organization (HMO). We are seeking funding for a full-time research coordinator who will enlist the support of the several talented service groups already working in the area, and intensively seek State and Federal monies to build a non-



profit, self-sustaining health care facility. If successful, this will go much further than our health insurance idea, to open access to health care to those who cannot currently afford its high costs. The HMO will provide education in preventive medicine, reducing the wasteful emphasis on purely curative approaches. Monthly payments will be like insurance premiums, except that the subscriber will be entitled to full health care. Health is quickly developing as a political issue on the national level. This means that unlike many cutback programs, the purse strings are being untied and actual implementation is

a distinct possibility. (We have recently received an offer of health insurance in an association group for good rates by Will Leinicke, former staff member of Gemini House. That will be prepared for the next issue.)

The credit union and the switchboard suffer from the inability of these projects to field full-time workers; as will the health organizing if we are not funded. The credit union could easily be organized from the subscribership of a successful HMO. The switchboard remains in limbo. Associated services such as the cable television committee are being actively pursued on a week-to-week level. The resource center

being set up by the *Prairie Dispatch* collective in accordance with their needs, but with access privileges for the *Community Union*. A number of other service agencies are organizing a central referral telephone staffed by volunteers that will do

much of what we planned to do. In a sense then, that will be accomplished for us.

I will end with sort of a general observation. Our original aspirations have been tempered by the realities of no capital to work with and a relative lack of ability on most people's part to pursue difficult projects month after month. The process of establishing significant social services requires concentrated study and long-term commitment. I have stopped thinking that large numbers of people are willing to supply that kind of dedication. It is hard for me to accept that reality, but it is reality just the same. A lot of people seem to be waiting for something to come along, for something to happen. Concrete social progress is not a spectator sport. Getting that across is one of the liabilities of organizing with a and among individuals with origins in the middle class.

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