

A Conversation on Building People Power for Transformative Change

By RICARDO LEVINS MORALES AND MIKE MILLER

This conversation began when Mike Miller read Ricardo Levins Morales's essay, "Float like a Butterfly, Sting like a Bee" on organizing and movement building. Miller thought the essay offered an opportunity for a serious conversation between Alinsky-tradition organizers and critics "from the left" of that tradition. Of particular interest was a discussion of the role of "winnability" as a component of strategic organizing. He proposed a dialogue: what follows is the result. It echoes long-standing arguments within movements for social and economic justice that too often become polarized, caricatured extremes. The current exchange seeks to frame the discussion in a way that connects the practical dilemmas of organizing and movement building. Both authors agree on the importance of grassroots leadership to organizations and movements; on the need to organize in ways that contribute to long-term as well as short-term change; on the imperative to resist the twin temptations of isolation and co-optation; on the centrality of building people power as the only way to challenge the corporate and political powers that dominate our society and block the road to genuine democracy.



Ricardo Levins Morales: What's Missing in "Winnability."

Discussions on "winning" in organizing generally refer to two distinct applications of the idea. One addresses the need to have successes along the way in order

to maintain morale and demonstrate that people power can win. The other is about selecting campaigns where we stand a chance of prevailing. These have direct application to the choices that organizers and other activists face in the course of our work, expressed in questions about what victories, when we can get them, move us forward and which might undermine our future prospects. How do we set goals high enough to inspire excitement and deep commitment but not so high as to lead to disappointment and withdrawal? How can campaigns around reachable goals help move us toward those that are not yet within reach?

Too often this discussion plays out in monologues directed at caricatured positions rather than in engaged explorations of the complexities of struggle. Crudely stated, they purport to pit pragmatic organizers — ever ready to compromise long-term vision in the name of realism — against well-intentioned ideological purists who have great global analyses but who are woefully out of touch with the messy realities of the street and the brick-by-brick nature of building power. Mike Miller and I are attempting a different approach. We come from different experiences of organizing and movement building in which, like everyone engaged in this work, we have had to grapple with the challenges of building long-term power out of the materials of daily struggle. We leave it to you to find the complimentary and dissonant threads in our approaches.

I start with a paradox. The practice of organizing has advanced significantly over the last four decades. We have a capacity for leadership training, power mapping, communications, new technologies, polling, and base building that we could hardly have dreamed of when I came to activism. Over this same period economic and racial inequality have increased; anti-democratic military interventions continue; the public sector has been decimated; and growing numbers of people are entangled in two parallel systems of mass incarceration, one for the domestic poor of color and one for immigrants. The reach of corporations has surpassed

our paranoid visions in earlier times. What gives?

It would be accurate — but insufficient — to say that this negative shift in the balance of power is due to factors beyond our control. If these factors are hampering our peoples' efforts to improve their lives, then we had better learn to deal with them.

I think our problem is that we plant good seeds in bad soil. The increased capacity I alluded to above is all about planting and watering our seeds, the organizing initiatives and campaigns around which activism in the U.S. is structured. The soil — the political and social environment in which they must grow — has been systematically altered, poisoned I would say, by our corporate adversaries and their surrogates such that our plants have to struggle just to take root while theirs flourish and spread. The result is that when teachers face a contract dispute or parents demand a teen center, they do so in an atmosphere in which teachers are understood to be greedy and social programs to be a threat to liberty. To get a campaign off the ground we must often counter such assumptions even in our own ranks.

Our organizing habits are largely inherited from the last major wave of progressive mass movements, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. That was a time when our seeds took root more easily, and we took a more hospitable cultural atmosphere for granted. The small but determined right wing was up against a more hostile environment, so that changing the balance in the soil became its obsession and organizing principle. The tables have now turned, and we have yet to absorb the lesson.

"Preparing the soil" takes place at a number of levels, not least of which are on the shop floor and in community struggles. It entails learning to keep one eye on what we can win in the near term and one on "organizing forward" so that we prepare the conditions for future struggle. In a union contract campaign, for example, we may want to save jobs in the shipping department which is threatened by outsourcing. Management offers to drop the sale in exchange for a two-tier pay structure that will start new hires at a lower wage or for a benefit cut for retirees. Such a deal will save the jobs — for now — but it will undermine worker solidarity in the future. If the rank and file is thinking ahead, then we can fight to ensure that whatever we concede — perhaps in scheduling, cutting hours, or changing certain work rules — will leave worker unity intact.

Repeated wins that do not lead to tangible improvements can be as demoralizing as not winning at all. Our side suffers from a chronic fixation on achieving "gains" while the other side is focused on increasing and retaining power. This is a particular problem as the corporate sector employs more sophisticated strategies to remove all obstacles to profit-making. The health care bill should be a wakeup call. It was drafted with the help of insurance and pharma lobbyists who, having insured that their core interests were protected, spent \$86 million to defeat it. Each round of negotiations made it even more corporate-friendly. The final law guaranteed the insurance industry's place at the center of the system. We won some laudable "gains"

which the corporations, from their position of power, are in a good position to dismantle. The new congressional Republicans will bluster about repealing the law but will end up just attacking the remaining consumer protections.

Massive mobilizations of the left and right engaged in a furious and expensive battle over exactly how insurance industry dominance of health care should be implemented.

A similar game plan can be foreseen in regard to Wall Street "reform," oil industry regulation, post BP, and climate change. In each of these cases we will win "what's possible" while having little real impact on the dangers they pose.

The environment in which we plant our seeds increasingly determines what appears to be winnable, and what in fact is winnable. If we hope to achieve victories, large and small, in the future, we must learn to think in terms of a movement not a collection of campaigns, and to incorporate that larger landscape into our very concept of organizing.

The issues raised in this exchange represent only a part of the complexities encoded in the word "winnability," as Brother Miller and I have discovered in this process. It could take several more months of dialogue for us to clarify, even for ourselves, where our differences in emphasis reveal real disagreements and where they represent different routes that point to similar conclusions. More important, however, would be to open a space for other voices to join in a deeper and more generous discussion than has often been possible: one in which we get to test our experience against each other's and learn from one another other in the process. I certainly have done so in this one.



Mike Miller: Winnability

The question of winnability engenders a reaction from people who think of themselves as "more radical," or who use the formulation, relatively useless in the American context, "reform versus revolution." You cannot build

a powerful movement for transformative change, and the powerful organizations that are required to sustain such a movement, without victories along the way. The victories are essential to convince people of the efficacy of collective action and to sustain them in it; to invest their time, talent and money in such a movement; to see it as a vehicle to express deeply held values like democracy, freedom, equality, security, community, and justice; to understand it as a means to defend things most important to them — their personhood, families, friends, neighborhoods, work, and income. ▶

Defeat confirms skeptics at home who say, "See, I told you so, you can't fight city hall," or "You can't beat money." Victories allow initial participants to go home and tell their families, friends, co-congregants, fellow workers and neighbors, "Look what we did. We can do even more with more people."

Note that this addition, "we can do even more..." is central to the argument. Public interest lawyers won huge victories with class action lawsuits; single-issue campaigns achieved significant reforms; and electoral victories led to positive legislation, judicial appointments, and regulatory and other administrative results. However, unless organically connected with a people power movement they do not, in themselves, change the relations of power — and that is the centerpiece of what must be done to realize transformative change in the United States, by which I mean change that fundamentally addresses vast inequalities of income, wealth, and power, that truly democratizes social, economic, and political decision-making.

We can measure people power in several ways:

First, from what level of institutional decision-makers are our organizations capable of obtaining negotiations? There is a big difference between an administrative assistant and an elected politician, a public relations officer and a CEO, a community relations coordinator and an executive director. And there is an even bigger difference between marching someplace, picketing a building, or getting arrested and then seeing what the evening media coverage was of the event and actually meeting and negotiating with someone who can reach an agreement with you.

There is, of course, the danger of illusions. Labor succumbed to the illusion that it was a partner with corporate power until it was too late. Public employees may have succumbed to a similar illusion when they secured niches for their members in alliances with the beneficiaries of their services, without becoming partisans to fight to improve the quality, effectiveness, appropriateness, and efficiency of their members' work. Community organizers succumb to the illusion when they tell you, "We don't need to show large numbers in action anymore; now we're at the decision-making table."

Second, what are the proposals put on the negotiating table when we meet? There are essentially two. "More," as in the American Federation of Labor's Samuel Gompers's famous 1893 response to "What does labor want?"

Often unexamined is his elaboration: "We want more school-houses and less jails, more books and less arsenals, more learning and less vice, more leisure and less greed, more justice and less revenge; in fact, more opportunities to cultivate our better nature...." As long as great disparities in educational quality, job opportunities, wages, hours, and benefits, health care, decent, safe and sanitary housing, and others exist, the demand for "more" is an essential one.

Another kind of proposal has to do with decision-making prerogatives. Who decides what? The biggest victory won by San Francisco's Mission Coalition Organization (MCO) was control over the planning process for Model

Cities. Not only did MCO nominate two thirds of the members of the model cities planning body (final appointment was by the mayor), but it had the right to recall them as well. That meant that the school district, urban renewal authority, developers, private employers, and everyone else who wanted to receive federal funding via the Model Cities program had to have their idea approved by a body accountable to a people power organization. (How this power ultimately undid MCO is told in my book, *A Community Organizer's Tale*.) When longshoremen struck San Francisco's waterfront in 1934, their union wrested control of the hiring process from the employer, whose agents handpicked who went to work and demanded a kickback in exchange, and replaced it with a rotational dispatch hiring hall that distributed work equally and fairly and was run by the union. Do financial institutions unilaterally decide

who will and who will not get loans, at what interest rate, with what compensation to their own executives?

Do mega-corporations decide unilaterally what will be produced, where, by what processes, and for whom? (I assume readers of this do not have illusions about a "free market" answering these questions.) If the answer to these last questions is "no," then who also sits at the table along with investors' representatives? Workers? Consumers? Affected communities? Elected or appointed public officials? And maybe these enterprises are broken up so they cannot be "too big to fail," and maybe they are owned by those who work in them and/or consume their products or services.

Third, has the capacity of our democratically constituted people power organizations grown? At its simplest, this is a question of numbers. Do we have fewer or more members, whether individual or organizational?



pou'er, *n.* Ability to act or do; strength; capacity to produce a result; influence; ability to effect a change of state or relationship between objects or forces; effectiveness; capacity to assert one's will to achieve a desired outcome; might; result of multiplying a number by itself.

Do we have more leaders, and are their competencies and self-confidence increasing? Are we better at resolving conflicts among the broad constituencies we need to unite so that we are less susceptible to divide-and-conquer strategies applied against us? Are relationships of mutual trust and confidence among and between our leaders and members deepening, thus overcoming historic “isms” that divided us? Are we better able to connect specific struggles with a broad values framework rooted in the moral, economic, and social justice teachings of the world’s great religions and the democratic tradition? Are horizontal connections of our organizations with others in similar struggles expanding and deepening through exchanges, conferences, joint campaigns, and other means?

Saul Alinsky was impatient with people who thought the revolution was coming tomorrow, or, if not, then one had to remain pure and be its advocate. He warned shortly before his untimely death in 1972 that the militant tactics and “revolutionary” demands of the day were going to cause a reaction bigger than their action, that “counter-revolution” was a danger. His warning was not heeded.

We live now with the results.

Ricardo Levins-Morales

Mike quite rightly steers the discussion back to the nuts and bolts of organizing. My concluding notes will attempt to bring my concern with the larger balance of power into line with the practicalities of daily struggle.

To move our deepest dreams from the unwinnable column into the winnable, we need to begin fighting for them while they still seem out of reach. Organizing, on the other hand, requires setting goals that make sense to folks whose concerns are often practical and immediate. This is where a deliberately nurtured cultural infrastructure can play an important role. If the cultural environment reflects only rightist assumptions, then the political imagination of our rank and file will naturally be constrained. If that environment reflects our own stories, the experiences of other communities in struggle, and a vision of the commonality of our issues, it makes a wider range of possibilities seem natural.

One reason we focus on immediate victories is because our battered communities need to re-learn that winning is even conceivable. This need is less in places with strong movement cultures, where past victories are retained in the collective memory. Where the UMW has had an active presence for a hundred years, the possibility of victory does not seem farfetched.

To suggest that “winning” is too narrow a formulation is not to dismiss the question that it is meant to answer. Winning is a sharp but double-edged sword. Encouragement can have other sources than concessions wrung from an opponent. The defeated Puerto Rican general strike against privatizing telephone service left people energized and ready for the next battle.

We can no longer expect our organizing seeds to grow unless we take up the fight to cultivate the soil, a lesson which the corporate right has applied with devastating effect.

Mike Miller

Ricardo helps me in two places. (1) If material benefits realized in a claimed “victory” also strengthen concentrated corporate power, there is something amiss in how we measure our gains. Community organizing has to have an organizational goal of creating sufficient people power to break the corporate stranglehold on democratic life. (2) He emphasizes the values framework that must root specific campaigns in a long-term prospect for democratizing American civic and political life.

A story that could be real: the Latino and African-American parents at Franklin Elementary School joined together to obtain the dismissal of racist vice-principal Malcolm Muggeridge and the introduction of a new multi-ethnic/racial curriculum. His transfer and re-training, with parent review, are “fallbacks.” An unacceptable compromise would be curriculum reform that addressed African-American and Anglo relations but excluded other minorities. This would be a defeat; it would divide and weaken rather than create a platform for further building. The school also needs dramatically lower class-size, physical rehabilitation, and quality improvement in cafeteria lunches.

There is greater likelihood the parents would participate in the lengthier battles on class size, physical structure, and food services if they won the Muggeridge issue and saw from their own experience the efficacy of collective action. They might then join in a parent-alliance that included a significant number of the district’s schools, then join in a multi-issue on-going people power organization. But if we failed to listen to what was important to them at their local school and did not build trusting relationships with them at the outset, we would not be able to raise these more difficult prospects and engage them in “next steps” and intermediary victories that then open the door to the fundamental changes that might be required to, for example, bring class size down to fifteen and radically change curriculum.

Ricardo Levins-Morales & Mike Miller: An Invitation

As we hope is clear, we do not consider the conversation over, let alone closed, by this exchange. We hope others will weigh in. We hope also that they will do so “constructively” — that is, in a way that acknowledges the terrain is difficult, its contours still to be fully explored, and none has the perfect plow to break open this resistant and rocky soil of American politics.

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