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Community Organization Vision and the Electoral Tactic

Mike Miller

THE PURPOSE of this article is to outline a vision of community organizing and organization in the United States and relate that vision to the dangers and opportunities of participation in electoral politics.

Since many people use the term "community organization" with many meanings it is necessary to begin with a definition and to note that most, if not all, community organizations are not interested in being a "community organization" as defined here. A community organization is one that can legitimately speak for the constituency it represents and can, if challenged, demonstrate that it does so. The best example of a narrowly based community organization is the National Rifle Association (NRA). Mess with them on gun control and you are assured of a constituency that can be delivered against you. The best example of a broad-based community organization is Poland's *Solidarity*, which functioned as labor union, community organization, and social movement.

It is with some hesitation that the analogy to Poland and *Solidarity* is used. Polish nationalism is unifying; there is no counterpart in the United States. A one-party state dominated by a historic enemy ran Poland at the time of *Solidarity's* spectacular growth. Two parties and smaller rivals vie for power here, even though at times the programs of the major parties are almost indistinguishable. Despite these difficulties, and with apologies to those who know Poland and *Solidarity* better than I, the analogy is used because of the vision it provokes and because of the clear fact that *Solidarity* did organize a tremendous number of people in an autonomous and voluntary organization that functions to represent

the values and interests of the vast majority of the people of its constituency—which, in its case, was the vast majority of the people of Poland.

Our interest in this discussion is with broad-based community organizations. They are multi-issue, democratic in values and process, and committed to defending and advancing the interests of the vast majority of the people in their constituency. If successful, they would function in this country in a manner analogous to the way *Solidarity* functioned in Poland.

No community organizations in the United States now meet this standard. There are very few that come close. There are very few historically which came close. The question to be asked is, "How do we build such organizations in the United States?" Electoral activity is the most problematic means for the building of such organizations—for reasons soon to be explored.

Broad-based community organizing faces, as its first task, overcoming several great obstacles in the American people. First, most people are skeptical of the fruits of public activity: "you can't beat City Hall."

The saying is both true and not true. The odds are with the politicians and the bureaucrats. And there's lots of evidence to support the argument. Yet every community organizer who has developed a block club in a neighborhood knows that when a few neighbors get together they can get a stop sign, a burned-out house fixed up, torn down or boarded up, or abandoned cars towed away.

Second, there are tremendous divisions among the American people: race, culture, age, sex, region, occupation, income, social status. The majority is, in reality, many minorities. Their interests and values are best pursued when they act with unity while respecting their diversity. This theme of power in unity and unity in diversity is reflected throughout the history of labor and community organizing. It suggests, as the following examples will illustrate, that concrete experiences can overcome the divisions among the people.

- In San Francisco's Mission and Outer Mission districts youth-gang and senior leaders came together, supported each other on issues neither could win alone and jointly, in the case of the Mission, hammered out policy on police protection, harassment and brutality. Not only were age divisions present; the elderly were

overwhelmingly Irish and Italian and the youth were mostly Hispanic.

- In Mississippi white Klansmen took off their hoods and joined black workers when it became apparent to both that the boss was using race to keep them divided and separately oppressed.

- In the Mountain Plains (Montana, Wyoming, Idaho), Native Americans and Anglo ranchers, historically bitter foes, have been coming together to deal with the threat to each of their ways of life that is posed by energy development activities.

A PROBLEM of past efforts has been that unity frequently became a slogan for a dominant majority within an organization to challenge the legitimacy of such formations as minority caucuses. Today, women and minorities are not likely to let that happen again. Further, in community organizations different ethnic, racial, age, religious and other groups have their own institutional bases of power from which to negotiate their way into multi-constituency organizations.

A third obstacle is the weakness of citizenship skills and values in America. Even the minimal act of voting is not valued by the majority. The arts and skills of fraternal discussion and debate, of compromise, of organizing and running meetings and of negotiating with decision-makers are not widely shared; they are not taught in civics or political science courses. The idea of citizenship advocated here implies the ongoing involvement of large numbers of people in the discussions, debates and policy-making processes of the society. It suggests, contrary to the "democratic elitists," that the protection of democratic values lies in the wisdom of the people themselves. It argues that civil liberties and rights will best be preserved when the vast majority of the people use them in the conduct of civic affairs. Most American liberal democratic theory argues the opposite: civil liberties are safeguarded by elites and such insulated institutions as the judiciary. This theory is reflected in the practice of many labor and liberal leaders. Leaders take a program to the people; if the people support the program, they vote for the leaders who advocate it. The people, in this paradigm, don't have much to do between the elections. An exception is when the leaders call upon them to act. The result is a "we-they" relationship between the leaders and the led. Uninvolved in their own organizations, most people are suspicious of leadership and frequently distrust their own organizations. Little wonder, then,

that members frequently ask, "What's the organization going to do for me?" Or that even the best politicians view the electorate as a market whose concerns are to be sampled so that the politician can be attractively packaged and sold at election time. This approach tends to apply to the best as well as the worst of our current public leaders.

A curious irony results from this view. The majority of voters and members of most labor and other voluntary associations of low- to middle-income people expect at once too much and too little from their elected representatives. On the one hand they think that leaders can deliver on programs without serious mass struggles in which the base is actively involved. On the other hand, cynicism about leadership is so pervasive that when leaders fail it is considered par for the course. The irony is repeated by leaders who don't involve constituencies in struggles (whether at the negotiating table or in legislative bodies) and then wonder why the troops don't rally to the banner when they are needed.

The image of a democratic society as a marketplace of buyers (voters/members) and sellers (politicians, leaders, parties and platforms) should be challenged. Citizens ought to be active, not reactive. They ought to formulate as well as respond to options. Educational institutions as well as voluntary associations ought to be places where people gain the competencies, develop the attitudes, and learn the values associated with the idea of citizenship as an ongoing right and responsibility requiring continuous participation. Community organizations should foster this view and these practices.

THE CLEAR EXPERIENCE of community and labor organizing over the past fifty years is that these obstacles among the people are most likely to be overcome by the pursuit of two basic strategies: negotiation with institutional decision-makers and through the use of self-help activities. Negotiations with decision-makers need to be about problems that are immediate and specific in the experience of a constituency and over proposed solutions that are immediate, specific, winnable and non-divisive. An emerging community organization creates a "win-win" situation. If agreement is reached in negotiations, there is a win. If the decision-maker won't meet or won't agree, there is a fight that can be won with a short campaign.

Self-help activities lack external adversaries, but they must have the characteristic of dealing with an immediate problem in a specific, achievable way. Getting a stop sign at a dangerous intersection is the classic example of adversary relations—the community vs. City Hall; setting up a food-buying club exemplifies the nonadversarial self-help approach. In either case, these activities help develop relations among people, build confidence and increase skills. This is how organization begins to be built. The possibility for changes in the relations of power emerges. Such action, whether of the negotiation and direct action or the self-help variety, provides the material for reflection on values. Lessons can be learned about "how the power structure works," "people have power when they organize," "in unity there is strength." Values are deepened: what is the meaning of "one man, one vote" when elections cost hundreds of thousands (or millions) of dollars and a few people contribute most of the money—and they represent large corporations? What is the relationship of greed to justice when landlords in Knoxville evict long-term tenants so they can make a quick buck on the World's Fair? Here a consciousness of values and action is fostered and deepened. There is a values war going on in America today: elitism vs. democracy, greed vs. human rights, selfishness vs. community. Skills, too, are taught in this process: negotiating, organizing and "actions" (pickets, boycotts, strikes), researching an issue and deciding on a tactic.

The organization that patiently engages in this process is likely to grow. Without too many mistakes, in three to five years it will be able to speak for a broad base of people on a multiplicity of issues. Further, the majority of the people will view the democratic processes of the organization as a forum in which to resolve their differences. They will have come to this conclusion as a result of several kinds of experiences: first, the pursuit of their own particular interests is enhanced as a result of their membership in the broad-based organization. Second, the pursuit of broadly shared goals and values is similarly enhanced; third, stereotypes based on the "isms" (sexism, ageism, racism) fade away as prejudices of the past when concrete experiences and relationships with people who are "different" challenge the stereotypes.

Another illustrative story is in order. Race was a critical issue in organizing mineworkers in the Mid-South. An old-timer told how he dealt with white racism at Peabody Coal Company:

White worker: "Ain't you the union lets the niggers in?"
 Organizer (pointing to a black worker): "See that fellah over there?"
 White worker: "Yeh, so what?"
 Organizer: "Who's he workin' for?"
 White worker: "Peabody."
 Organizer: "Who you workin' for?"
 White worker: "Peabody."
 Organizer: "You think about it. I'll be back around and we'll talk some more."

FEW COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS in America have reached the point we're now talking about. A number are on the way. Solidarity, we should recall, shut the country down when three workers were arrested in one incident. The capacity for "average people" to make their horizons grow to encompass others is vast. Accounts of the CIO in the 1930s and the immediate post-World War II era give one a sense of what it might have been like. The Southern civil rights movement had this experience in some of the places in which it organized. So, too, in some places has the United Farm Workers Union. In Northern cities, an alphabet soup of Saul Alinsky-related organizations developed this success. As these organizations matured and developed power, all of them asked, "Can participation in the electoral process help us build our power to defend and advance the interests of the people we represent?"

Today there is a relatively widespread agreement among organizers that community organizations can be strengthened by inserting their key issues into the electoral process and forcing candidates to address these issues. The typical form for this activity is the candidates' accountability session.

Imagine a thousand citizens in an auditorium. They want "yes" or "no" answers to three critical questions which reflect three key issues. Candidates are paraded in front of the audience. The questions are presented; the answers are recorded, printed on a flyer and widely distributed in the community. Ten thousand new voters are registered. A massive "get out the vote" is organized. The candidates with the "right" stands on the issues win. The organization proceeds to ensure that the elected representatives vote as they promised. The issues were carefully studied and formulated so that the community organization's proposals for action were realistic. This form of electoral activity has been implemented with success.

• In Chicago's anti-crosstown-freeway fight, antagonistic ethnic and racial groups came together to defeat a freeway that would have destroyed their neighborhoods and eliminated many jobs. They needed each other to win and they came to know and respect each other in the fight. One of their tactics was an accountability agreement on the freeway. They asked all candidates for public office where they stood on the freeway. Those that favored the freeway or failed to answer (after warning) were listed as "opposed to the people." Those who opposed the freeway were "for the people." In the Walker-O'Gilvie race for governor, Walker opposed and O'Gilvie supported the freeway. A flyer with the positions was widely distributed in the corridor of the proposed freeway route. Walker subsequently attributed his electoral victory in the state to the corridor vote.

• Pulpwood cutters in Mississippi (a different group from the one earlier described) recently won passage of the "Mississippi Uniform Pulpwood Sealing and Practices Act," a law aimed at ending numerous exploitative practices in the relationship between the cutters and those who buy from them. According to the United Woodcutters Association, "Hundreds of woodcutters have made trips to the State Capitol, and approximately 3,000 people have attended 'legislative accountability nights' in more than 30 districts around the State."

THE RISKS to the participating organizations that used this approach were relatively small. No endorsement was given. Issues were identified; voters were informed, registered and "turned out" to vote. The organizations continued to work to enforce their victories. The risks can be expressed in these questions: (1) What if the opponent won? (2) What if the "good guy" won, then "double-crossed" the organization and people who supported him, but the organization wasn't strong enough to punish him next election? (3) Having backed a loser in a primary, what if your candidate did so poorly that a "lesser of two evils" nominee didn't even bother to court the vote your organization represents? (4) What if your candidate won, sold you out, but neutralized the organization by hiring or appointing some of your key leaders or giving them or the organization a government program grant of some kind?

An organization with a strong collective or team leadership at the top, with many secondary leaders and with an active rank and

file can resist sell-outs. It can use the problems associated with electoral participation to strengthen its own power and to educate its own rank and file. An organization without these prerequisites is likely to be weakened by electoral activity for a number of reasons: (1) It will become candidate- rather than issue-oriented and, associated with this, (2) it will see power in the elective office rather than in the organization of the people; (3) it will be unable to hold accountable those it helps elect; (4) it will not be at the negotiating table after a primary or general election because its contribution in the election wasn't significant enough to be counted.

A note on cooptation is in order at this time. In the campaigns to stop the crosstown freeway in Chicago and to win lifeline utility rates in California, successful candidates "coopted" the issues. They proceeded, when elected, to stop the freeway and implement lifeline rates. The cooptation is a victory if the organization claims it *and* can enforce it. No one in politics gives credit; it must be claimed. This fact, however, should not lead us to the conclusion that victory is defeat. It should only warn us that we cannot count on politicians to do our work for us—that is, to build our movement. They tend to be more interested in building their careers. And this, by the way, applies to those in third parties as well as Republicans and Democrats. It is, as a matter of fact, one of the ways we have of holding politicians accountable, and should not, therefore, be viewed as a negative. After all, they do have to run for reelection.

A related note is also now in order on the nature of the American political parties. The major parties are best understood as guilds or associations of professional politicians and those who support them. There is a division of labor between them. The politicians draw district lines, run for office, pass legislation and budgets, and provide patronage in the form of appointments, jobs and contracts. The supporters adopt platforms, operate the parties on a day-to-day basis and help elect the politicians. Sometimes the two disagree, particularly the issue-oriented volunteers and the votes-oriented professionals. The latter invariably win because they play much more seriously; their careers are at stake.

The parties are not mass organizations, nor is there much chance of turning them into such organizations. There is little accountability of candidates to the party apparatus, and almost no relationship between the apparatus and party "members." Indeed few regis-

tered Democrats or Republicans think of themselves as "members" of their respective parties. There is some degree of voter loyalty to party label, particularly on regional, racial/ethnic and union membership lines. There are one-party counties, districts, and even states. These facts suggest that an independent community organization should not be wed to one party or one candidate. Rather, it should use its power to get the best of the professionals elected, recognizing that the "pro" will only be as good as the people's power to hold him accountable. The exception to this proposition will be noted below.

ANOTHER KIND of cooptation should be noted. It was represented by the New Frontier and Great Society programs of the sixties. Its effect was to undermine the community organizations of that era in two ways. First, officially created and paid for citizen participation undermined autonomous and independent grassroots organizing efforts. Election to local poverty boards took the place of building and strengthening powerful organizations. Second, programs promised far more than they could deliver. Local leaders, as a result, became frontline administrators for inadequately conceived and/or funded efforts. These leaders traded a role of spokesperson for a constituency for that of service provider. One can hope that lessons were learned from that era. At the same time, a shrinking economic pie and Ronald Reagan make the likelihood of such options at least as remote as the 1984 elections.

The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) sought to become a mass organization in Mississippi. It was a complex organization made up of local black community organizations and Mississippi representatives of national civil rights organizations. The organizing force in it was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Its political arm was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). It operated "freedom schools" in black communities around the state. It supported co-ops, an effort to organize sharecroppers and tenant farmers, a black theater group, and other cultural activities. It provided a context, for a brief period, to organize poor Mississippi whites. There were many problems in COFO practice, but they are not the point here. The major point is that MFDP and the electoral process came to be the focus for black leadership in Mississippi.

It was the MFDP that challenged the "Regular" Democrats at the 1964 national party convention. It later became the organizing vehicle for many black candidacies for public office, some of which were successful. COFO is now dead; MFDP is, at best, a shell. While candidates have been elected the organizations have withered and died; so, too, did all the other programs. The power base has eroded. The emphasis on electing public officials without asking what would be built out of such elections is in part the reason for the decline of the Southern movement. The great tragedy of the Mississippi (and Southern) movement was that it put its best energies and talents into electoral politics. It got hooked on winning elections and forgot to ask continually about the relationship of winning elections to building a unified movement.

IN MY MIND'S EYE I can imagine a time when community organizations will be so strong, so deeply rooted and so confident that they will generate their own candidacies from their own ranks. To imagine that is not to see it on the horizon for 1982 or even 1984. Imagine, however, the earlier described organization which, after a couple of years of accountability sessions, is now five years older. It is the annual convention of the organization. Seven thousand delegates are gathered to determine the direction of the community for the next year. The delegates come from religious, labor, youth, senior, minority, women's, neighborhood, small business, social, fraternal, and athletic organizations. Every facet of community life is represented. The agenda of the meeting includes reports from the self-help division, including a community credit union, a co-op food store, tutorials in numerous neighborhood facilities, and housing co-ops numbering two thousand units. A tenant union reports on four thousand units that are governed by landlord-tenant negotiated agreements. A parent union reports on its efforts to improve reading scores in the schools and describes a successful campaign recently undertaken jointly with the Teachers Union. Labor reports on recent investments of pension funds that will benefit community life and asks for community support for two new organizing drives among unorganized workers. The honorary co-chairs of the convention are the heads of numerous religious denominations and the secretary-treasurer of the local labor council. Delegates are being named to the state and national federations of which the community organization is an affiliate. And on the agenda is the nomination of candidates to elective office in those

situations where there is no professional willing and able to carry the program of the organization. It is understood by all that the outcome of this nomination will determine the outcome of the general election because the delegates attending this convention truly represent the vast majority of the people of the political district or districts being contested. The nominee(s) understand their role as one of representing the organized people of the districts in the area. They will "stand," not "run," for election. Their platform will be that adopted in today's convention. There will be no need for massive expenditures of funds for media; the community organization is linked to the majority of the electorate by a vast network of its own formal and informal means of communication. One of the things created by the organization has been the kind of community in which face-to-face relationships and networks of local leadership replace the mass media as the primary sources of information on important issues.

Note, to return to Solidarity, that when the Communist Party in Poland opened up the electoral process, Solidarity declined the invitation to play by the party's new rules. At the same time, Solidarity continued to build. Demands for better treatment gave way to the slogan "Nothing about us without us." It was clearly understood that the power of the Polish workers would be built through the development of their own organization, not through efforts to take over someone else's.

The discussion thus far should not be interpreted as an anti-third-party argument. In Lowndes County, Alabama, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee organized a third party that was very powerful for a brief period of time. So, too, did La Raza Unida organize powerful third-party units in Texas. In both cases, however, the electoral activity was strategic rather than tactical. The election of a majority to a local political body was viewed as the way to build a powerful movement for social change. The strategy was mistaken. Electoral victory led to organizational defeat. Indeed locally elected officials frequently take the blame for the inadequacies of state and national programs. Similarly they can be the fall guys with a local electorate for decisions by corporations to shut plants down or not move to a local community.

The task ahead in America today is to build our Solidarity. It will be shaped independently of the political parties—whether the major or minor ones. It will use negotiation and confrontation

with dominant institutions, self-help, autonomous cultural celebration, formal education and electoral participation as the means to build its power and to begin to solve the problems facing the vast majority of the American people. It will involve unions, religious congregations and other independent organizations in developing its power. It will be shaped by them and will, in turn, provide a forum that helps strengthen them. Out of the democratic process within it will come a program for a society that more closely approximates the ideals of our revolutionary heritage. Electoral participation, endorsement, candidacies or accountability sessions, whether in a third party or the present two or both, will be a tactical question to be addressed along the road. Nothing more and nothing less.

Letters

Will We Need Experts and Markets in Classless Societies?

I'd like to make some comments about the Carmen Sirianni article in SR 59 on building a classless society. Following that I'd also like to say a few words on the statements from the Directions for Action outline from Poland's Solidarity union movement.

Briefly, while I agree with Sirianni's warning on the dangers of restricting life-choices by emphasizing productive integrity models of human labor forms to the detriment of Renaissance Man models—common sense tells us that most people, even so-called "geniuses," are happy to settle into one particular area of concern and stick with it until "complete fulfillment" is achieved and the need to change is felt. In many cases—if the direction of life work is satisfying enough—no change is needed. Further, he completely omits the key to all life choices in any type of society and that is education. In a utopian society presumably people are from an early age given every chance to experience much direct knowledge of what that society has to offer in terms of social roles; and according to the individual's own inclinations and abilities he or she will gravitate toward that activity which most suits the individual's proclivities. To assume that everyone will or should feel trapped by a particular work form ignores the possibility, indeed necessity, that a classless society will give all of its citizens the opportunity to explore their own potentialities to the fullest from childhood to the end of their lives. To do less would indeed trap the citizen. I might also add that his emphasis on the shortness of life and the tyranny of time is a function of his Western philosophical outlook. There are other ways in which to deal with this age-old "problem" than by insisting on dragging bureaucracies with us into the classless future because time demands that we must always have "experts" around. (Since momentous decisions can only be made immediately.) I find the notion of political expertise somehow divorced from common-sense decision-making ability, which any one can possess, very disheartening, for the simple reason that it institutionalizes decision making. It separates the people from the tools of political power. Having technical expertise no matter what field