

Unions, Community Organizing, Social Issues and Electoral Politics

by Mike Miller

Mike Miller is editor of Social Policy and has forty-five years of experience in the matters addressed in this editorial essay.

What do the election results mean? Bill Moyers, Lyndon Johnson's media man, is on target: "It is," he says, "a heady time in Washington...for piety, profits, and military power, all joined at the hip by ideology and money...(T)he money...came pouring into...both parties, from corporate America and others who expect the payback. Republicans out-raised Democrats by \$184 million dollars. And came up with...monopoly control of the American government, and the power of the state to turn their ideology into the law of the land..."

Moyers again: "Way back in the 1950's..., Republicans briefly controlled the White House and Congress. With the exception of Joseph McCarthy and his vicious ilk, they were a reasonable lot, presided over by that giant war hero, Dwight Eisenhower, who was conservative by temperament and moderate in the use of power. That brand of Republican is gone. And for the first time in the memory of anyone alive, the entire federal government...is united behind a right-wing agenda for which George W. Bush believes he now has a mandate."

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?

For those who think "it doesn't make a difference, whoever's in you have to hold them accountable" or "they're both the parties of big business" (both of which may be true, but beside the point), watch what happens in the issue areas affecting the lives of unemployed, working and middle-class and discriminated-against people, and what happens to the First

Amendment—on which community and labor organizations and social movements rely for almost every form of mass expression of opinion that is in their tactical repertoire.

It is also true that on major issues of deep concern to the majority of Americans—decent income and jobs, environment, health security, affordable housing, government that works for people, excellent public services, corporate rip-offs, tax justice (progressive taxes) and corruption to name some—Democrats nominated by their Party were for the most part only marginally distinct from Republicans; yet it is on these issues that an electoral majority can be built.

Illustrative of the Repucrat problem is this: *[S]aid [Gray] Davis spokesman Russ Lopez [about the Governor's opposition to business penalties in a law to protect immigrants], the governor didn't believe this was the time nor the environment to apply more pressure on California businesses...At this point in time, we cannot do anything...to hinder business in California.* (San Francisco Chronicle, December 30, 2002)

Some centrist Democrats claim "we paid too much attention to race." Quite the contrary: not enough attention was paid in the 1954-1968 period when equality of opportunity and compensatory justice could have been achieved if they were vigorously pursued. During Johnson's Administration, Labor Secretary Willard Wirtz proposed a full-employment program; the President rejected it as too expensive. "Citizen participation" in woefully under-funded programs like the war on poverty became the substitute. The Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act was adopted, but it languished as a

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toothless tiger because Congress didn't appropriate funds to give it bite.

Should the Democrats be blamed for the absence of a significant alternative? I think not. We should look at ourselves — the labor movement, community organizing and other social movements concerned with equality and justice. Each group has made a strategic error in its relationship to electoral politics and building electoral majorities.

LABOR'S ROLE

In his election post-mortem, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney said, "the Democrats needed to be crystal clear about what they stand for, and to present an alternative vision to the country that creates excitement among disenfranchised voters and inspires hope..." Where is the inspiring vision of the AFL-CIO, and why must it wait for the Democrats to present one? On several counts labor failed to move an agenda that could inspire, energize and motivate volunteer campaign workers and voters.

In the same post-mortem, Sweeney continued, "we're going to lead an economic, working families agenda. We're going to drive a program of legislation and politics that's rooted in what matters most to working people. Good jobs. Health care. Retirement security. We're not going to wait for either party. We're going to...insist that officials who are elected to represent America's working families follow this program." The strategy is a good one; it wasn't applied in the last election.

Labor's agenda remains too narrow. In Pacifica (pop. 40,000), CA (*Social Policy's* home town), a local ballot measure proposed to approve a large developer's agenda on an 80 acre vacant site. The San Mateo Labor Council exacted job agreements —use of union labor and exclusion of anti-union commercial developments—from Trammel Crow, the site developer. Based on that commitment, labor endorsed Proposition "E." It was defeated two-to-one, despite the fact that its opponents were outspent 50:1! Many

of the people active in the "No-on-E" campaign were trade unionist members of the San Mateo Labor Council. Here's how one of them views what happened:

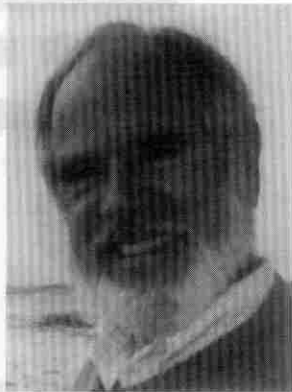
I was disappointed by the lack of investigation and understanding of the issues by the union leadership. When I'd ask what they knew I would invariably find their information came from Trammel Crow. I am very supportive of Unions partnering with Management for the betterment of all rather than the strictly adversarial roles of the past but critical investigation and due diligence are essential. I don't think they did their homework.

I received at least four Union-generated flyers and two phone calls in support of E, each contained some false information. There is a credibility issue here. If we are to support our unions then we must trust them. That trust was eroded in Pacifica.

At the beginning of the City Council campaign it became apparent that Measure E would be a litmus test for union endorsement. As a result three candidates were eliminated from consideration. They were likely among the most ardent union supporters running! And they beat the socks off two of the union-endorsed incumbents. If this didn't get COPE's attention I don't know what will!

Tim Williams, Member, Carpenters Local 217, San Mateo County; past Member, Pacifica Planning Commission.

Labor should align with bona fide community organizations that represent real constituencies and develop with them a broader agenda for its political endorsements. From that alignment can come other issues of concern to working families: quality education, child care, public transportation systems, affordable housing, neighborhood revitalization and more. If labor and community organizations developed such a vision, the question would be which candidates endorse that vision rather than which candidates



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labor endorses. But there's a price: construction unions, for example, have to demand more from development plans than union jobs; service (hotel, department store, etc) unions have to do the same. The price goes up: whatever big developers think will maximize profits isn't enough. An alliance with small business and neighborhood associations could lead to development plans that preserve neighborhoods and their local businesses. An alliance of building trades and environmentalists could lead to construction of light rail systems, resurfacing local streets, creating bike routes and a multitude of other union job opportunities for which there isn't an immediate for-profit big developer available. A similar alliance with neighborhood groups could lead to major rehabilitation of neighborhoods. A majority constituency for neighborhood preservation and environmental sanity could be developed.

PUBLIC SECTOR UNIONS

Too often, public agencies humiliate their presumed beneficiaries. Public employee unions should assert a role in determining the quality, appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of services their members deliver. Public services are systematically under-funded; government is then blamed for their inadequacies. Public employees generally want to do a good job, but communities don't know that. The recipients of various services deal face-to-face with front line workers, and blame them when there's a problem with the service.

Public employee unions point the finger at under-funding or bureaucratic incompetence, but fail to create effective partnerships with community groups whose members have as big a stake in the services as the workers who provide them: transit riders, students and parents, health service patients, players in public parks, applicants for driver's licenses, recipients of welfare, and others. Either in specific interest organizations (tenant unions, parent associations, athletic clubs to name a few) or more general organizations (neighborhood associa-

tions, religious congregations, broadly-based multi-issue organizations) there are opportunities for between-election alliances to jointly define an agenda to improve quality in these services. From between-election efforts a platform for reform will inevitably emerge. It is against such platforms that candidates for office can be measured, and from these campaigns that new candidates can emerge. Instead of doing the hard work of this kind of people-politics, public employee unions spend large sums of money on media-campaigns to "educate" the public; the campaigns don't work because they can't reverse negative face-to-face experiences of users of the services. You can explain why a public worker is discourteous till you're blue in the face; in the absence of relationships of mutual trust and efforts to bring change, the defining experience for users of public services remains one of discourtesy.

LABOR IN NEIGHBORHOODS

Unions could create organizations open to trade unionists living in a neighborhood or town. The unit of membership could be families, not just the union member him or herself. These groups could have year-round agendas of action on matters affecting the lives of the people in the neighborhood. This agenda could be part what determines whether candidates are endorsed or, if not endorsed, given visibility for the stands they take on issues (called "near-endorsement"). Locals with large concentrations of members in a particular district or neighborhood could take the lead in forming such a group, assigning staff to work with it. A Firefighters local might be "lead local" in one area, while Airport Mechanics would be in another.

Efforts in this direction have been routinely undermined when COPE endorses candidates with whom their own members have had bad experiences on non-workplace working families issues. The fear that such neighborhood groups can be "captured" by activists who are out of touch with rank-and-file sentiment is legitimate; it can be answered by having

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lead locals playing key roles in each such group and by having annual or bi-annual large membership meetings to adopt platforms and elect labor's neighborhood leaders. But if labor's official structures either cripple or undermine labor's own neighborhood groups, these will cease to meaningfully exist.

Of necessity, unions are restructuring themselves to more effectively negotiate with larger, sometimes conglomerate, employers. This often means creating larger units—locals or councils that encompass multiple counties or even cross state lines. The danger is that member participation will be further limited by the very nature of such locals. Neighborhood units can help counteract such alienation.

LABOR AT THE WORKPLACE

Unions need a significant presence at the worksite both to more fully engage workers in the life of the union and to make meaningful alliances with bona fide community groups possible. For the most part, community groups rely on management for an understanding of how a business or public service works, and how it can be changed.

To reform a particular school, parents typically go to a principal; to reform school districts, they go to school superintendents and boards of education. Rarely do they go to union building representatives or the teachers union in their school district. Yet those who have most at stake beside students and parents are teachers. On the significant issue of the quality of children's education, shouldn't parents look to teacher unions for information, commitment to quality and alliances for change? They usually don't. They won't unless teacher unions broaden their agenda to include the quality of their members' work.

To determine alternative service or production capabilities in a privately owned enterprise, workers and communities rely on management and owners for a determination of what is profitable. Where do

unions and communities do the research that could develop alternative plans for economic development based on an intimate knowledge of the capacities of enterprises and the interests of communities? To do such research requires a union presence that now doesn't exist. For the most part, unions would rather react — saying "no, you can't do that to our members," rather than be pro-active — saying, "here's an alternative plan that could work." In a few instances, such plans have been developed and partnerships of community organizations, unions and local government saved good union jobs and kept or started an enterprise for which there was a market. Unions have to develop competencies they now lack. That, in turn, means continuous struggle over so-called "management prerogatives", particularly on issues that affect both communities and workers -- such as disinvestment and production decisions. Finally, an onsite presence of union-organized units of workers is required if workers are to assume responsibilities for what management once asserted as its sole prerogative.

Both at the workplace and in electoral politics, for labor leaders to gain more power (which they should) they are going to have to give up some control over the internal life of their unions. "Turning out the troops" may sound nice but the members of unions can't be turned on and off. If labor is to achieve real power for working people at work and in their communities, union members must be co-creators of their organizations, rather than consumers of their services and relatively passive beneficiaries of their advocacy.

There are potential problems in this strategy as well. A union that is too closely identified with a product or service can be coopted by management or blamed by customers for quality problems. But the solution isn't to withdraw from the arena. Rather, it is to engage those community organizations in which the customers are members and bring them to the table. On questions of direct importance to communities and customers, such as research, development, investment, qual-

ity and business site selection, the customer and community should see labor as their ally. The specific forms for such alliances have yet to be designed and there are important questions of jurisdiction associated with them when conditions of work and quality of product or service can be in tension with one another. But the design of these forms and the resolution of these tensions shouldn't, by default, be left to private managers who serve the bottom line of profit maximization or public managers who serve and are accountable to elected politicians.

Without an effective labor movement, it is unlikely that a bold, democratic, egalitarian and just vision for America will be constructed. Community organizations are increasingly recognizing that their logical partners in action are unions, but they are frustrated by common experiences with unions. These include:

- responding to crises rather than planning ahead and taking the initiative;
- unwillingness to trade their first-name-phone-call access relationship with elected officials for influence gained through public accountability with hundreds if not thousands of citizens involved, and;
- turning their volunteers and money over to politicians rather than develop an increasingly powerful and independent political capacity that builds and increases competency and self-confidence with each election in which it is active.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

Community organizations should re-examine some of their own policies and practices as well. A form of organization could be created in which organizations come together on the basis of their real strength in precincts and define multi-issue platforms against which they measure candidates for public office. Partial steps in this direction are now taking place. In large public meetings candidates are asked "where do you stand on the 'people's platform'?" Their replies

become the basis of "near-endorsements": voters are told where the candidates stand on the issues and left to decide for themselves who to vote for. If the platform is a majority constituency platform — which requires that it be multi-issue — this approach could persuade a majority of voters.

Such platforms could be adopted in meetings at the electoral district level (assembly, congressional, council, board of education, etc.) attended by thousands of people. Voting strength in these meetings could be based on what organizations can deliver in votes at specific precincts for which they take responsibility. This means that public interest and community-based nonprofit organizations whose boards of directors are typically nominated and elected internally and which are funded externally by foundations or government will have to take responsibility for grassroots work if they want to have their point of view on an issue taken seriously by the community.

There is no place in America where every precinct has a precinct committee that is connected with a broad-based community organization. Until that is the case, there is plenty of room for all organizations — however much they might otherwise be rivals. This means that the tendency toward sectarianism that now characterizes the community organizing movement ("we're the only ones who really know how to organize") will have to give way to a spirit of ecumenism — not pablum, "can't we all like each other and work together?" but a tough-minded "how many votes do you bring to the table?" approach. An organization that takes responsibility for 300 precincts should have as many as 299 more delegates than one that takes a single precinct. And the results are measurable: look at precinct records to determine registration, turnout and voter choices. These results could determine the number of delegates the organization would have at a next bi-annual near-endorsement community congress.

Imagine a city of 500,000 people.

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Planning for a community-union electoral alliance congress would begin two years before the next election. Months of building relationships, sharing stories, clarifying core values and understanding each other's interests would precede the work of hammering out a platform against which incumbents' records would be measured; candidates would be asked to endorse the "people's platform" and ranked according to their responses. The alliance's platform convention would be attended by 10,000 delegates, representing a wide range of organizations and interests. Delegates and their organizations would agree to be bound by the outcome of the platform adoption process. The congress would take place just after Labor Day for a November election. All of the delegates would be registered voters. Together with their families, friends and close associates, 50,000 votes would already be represented in the congress' auditorium. Their outreach in precincts could deliver another 100,000 votes. The election's outcome would be determined before the politicians moved their campaigns into high gear.

Such people-based politics barely exists in America today. One-to-one meetings, small house meetings and neighborhood and workplace gatherings would take place during the preceding summer and lay the basis for the congress. These would provide the "input" to create a platform. Radio, TV, direct mail, internal newsletters and flyers and other media could be used to strengthen a people-based politics. The continuing nature of the community congress -- meeting every two years -- would hold politicians accountable. This approach would replace the politics of polls, focus groups and narrowly targeted interest group mailings -- each of which allows candidates to say what they think voters want to hear and then do what they think they have to do to raise the money for TV, radio and direct mail expenses. We cannot blame politicians for doing what they think they have to do to get elected. Without a peoples' politics built by peoples' organizations, we will continue to deserve the politicians we get.

THE "SOCIAL ISSUES"

To fill the picture out, single-issue and constituency groups have to moderate their demands if they cannot persuade their co-workers and neighbors to fully support them. "Principled" stands on deeply divisive issues may play well at home, but they are ultimately self-defeating because they contribute to electing people whose views are far more adverse to these groups than the "lesser of the two evils." In some measure the political right has been the beneficiary of unrealistic demands made upon candidates for public office by groups with relatively narrow bases of support in the electoral districts in which the demands are made.

Is this possible? Can bridges be built across deeply divisive lines? I asked an evangelical denominational worker, former pastor in New England and a leader in an ecumenical congregation-based community organization--and a good friend--what he could support on one of the major "social issues."

"I believe," he told me, "the Bible teaches that the gay life style is immoral. For this reason, I don't agree with gay marriage, gay ordination or extending benefits to gay couples -- all of these in one way or another sanction the gay life style. At the same time, gays are human beings and therefore deserve to be treated with the dignity of all human beings. Furthermore, in a democracy they shouldn't be discriminated against in employment, housing, education or other areas of civic life. A major commitment of government funds should be made to AIDS research, education and prevention."

In saying these things, my Evangelical friend has come quite a way from the public positions of his faith perspective. His spirit needs to be emulated by others who have strong moral convictions that aren't shared by large numbers of people who could and should be their allies on a wide range of other concerns, and who would argue for tolerance and basic human rights in relation to any specific group, whether it be gays or anyone else.

**STOP NEAR-AUTOMATIC
ENDORSEMENTS OF POLITICIANS:
THEY LISTEN BETTER THAT WAY**

Labor, liberals and progressives almost instinctively support Democrats and social conservatives do the same with Republicans, even when many other of their interests and values are better served elsewhere. There are times when neutrality, dual endorsement or support of a third party candidate may be the strategic thing to do. A few examples are illustrative: in corrupt Democratic Party machine-ridden cities, it is frequently Republicans who are the reformers. In Lowndes County, Alabama, in 1966, it was a third party, The Lowndes County Freedom Organization, that was the vehicle for the civil rights movement. In some recent city council elections, it has been the Greens.

"Should we vote for (fill in the blank)?" is the minor question -- a consumer's question in which we, the people, argue about which product (candidate) we should buy. The major question is, "How do we" -- however you think of 'us' -- "create something that can begin to define the nation's political agenda in a way that moves us toward peace, freedom, environmental sanity, equality, solidarity/community and justice?"

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The fundamental question is this, "Can we hammer out a lowest significant common denominator understanding that will allow us to slow, halt and reverse the continuing drift to a security state, growing concentration of wealth and power that already makes a mockery of any meaningful understanding of democracy, now-rapid erosion of basic Constitutional freedoms, and the threat of new polarizations based on suspicion of 'The Other'?" †

RELATIONSHIPS: A STORY

by Mike Miller

Can ongoing (not ad hoc) alliances be made between public employees, their unions and public service beneficiaries and their organizations? I know they can: this 1970 story illustrates how.

Tension between teacher unions and the black community was high in 1970; the nationally-known Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict over "community control" was only two years old. In San Francisco's Mission District, the AFT Teacher Union local and the Potrero Hill Public Housing Tenant Association (PHTA) were members of the multi-issue Mission Coalition Organization (MCO).

MCO's Housing Committee was led by an AFT-member; several of the AFT's members were involved in pro-tenant, neighborhood stabilization efforts. The Housing Committee was involved with and supporting the PHTA in a struggle it was having with the infamous, and corrupt, S.F. Housing Authority.

The MCO was also supporting the AFT local on an issue at Potrero Hill Middle School. A tense meeting at the school auditorium pitted angry black parents against the MCO and AFT. The AFT member who also led MCO's Housing Committee spoke. A black woman got up and attacked her and her point of view. Then, mid-sentence, she hesitated and interrupted herself.

"Ain't you the lady that supported the Tenant Association?"

"Yes," replied the AFT spokesperson.

"Well, you couldn't be all that bad then. We have to talk."

Outside the auditorium, the two caucused; they returned a few minutes later. The black woman, a parent, as well as a PHTA leader, rose and spoke:

"We're goin' to adjourn this meeting cause we've got to talk with the teachers."

Subsequent meetings developed a common program for school improvement--and a teacher-parent alliance. †

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