**Racism, Classism, Sexism and Other Isms and the Election. Mike Miller, November, 2016. For *Stansbury Forum*.**

These comments seek to build on the strong piece by Kurt Stand that was recently added to the Stansbury Forum election-discussion that included Bill Fletcher, Garrett Brown and me. I hope they do. I’m going to focus here on African-Americans, but the argument can be applied to all racial and ethnic people of color, and their struggles.

The intersection of class, gender and race has moved again to the center of debate aimed at understanding the American electorate. Are whites who voted for Trump racists, sexists and xenophobes? If a white voted for Obama in 2008 or 2012, but voted for Trump in the 2016 election, was s/he not a racist? I think there is no adequate answer to these framings of the question. We cannot understand what is going on in the country if we limit ourselves to questions of this type.

Here I plan to focus on race. But the underlying assumptions and principles are applicable to other identities as well.

I propose questions that ask the details of what happened in circumstances when white-black (or any other people vs. another group of people) unity overcame otherwise divisive understanding of self- interest and prejudicial views of “The Other”. To do that requires telling stories, not truncated questionnaires that ask for yes/no or ranked short-answers, nor even the answers from the hot-house context of a focus group—no matter how good the facilitator is. Labels are static: they describe someone at a point in time. People live in dynamic, always changing, circumstances. The question is whether people with small “d” democratic values can successfully engage others who may disagree with them.

To win “identity” issues (as the term now is widely used to describe statuses other than class), one set of alliances is made: immigration reform advocates make alliances with corporations that want to hire cheap labor; women’s movement organizations whose only criterion for endorsements is that you be a female endorse anti-union Republicans. I have black acquaintances who support Clarence Thomas because he’s African-American, despite the fact that he voted to end Deep South protection of African-American voters in the *Shelby v Holder* case. (Thomas wrote, “[T]he conditions that originally justified [federal protection of the right to vote] no longer characterize voting in the covered jurisdictions. [V]oter turnout and registration rates now approach parity. Blatantly discriminatory evasions of federal decrees are rare. And minority candidates hold office at unprecedented levels.”) And I have women friends who agreed far more with Bernie Sanders than they did with Hillary Clinton but supported her to “break the glass ceiling”.

To win issues of the former character, minorities make alliances with “whites”, typically to form unions but also in anti-freeway, urban renewal, massive development, affordable housing and other issues. When the community campaigns are used to form on-going relationships (as in multi-issue community organizations), the possibility exists to transform old prejudices—as the stories above demonstrate. So, too, can relationships in a multi-ethnic/racial union change attitudes and understandings of “white” members. Not that the change is automatic: relationships can increase tensions as well as minimize and end them. The role of leadership is central in which direction they go.

The dominance today of “identity politics” precludes these latter possibilities—opening the door for the demagoguery of Donald Trump. But minorities and women have separate battles that need to be fought as well. Achieving a strategic balance is necessary. It is also difficult to achieve.

**Some Stories**

This one is from David Bacon’s review of Harvey Schwartz’ *Solidarity Stories: An Oral History of the ILWU [International Longshoremen’s & Warehousemen’s Union].*

According to Lou Goldblatt, who served as ILWU's secretary-treasurer from 1943 to 1977, "[Thompson] [the ILWU organizer] would go to these [Hawaiian pineapple] plantations one by one and conduct a rehearsal election. He would put out a sample ballot, call a meeting, and say, 'We are going to vote. Everyone gets a secret ballot.'., .Well, the NLRB election results speak for themselves. We had entire plantations that voted unanimously.…[for the union].

I can add this from my knowledge of this organizing campaign. In the rehearsal elections, if the vote was short of unanimous Thompson found out who the dissident vote(s) came from, and continuing efforts were undertaken to shift those votes. Hawaii’s pineapple and sugar cane workers were a mix of native Hawaiians, Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Portuguese and others. Racism ran deep; the employers had carefully cultivated it.

How did Thompson overcome it? I would be willing to bet a lot that he didn’t start by telling the workers, “the employer is using divide and conquer tactics so you won’t form a union.” And I would further be willing to bet that the first thing he did was to build relationships with those plantation workers, and the first thing he did to do that was listen…a lot!

**Confronting Racism**

Continuing with *Solidarity Stories,*

Building solidarity among members was not an easy process, and the voices in *Solidarity Stories* draw attention to one of the biggest obstacles: racism. Black workers had to fight their way onto the waterfront, and into good jobs in warehouses. The union was their vehicle, but [they] also had to fight for their rights in the union itself.

African· Americans came onto the Los Angeles docks during World War II, but after the war the promise of continued employment was unfulfilled for many. The "500 unemployed" lost their jobs with the complicity of the conservative leadership of the longshore local. While they fought a long battle back onto the docks, one of their strongest allies was Warehouse Local 26, which helped them survive by dispatching them through its hiring hall. Some workers even sued the union, a controversial decision, but their objective wasn't a monetary settlement, but to become full and equal members.

Longtime longshoreman, union officer (the coastwide negotiating committee and shop steward, business agent and secretary-treasurer of ILWU Local 10), early UC Berkeley student movement leader and brilliant political science PhD holder Herb Mills tells a different story about the blacks who went to work in WW 2 in the San Francisco Bay Area. At an early post-war meeting of Local 10, International President Harry Bridges recommended against voting full membership status (“A-Book”) to the blacks. He argued that a post-war depression was likely, and that it would be unfair to everyone—white and black alike—to try to spread scarce work so widely as to make it insufficient to earn a living. The membership voted him down; the African-American men became full members. (They would have remained “B Book” members, eligible for work after all “A men” had been dispatched from the rotational hiring hall.)

Mills’ explains the vote as the result of the day-to-day experiences that bonded black and white workers together in work groups (“gangs”) that unloaded ship cargo. The work was dangerous; it required continuing cooperation among the men for its efficient and safe completion. The men worked in inter-racial groups because the hiring hall, run by the local, dispatched them in a fair way: the last man who worked had to return to the hiring hall and “plug in” at the bottom of the dispatch list when he was laid off (when a ship leaves, a job ends). If you wanted a few days off, you didn’t sign-in (“plug-in”). Thus men were dispatched in what were often racially-mixed groups where relationships of mutual respect and affection developed among them. Mills thinks this is more important than ideology, though he acknowledges it played a role. (ILWU was a “left-wing” union, and in general its leadership was explicitly anti-racist, Bridges included.)

Bacon:

Racism is an uncomfortable topic for many unions; *Solidarity Stories* makes an important contribution by describing the way rights and equality were won in the ILWU. Change came about because of the persistence of the African American workers. But the struggle for equality and democracy also made the ILWU stronger because white leaders like Bridges, and "white progressives" in the membership, supported them. Cleophas Williams, an African American who became president of the San Francisco longshore union, says, ‘Local 10 was the most democratic organization I've ever belonged to. If you wanted to go out there and face that membership and campaign and work with them and relate to them, that was your challenge, and you won and you lost. .. This union was the greatest thing in my life, other than my family…[in] terms of economics and social growth, this…union was a platform on which I made my “stand” and found a place in the sun’.

Wherever you want to place weight on what accounted for it, I think it safe to argue that the membership vote that made “A men” of those African-American “B-men” had a lot to do with the mutual confidence and respect they had with white longshoremen as a result of their daily work relationships.

Relationships! They’re key. We now have few opportunities for whites and blacks to meet as equals in contexts where they work together, pray together, play together, and most of all, where they struggle together and talk with one another in any continuing and meaningful way.

Elections are rarely those opportunities, except for those who are continuing volunteers in a candidate’s campaign organization and for brief periods in “caucus states”. Voters in today’s American politics are markets to whom candidates are sold. The sale may be in the interest of those who are the potential consumers or not. In my view, for the most part, Bernie Sanders offered a good product. I was willing to buy what he had to sell, and even volunteered to be one of its salesmen.

Alienated white working class and middle-income people, along with millenials burdened by student debt and looking for a different vision of what constitutes politics bought Sanders. In organizer terms, they were “mobilized”—i.e. “turned out” to make their purchase by casting a ballot in the voting booth.

But Hillary Clinton, mostly because of her husband Bill, had the relationships with the black pastors who, in turn, had the relationships with most of the black electorate. Though in substantially diminished numbers, blacks voted for Clinton by only a percentage point-or-so less than they voted for Obama. Sanders’ product couldn’t overcome the relationship deficit.

Elections don’t offer the opportunity to develop continuing relationships any more than shopping at the same store does. Social media develops shallow relationships. Vital, continuing/ongoing, diverse, participatory organizations that are internally democratic and committed to acting on democratic values are the precondition for relationships that can change how people view each other and think about the world in which they live. If we want to overcome the “isms” we need to figure out how to create such organizations.

And, note this especially, narrowly constituted identity group organizations don’t offer these opportunities either. They are brokered by politicians or by top leadership groups who deal with their counterparts in other silos. They aren’t interested in how rank-and-file members develop relationships that cut across historic barriers. *If they were, at least in the case of many of them, they wouldn’t be able to pursue maximum programs because they would have to take into account the views—often prejudices—of others with whom they wanted to be in relationship.*

**Parenthesis**

I want to introduce some definitions here. They are tentative.

I think it’s too easy to speak of white working class “racism”. I’d like readers’ thoughts on this.

“Racist structures” are those that divide the distribution of benefits on the basis of race. “Racists” are people who *consciously* use race to protect their unequal benefits from those structures. Hawaii plantation owners consciously used race to divide workers. Many white union members *consciously* fought affirmative action so they could pass jobs down to their sons and friends’ sons. Both were racists in my sense of the word; both use racial discrimination to distribute benefits unequally. But I hope the reader will recognize a difference—one that warrants different strategies for dealing with each of them, and different understandings of who they are.

A white person who gets on a bus, surveys the vacant seats, and chooses to sit next to a scruffy “Anglo” rather than a trim and well-dressed black is prejudiced, but his choice probably has nothing to do with the distribution of benefits. Calling someone a “racist” for something s/he says, if it isn’t related to the distribution of benefits, doesn’t meet my definition. It surely reflects prejudice, but it doesn’t reach the bar of distinction I want to use here.

**ACORN in Arkansas**

The sadly no longer with us ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) dealt with race. Here’s how then-ACORN organizer Madeline Talbot tells her Arkansas ACORN story.

When you get people together in the first stages of organization development, there is excitement at being in the same room together. People who had been telling me that “the other” was the problem, now discovered that they were involved in the same concerns. They were excited to be working together. They remained racist when they left the room. But, over time, you could break that down. I discovered in the first drive, that you had to get diverse groups together so they could discover the excitement at the same time. The first OC [organizing committee] meeting is a kind of spiritual experience—‘I’m not alone; there are other people who feel the same way I do’; it’s a magical moment of community. If you discover that with “the other,” then you start to make some progress on race.

…

I was looking for people who had “good politics,” but I found out that was not necessary. I was generally not looking for white males. I noticed when Steve Holt [her supervisor] came in, he went after some of the white males, and brought them in. I think his expectation was that if an organization didn’t have white male leadership it was not going to be respected in the wider community. At the founding meeting, I was surprised that a white male was elected, not a woman I’d expected to win. Steve was clearly looking for someone with a following, or who could have a following. I was more looking for someone who had the “right politics.”

…

I read the [ACORN] model [document], and referred back to it a lot. But I thought its tone was obnoxious; Steve got a big kick out of that. I didn’t like the part about race—that you had to start white, then go black; not that the content was wrong, but the way it was said. I thought there was arrogance in the tone, but I learned a lot from the detail.

I went into both black and white communities, and built chapters there.  In one Arkansas area, I got a phone call from a neighborhood known as white racist.  They said, “we saw what you did with the niggers; would you do the same with white people.”  I also worked with racially mixed groups.  But in Arkansas, there were complex realities around race.  There was an integrated history and tradition there, in the Southern Tenant Farmer Union (SFTU) and Populist history of black-and-white organizing there, and some memory of it.  But it was difficult to find a place to meet, and some whites were worried about what their neighbors would think if they were in a mixed group, etc, etc. …[Y]ou couldn’t assume anything.

Should Talbott have told those whites that they were racists, and she wouldn’t work with them? Should she have insisted on a conversation about race (or some other form of “good politics”) before doing anything else with them? Had she done that, I doubt the conversation would have continued.

ACORN had a reputation of getting things done. White people who wanted to get things done were willing to consider joining it. That’s an opportunity for an organizer to develop relationships with those people. It’s an opportunity to bring them into relationship with black people (because chapter leaders meet with one another in regional and statewide leadership bodies). It’s an opportunity for having conversations with people about whose interests aren’t served when low-income (working class, middle class—use the term that best works) people are divided. I’ll soon tell a story of how I did that.

**“It’s a Filipino Strike”**

When Cesar Chavez began organizing what became the United Farm Workers of America (UFW), he didn’t talk about a union because there was a bad union history among farm workers. Unions had come, talked them into striking, and left when the strike was over leaving the workers to pay the price of employer sanctions. Instead, he organized the rural “shoe-string” communities where Mexicans and Mexican-Americans lived year-round, driving from their homes to their almost-year round work opportunities in the crops of California’s Central Valley. The organization that emerged from a two-year organizing process was called “The National Farm Workers Associations” (NFWA). It was built using tools of mutual aid (cooperative buying of tires and batteries, a burial society, and other forms), advocacy with public agencies (Department of Motor Vehicles, Welfare Department, Immigration, and others) in which groups of farm workers met with representatives of these agencies to make changes in their policies or practices. A small strike of highly specialized flower workers took place.

Parallel to the NFWA organizing, the AFL-CIO’s Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) was organizing the migrant stream of male, Filipino, workers who moved with the crops from south to north, beginning in Imperial Valley. These men were single or their families were in the Philippines; they lived in grower-owned housing that was typically awful. When they reached Delano, CA in 1965, they went on strike in the grapes.

Mexican and Mexican-American grape workers streamed across the picket lines. Chavez called an emergency membership meeting. “It’s a Filipino strike” his members said. Chavez challenged that view. The membership voted to honor the strike. Not only were Chavez’s origins the same as theirs (he was Mexican-American, his family had farm worker roots in the Central Valley and he had been a farm worker himself), but he had spent two years organizing among them, earning their trust, creating an organization in which they delivered for themselves by their participation in mutual aid activities, and in delegations that met, and put pressure on, public officials. Chavez’ word was gold. He earned that.

When the UFW formed as a merger of NFWA and AWOC, a slate ran for the top offices. It included a key Filipino leader.

**Organizing Peabody Coal**

An old-timer I met in the early 1960s, who worked as an organizer for the United Mine Workers Union in the 1930's, told me this story about how he organized prejudiced white workers at the Peabody Coal Co. in Kentucky (but it could have been elsewhere in the South):

Organizer : "Wanna talk about the Mine Workers Union?”

White Worker: "Ain't you the Union let's in the niggers?"

When he heard that the organizer would take the white worker by the arm and walk with him until they saw a black worker.

Organizer: "See that fella over there?" (Organizer points to the black worker.)

White Worker: "Yeah."

Organizer: "Who's he work for?"

White Worker: "Peabody."

Organizer: "Who do you work for?"

White Worker: "Peabody."

Organizer: "You think about it; we'll talk more later.”

**The United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA)**

The top leadership of UPWA that emerged from the organizing drives of the 1930s and strikes of the immediate post-WW 2 period, was committed to racial equality. Their integrity, skill and respect for their rank-and-file earned them the right to fight for equality in lily-white locals that existed in places where the population was nearly all-white. And to fight for it in places where a racial hierarchy in the packinghouses gave the most dangerous, most onerous, work to blacks.

They won some of those fights, and they lost some.

The key organizer for the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC) in the Chicago stockyards was Herb White, an open member of the Communist Party. The Chicago local joined the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC), Saul Alinsky’s first organizing effort. In its early years, BYNC was at the forefront of the fight for equal rights. As the years wore on, it became a bastion of segregation.

In a long conversation I had with Herb and his wife Jane, they carefully considered whether there was anything beyond what was done that might have changed that shift. They concluded there wasn’t, largely for this reason: the relationships that once had existed between blacks and whites in the industry had largely disappeared in the post WW 2 years: whites were able to move into other industries that paid as well or better, and where the work wasn’t as strenuous and dangerous. The result was an erosion of the relationships between the groups. No more workplace banter; no more picnics; no more athletic leagues; no more dinner-dances.

But when we had this conversation we didn’t talk about the consequences of redlining for housing segregation. As now is generally acknowledged by those who have studied its history, redlining was a pernicious force that “turned neighborhoods over” from white to black. It started with the label: “you’re in a declining neighborhood”. That meant savings and loan companies, banks and insurers either wouldn’t offer loans or insurance, or these were offered at higher rates. In particular, home improvement loans weren’t available. Enter the block-buster realtor, often black. The block buster wanted to get a white homeowner to sell his property so it could be sold to a black—at a price far higher than the purchase price. That was possible because of the pent-up demand from Chicago’s black ghetto residents for housing. (Indeed, I have black friends who supported redlining because they saw it as the only way to create new housing opportunities for African-Americans who were otherwise locked into the slum conditions of the ghetto.)

Literally when the first black moved in, the price of property in the neighborhood dropped significantly, and lending and insuring tightened. Ethnic white homeowners, typically the ones who were redlined, knew this. They didn’t want homes in their neighorhood sold to blacks. They were fighting to protect the major asset they had in their lives, their house, and the place where they had neighbors, friends, churches, social clubs, local bars and all the other things that made up dense ethnic (and racial) neighborhoods.

Was that behavior racist? By my definition it was. But I am hard-pressed to know what I would have done in that circumstance. If my greatest asset was about to markedly lose value, I might have fought to protect it. At the time, Alinsky said there should be a city-wide quota so that no neighborhood could escape the responsibility to de-segregate its housing. He got close to no place—not with liberals, not with the religious people with whom he worked, not with radical unionists, certainly not with conservatives.

**Visitacion Valley, San Francisco**

I grew up in 25,000 people Visitacion Valley, more exactly in the Sunnydale Housing Project which is at its western edge. I left in 1954 to go to UC Berkeley. My mother lived there long enough to see it become a largely-African American place of residence. Twenty years after I left, I returned as the lead organizer for what was initially the Visitacion Valley Organizing Committee (VVOC), an effort to build a multi-issue federation that would be a people power organization for the mostly- low-to-middle income residents of what was then a very racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood.

In my “organizing plan” for building the VVOC into what became All Peoples Coalition (APC), I had Sunnydale groups I was hoping to recruit to membership, and the Visitacion Valley Improvement Association (VVIA) largely made up of white ethnic homeowners.

A major obstacle to VVIA joining the newly forming community organization was its President, Joe Brajkovich. It was from him that I learned what VVIA wanted from Sunset Scavanger Company, one of the city’s two garbage pick up outfits: a dollar a year lease of a small lot it owned so that it could be used as a “postage stamp” park in Little Hollywood (a sub-neighborhood), and a better way to cover its trucks so that debris wouldn’t fly from them as they passed through Little Hollywood on the way to the City Dump. (In the days before “packers,” garbage was piled in an empty bin on the back of the garbage truck that went from house to house picking up its load. When the truck was filled, a big canvass was spread over the top of the load and tied down on the sides of the truck. Unfortunately for those in the truck’s path, things would fly out from underneath the canvass littering the truck’s route. Every truck that went anyplace in San Francisco passed through Little Hollywood on its return to the city dump. VVIA had been unable to get the garbage company to do anything about the litter problem.

Brajkovich was the 1972 George Wallace-for-President Campaign Coordinator for San Francisco. Wallace was the racist former Governor of Alabama who spewed forth a mix of populism and racism. His success with white working- and lower-middle-class voters sent a chill down the back of mainline Democratic Party activists; he was a warning of what became the “Reagan Democrats” phenomenon in 1980. Whenever I talked with Brakovich about becoming part of the organizing committee that created APC, he unleashed a lot of vitriol about Sunnydale Housing Project, Geneva Towers (a HUD-subsidized, two 500-unit, 16 story buildings in the middle of the neighborhood), blacks, welfare recipients, and how they were all subsidized by working people like himself and his neighbors who had made it in America by pulling up their own bootstraps. When we met a next time, he would rant and rave some more about welfare, public housing, and Blacks getting everything. I just listened.

I listened to what pained and angered him, and what he hoped he could accomplish for his members. He was pained by the fact that the neighborhood was going down hill (which, in fact, it was if you looked at things like housing deterioration, city services, and other “standard” indicators); that the Sunset Scavengers ignored his requests to meet; etc. He wanted to deliver for his people.

He was angry that he couldn't get "city hall" (or the scavenger company) to meet with VVIA and deal with on these issues. He was most angered by the fact that Visitacion Valley had a "broker," a realtor named Henry Schindel who owned lots of property in Vis Valley, who set himself up between "downtown" and the neighborhood and dispatched favors here and there to keep himself in that “broker” position.

I kept bringing our conversations back to this point: Brajkovich wasn't getting respect for VVIA and he didn't have the power to do anything about it. I wasn't telling him anything he didn't know. But I did have an idea how he might get what he wanted: by joining with "those people" with whom he didn't want to join. Whenever he gave me his litany about "them," I asked him whether what he was doing now was working. I did that for about three months. Meanwhile, a number of churches, tenant associations, block clubs and other groups in the neighborhood were in the process of becoming part of the organizing committee that was putting together the founding convention of what came to be All Peoples Coalition (APC). If he wanted his issues to be part of the convention's resolutions, his people to be among the officers, and a voice in the adoption of a constitution and by-laws for the organization, then he and they would have to join.

I even told him that if he didn't want the Sunnydale or Towers people to be part of the organization, he could propose different boundary lines for the neighborhood--lines that would exclude the housing project and Towers. Then I'd ask him what "downtown" would do with that piece of information if the organization presented itself as the "voice of the neighborhood." He knew that he couldn't get around the neighborhood broker if the organization, by its constitution, excluded what was generally considered to be a part of the neighborhood.

Here’s the picture I painted: As a member organization of All People’s Coalition (APC), VVIA would be able to bring its issues to the federation. With support from Black and white residents who lived throughout Visitacion Valley, VVIA would be able to negotiate with Sunset Scavenger on both littering and the empty lot. He invited me to be a guest speaker at a VVIA meeting. “No,” I told him, “I don’t want to be a guest speaker. I’ll come to answer questions about the community organization if you’ll recommend that VVIA join. Brajkovich finally agreed to make that recommendation. VVIA joined. And he didn’t propose a constitutional amendment excluding Sunnydale and the Geneva Towers.

In fact, with APC support, an agreement was reached with the Sunset Scavengers on both littering and the postage stamp park. Ron Morton, President of APC, was part of the negotiating committee. He was an African-American locksmith whose shop was on Leland Street, Visitacion Valley’s neighborhood commercial strip. Other African-Americans who lived in the Federally subsidized Geneva Towers participated in some of the direct action events that put the pressure on that got the Scavengers to finally meet; so did some people from Sunnydale.

**Eddie Wafford Shows Up (You’ll Quickly See My Debt To The Peabody Coal United Mine Workers Union Organizer)**

In the brief period preceding the following story, APC had undertaken campaigns for improved neighborhood traffic controls, recreation facilities, job opportunities and public housing. In the Mayor’s revenue sharing hearings, APC demonstrated itself to be the “voice of the neighborhood.”

Eddie Wafford was a retired Teamster Business Agent living in Visitacion Valley. He shared the anti-Black prejudices of his fellow Irishmen in the neighborhood. But he was a member of the Visitacion Valley Improvement Association (VVIA), attended APC’s founding convention and participated in some of the action that led to the agreement with Sunset Scavenger Company, as well as a few other APC activities.

About a year later, the tenants in the Geneva Towers, with APC organizing staff assistance, developed the Geneva Towers Tenants Association (GTTA) and joined APC. By that time probably 80% or more African-American in its make-up, the 500+ units high-rise Towers stood out in more ways than one in a neighborhood that was primarily single-family homes and duplexes. (Years later, the Department of Housing and Urban Development paid to literally blow the high-rise Towers up and replace them with townhouse subsidized units.) GTTA wanted the Towers management company to meet with it and negotiate a series of improvements and services in the two buildings. After showing up for a first meeting, management refused to further discuss things with its tenants. Direct action by the tenant association followed. (Along with some of the other organizers of APC, I’ve written the story of this tenant association in *The People Fight Back: Building Tenant Union*.)

Eddie showed up on a Saturday morning to ride a rented bus to the Towers owner’s home in nearby fancy Marin County. Eddie was one of a number of whites from the neighborhood who participated in the day’s action. By that time I’d gotten to know him pretty well. Given what I knew about his feelings toward blacks, I was a bit surprised to see him, and said so when I first saw him that morning. On the way home from the picketing, he and I had this conversation:

Mike: I was a little surprised to see you here today, Eddie.

Eddie: Why’s that, Mike?

M: Well, you know, you told me a while back you didn’t have much use for Black people, particularly those living in the Towers.

E: Aw, that was before I got to know them and they showed up for me and Little Hollywood. This is the least I could do.

M: So how do you feel about the Towers people now?

E: There’s some real nice people there, Mike.

M: Whose interests do you think were served by the way you used to think about the Black people there?

E: What do you mean?

M: You think about it; we’ll talk a little more later.

When we talked about it later, Eddie understood that “downtown,” the Sunset Scavengers and Henry Schindel, the old-style neighborhood political “broker,” were the people who benefited from his prejudices against his black neighbors.

The racist President of VVIA may have never changed his mind about “them” or “those people.” But some of “his people” did, Eddie Wafford included. Equally important, they concluded their interests were better met in relationship with people they hadn’t wanted to work or associate with in the past. I wouldn't have gotten to talk with the VVIA people if I had “led with race”--telling Joe Brajkovich that he and his members were wrong about their racism, were “privileged whites” or whatever. (That was the then-common approach of “anti-racism” organizers.) The door would quickly have been shut or the phone hung up when I called.

**Laurel, Mississippi**

Grass Roots Organizing Project (GROW) was part of the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF), a Deep South organizing and education center with roots in the 1930s Popular Front. Its founders were Carl and Anne Braden. GROW was conceived by Bob and Dorothy Zellner, two white former field secretaries for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as an effort to organize poor and working class blacks and whites in the same organization. They initially met with poor whites, inviting them to a workshop in New Orleans. But they concluded that the situation was so desperate for these whites, and their sense of being beaten down so great, the organizing was impossible.

In 1967, they went to Laurel, Mississippi where the militant International Woodworkers of America (IWA) Local 5-443 was locked in a working conditions struggle with a Masonite plant; they were on strike. The local had 3,000 members, 75% of whom were white. The plant is in Jones County, now-well known because of the recent Hollywood film that depicts its Civil War history as a Union County, and the major leader--a white man who believed in equal rights.

In 1964, the Local ended segregation, dissolving an all-black “sub-local”. But by this time Jones County was Klan country.

During the strike, Masonite management integrated showers, drinking fountains, bathrooms and other facilities. This led more than 50% of the black workers to return to work, in part because they were bitter over their second class status in the local. The union’s International moved into the situation and settled the strike, on disadvantageous economic terms for the strikers. 2,100 men were thrown out of work. At the end of 1968, more than 800 of the strikers were not re-hired because of their strike support. Efforts to win support from various black community and national civil rights organizations failed to bear fruit. Efforts to find black organizers to work with the black unionists failed.

The Zellners developed good relationships with both black strikers and white unionists, and they “sipped moonshine, discussed [George] Wallace, and drank beer into the wee small hours in a bar which we were told was a headquarters for the Klan.” They didn’t hide their history with SNCC, as a matter of fact black power (unfortunately, for the most part more slogan than reality) was something the white unionists wanted to borrow.

Patient work took place over more than a year period. One sample exchange between two white women illustrates how difficult it was to move people on the question of race and, at the same time, how rapid that movement was once it began:

First woman: I never thought I could bring myself to shake a colored person’s hand.

Second woman: I hate Masonite and the rich people so much I’m willing to do anything.

Writing later about it, Dottie Zellner said, “we proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that on a grass-roots level it *is* possible to create working-class interracial coalitions. Period.” She concludes, “…white working people can be reached and changed…not by rhetoric, but during conditions of change or crisis. Appeals to conscience or morality cannot work in isolation from struggle. In the Laurel case, the whites needed the blacks…they became aware of how they had been manipulated…instead of struggling against their common enemy…”

Zellner concludes by discussing lessons. The organizers learned a lot. Were they to do it again, they would have done some things differently. But that’s not the point of my story, so I leave her here. (Most of the above is based on the two-part *Lessons of Laurel: Grassroots Organizing in the South* written by Robert Analavage and Dorothy Zellner. You can get that document from me. Write [www.organizetrainingcenter.org](http://www.organizetrainingcenter.org) and I’ll send it to you.)

**Another Mississippi Story: The Indianola Catfish Workers**

The successor to Delta cotton as a major employer of Delta blacks was catfish farming.  The mechanical cotton picker and chemical fertilizers eliminated many, many jobs in cotton.  About 175 cotton plantation owners flooded their land and turned it into catfish farms. At the peak, they employed more than 5,000 people, 90% of them black.

The work was difficult and dangerous. Rapid hand movement on the assembly line led to carpal tunnel problems. Speed-up led to bad knife cuts and, at the worst, lost fingers. Indignities in the workplace (no doors on the stalls in the women's bathroom, asking permission from a supervisor to take a bathroom break, workers called derogatory names) were reminders of the worst period of second-class citizenship. Workers were forced to show up and then hang around waiting for a shipment to arrive. During the wait-time, they weren’t allowed to clock in, so they didn’t get paid. Poor pay and no benefits were standard.

Between 1985-90 there was an extended organizing drive and strike that finally led to a contract that increased pay, defined work hours and overtime, and created a pension—which hadn’t previously existed. The arbitrary and capricious behavior to which they’d earlier been exposed was no longer possible because they had a union. Since then, because of foreign competition and increases in the cost of feed, the industry has shrunk.

When United Food & Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) Local 1529 sought support from black politicians in Indianola and Sunflower County (home of former Senator James O. Eastland, and of Fannie Lou Hamer), few responded. Most of them had reach various accommodations with the white economic power structure. Racial solidarity was not enough for these workers when it was crunch-time.

**A Different Approach To Racism (and Other “Isms”)**

My conclusions from the above experiences:

--Draw the "boundary lines" (industrial union, multi-racial/ethnic turf or multi-racial/ethnic organization which chapters join) so that people come into relationships with "The Other."

--Look for circumstances of cognitive dissonance--when people's experiences don't fit the stereotypes they came to the experience with.

--Use self-interest issues—either of the “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” or the bigger than anyone of us can handle alone variety—to create opportunities for new relationships that cut across historic lines of division.

--Place those self-interest issues in a larger framework of justice, fairness and democracy values.

--Those circumstances, interests, values and relationships create teachable moments—opportunities when an organizer or educator really can get people to change their minds.

My observation is that, contrary to what most sociologists and "leading with race" organizers say, peoples' prejudices can quickly be put on “the back burner” and soon fade to the background when the circumstances are right and the conversation based on those circumstances provides a new way to frame reality.

**Elections Sum Up What Has Preceded Them: You Pay the Price for What You Didn’t Do Earlier and That Bodes Ill for the Future.**

Organizing across racial lines, and other lines that divide a potential majority constituency, is a year-round proposition that will bear fruit at election time. Also note that these stories are in specific local places. That’s where organizing has to begin because it’s where continuing relationships can be established. Finally, it’s where victories can be won as a result of struggle and solidarity—victories that can build toward statewide and national victories. Without these victories, the fragile unity that begins such efforts will fade into the past, and old prejudices will return.

In the absence of class leadership and struggle within the racial struggle for justice, neither can be won. For this reason: The peoplehood struggle by racial and ethnic minorities, typically led by professionals and others in the middle-class, will be defeated by working class whites who are threatened by its demands and have no organic relationship with that struggle leading them to support a racist status quo.

*And*, in the absence of leadership rooted in the working class of different groups, the struggle for economic justice by working class whites, blacks and others will be lost because of the absence of solidarity among blacks, other people of color and working class whites. Instead, the class interests that cross racial and ethnic lines will be submerged because of the middle class leadership of the peoplehood struggle.

I’ve focused here on organizing not because electoral mobilization is unimportant but to argue that transformational mobilization cannot take place without the kind of organizing that is described in these stories. This kind of organizing can overcome the “isms”, not simply for a single election cycle when they are overcome by consumers who buy the same product (as they did with Barack Obama) but for the long-haul struggle that will be required if we are to come close to what Bernie Sanders advocated, let alone a more participatory, egalitarian and democratic society that we might imagine.

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