

"Racism in America: Deep or Shallow?"* (*this is an elaboration by the author of the article that originally appeared in THE ARK).

Building Solidarity and Dealing with Racism

By Mike Miller

1. All Peoples' Coalition

I was the "lead organizer" for what became the All Peoples' Coalition (APC), a federation of some thirty organizations (churches, block clubs, the neighborhood shopping strip's merchant association, tenant associations, and other groups in Visitacion Valley, a small neighborhood of about 20,000 people in the Southeast corner of San Francisco. "Vis Valley" included a number of sub-neighborhoods, including Little Hollywood, Upper Valley, Lower Valley, Geneva Towers, Geneva Terrace and Sunnydale Housing Project. Its people ranged from low-to-moderate, and a few middle, income. It was ethnically and racially quite diverse. In San Francisco poverty and race politics, it was largely ignored. While racially "integrated," there was also substantial racial tension in the neighborhood, particularly between the "white ethnics" (Irish, Italian and Maltese) and the African-Americans.

In my "organizing plan" for building what became 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.

VVIA wanted to talk with the Sunset Scavenger Company, one of San Francisco's two garbage companies. Its trucks regularly drove through a little pocket of Visitacion Valley, called "Little Hollywood," on their way to the dump. Further, VVIA wanted Sunset to lease for a dollar a year a small lot it owned in Little Hollywood so the residents could have a park there.

2. Visitation Valley Improvement Association (VVIA) and All Peoples' Coalition (APC)

A major obstacle to VVIA joining the newly forming community organization was its President, George Brajkovich. It was from him that I learned what VVIA wanted from Sunset Scavenger Company: a dollar a year lease use of a small lot it owned so that it could be used as a "postage stamp" park in Little Hollywood, 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.

Joe Brajkovich, President of VVIA, 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 Brajkovich about becoming part of the organizing committee that created APC, he unleashed a lot of vitriolic stuff about Sunnydale Housing Project, Geneva Towers, 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, he

would rant and rave 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 man 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" he didn't want to join with. 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. Brajkovich finally recommended to the VVIA membership that it vote to join APC. 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.

3. Eddie Wafford Shows Up

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 activities of APC.

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 their two buildings. After showing up for a first meeting, the 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 here, Mike.

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

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.

I'd learned the approach I used with Eddie from a retired coal miner, and United Mine Workers Union organizer, whom I'd met a few years earlier in San Francisco. Here's the story he told; you'll quickly see how I adapted it.

4. 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."

5. A Little Background

There are two background facts that make the Eddie – Geneva Towers story even more interesting. These events, by the way, span a period from early 1971 to the end of 1972—when “Black Power” was at its peak and concerned whites were being told to organize white communities against racism.

The first fact is pretty straight-forward: the community organizer who worked to build the GTTA was white. He worked closely with a very respected African-American guy who lived in one of the two Towers buildings and who was elected President of the GTTA—a position from which he subsequently resigned when he became the Towers site manager. His election took place after a successful campaign led the owners to reach an agreement with the tenants’ association. At a subsequent meeting, GTTA leaders wouldn’t let him attend, telling him, “Marvin, you’re on the other side of the table now.” The white organizer continued working with the Tenant Association.

The second fact is more complex and extraordinary! 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.

6. Can Whites Organize Blacks?

The experience of All People’s Coalition was that they could. But there is an assumption in the question that needs to be challenged, namely that racial or ethnic identity isn’t something above which an organizer conscious of the issues associated with race and ethnicity can rise. I know an organizer who very successfully worked with Hassidic Jews in Brooklyn; he was black. The people with whom he worked thought of him as their organizer, not as a Black or a Black organizer, but as an organizer who was Black.

Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) spends time on this question in his autobiography, Ready for Revolution (pages 306 – 309). His points deserve to be quoted at some length: “...I say SNCC was never an ‘integrated’ organization. That no ‘white Americans’ were ever on the SNCC staff—certainly not the field organizing staff...That, if they joined, ‘whites’ never survived in SNCC more than a month. That the organization was ‘nationalist’ from its first day...Was I quite serious in saying there were no ‘whites’ in SNCC?” [Ture then asks, “What about...” and lists a number of ‘white’ SNCC staff members.] “What were those guys, tokens? Department-store mannequins? Black folk in whiteface?...They were friends, allies, comrades, SNCC staffers, and brothers and sisters in the struggle...I never said no whites ever *joined* SNCC. So how could I say there were no ‘whites’ in SNCC? Because upon joining us, those comrades stopped being ‘white’ in most conventional American terms, except in the most superficial

physical sense of the word...[O]ur 'white' staffers had at least three particular attitude-changing experiences that 'white' Americans almost never have: working with blacks in complete equality; being on the receiving end of white racial hostility; *and* being immersed in the highest expressions of black culture while meeting the black community at its very best...Socially and politically our comrades of lighter complexion stopped being 'white.' ...I meant it as a sincere compliment when I said there were no 'white' people on the SNCC staff...In SNCC, 'white' folk became 'black.' ..."

7. 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 disappear or at least be put on “the back burner” when the circumstances are right and the conversation based on those circumstances provides a new way to frame reality.

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A Barack Obama postscript:

Barack Obama’s March, 2008 speech on race in America opened the possibility for a new conversation on the subject, one that could take the country beyond its present divisions. Instead of “educating” white working class people about their racism, asking them to acknowledge their privilege or condemning them for it, Obama began by seeking to understand why they think as they do. By placing himself in their shoes, he was able to empathize with their situation without pandering to their prejudices. His speech suggests a different way of dealing with white working class racism. Actually, it’s not a new way at all, but it hasn’t been discussed much lately in the climate of identity politics that has so dominated the national conversation. In the stories above, I write about that new-old way—using a story from my organizing experience in the early 1970s and telling the story of another organizer from the 1930s. While these examples deals with race, I could tell similar stories about straights and gays, men and women, “Anglos” and Latinos, young and old, physically-abled and disabled, etc, etc.

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analytic history of a community organizing project for which he was the lead organizer, A Community Organizer's Tale: People and Power in San Francisco; he and several co-authors tell the story of the Geneva Towers Tenant Association in The People Fight Back: Building a Tenant Union. He also is author of Community Organizing: A Brief Introduction (Amazon), and co-editor of the forthcoming Vanderbilt University Press, People Power: Classics of the Alinsky Tradition. He lives and works in San Francisco. Learn more about his work at www.organizetrainingcenter.org