**A Community Organizer’s Tale: People and Power in San Francisco, by Mike Miller, 2009, Heyday Books**

**Review by Walter Davis; *The Ark.* Winter 2011/Issue #28.**

“An organizer’s job is to assist people to build a powerful voice through which they can speak on their deepest concerns.” The role of the community organizer building grassroots organizations is told in an exceptional history: *A Community Organizer’s Tale: People and Power in San Francisco*. Author Mike Miller tells the story of the Mission Coalition Organization (MCO) driven by a core belief that “change comes from below”. Miller was the organization’s lead organizer from 1968 to 1971 after leading the successful organizing efforts from 1964 – 1966 that created MCO. This is not simply an historical review, it is a resource that provides organizing concepts and tools.

As Martha Prescod Noonan says in a review comment, “This book challenges today’s community organizers to learn from the past. Agree or disagree with its conclusions, but read it.”

Miller was influenced by Saul Alinsky who worked, as he put it, ‘within the experience of people, building on their beliefs and traditions, and framing these in the America democratic tradition…’\* Miller takes on the issue of symbolic action in a chapter with the provocative subhead, “Don’t Piss on the Building: Meet With Someone Who Can Decide.” One of my pet peeves is the symbolic action where there is no “target” even identified and therefore is never personally held accountable. How can a building answer your demands?.

Published early in the Obama Administration this book notes how his election owed much to grassroots organizing principles that benefited an electoral machine. One cannot assume that a presidential strategy remains a small-d democratic one: “Community organizing’s agenda should be to push the president. There will be plenty of people pushing him from Wall Street, the auto industry, and other elite circles. If there is not a countervailing push, organized independently of Obama, hopefully with his blessing, we will be disappointed in him as a president – and will have ourselves to blame.”

Governing is not organizing and in the first two years of the Obama Administration, the voices in favor of injustice seem to rise above those of the people. Miller warns that failure to hear the people will lead to a “new cycle of disillusionment with government, and a new withdrawal of citizens from public life.” Miller argues for a Left that fights and builds and pushes hard but also makes an “accommodation with the center” in order to defeat the right or economic power elites.

The formation of a popular front is a continuous issue in organizing and politics. The debate continues. *A Community Organizer’s Tale: People and Power in San Francisco* is a valuable addition to the narrative of grassroots people’s power. It is a must read for any citizen-organizer determined to build a community for the good of the people.

In “Growing Pains”, Mike Miller asserts that the most effective way to unify diverse forces is through the “lowest common denominator”. Given recent legislative compromises, is this always the best step forward? Continuous struggle is actually an argument for multi-issue organizing but it is difficult to sustain multiple issues in a lowest common denominator environment. Miller asserts that organizing should lead to “continuous struggle over prerogatives.” He asks, “…why shouldn’t government have a decision-making voice on the boards of lending and insuring institutions? And why shouldn’t organizations of borrowers have a voice as well? And what about the communities that are devastated by widespread foreclosures and industrial abandonment? Shouldn’t broadly representative organizations in these communities have a voice?...

These ideas are now beyond the pale of political discourse among most Americans. They shouldn’t be.” Amen. In “Who Pays for People Power?” Miller addresses an issue widely discussed in recent years at gatherings like the U. S. Social Forum and other venues on how movement or organization can depend on funding from the existing social structure without straying from its mission. Miller writes, “The question of who pays is a major one. One of the Mission Coalition Organization’s major early strengths was that it was ‘leadership-intensive’: a very small professional staff supported an amazing amount of voluntary effort.”

Miller turns the narrative inside out saying, “Contrary to some claims, external funding does not necessarily impose conditions on what an organization does. Rather, an organization imposes conditions on itself when it applies for the funds.” In other words, know what the strings are and be honest with yourself. The JONAH organization of west Tennessee had a slogan, “You can’t ride to freedom in Pharaoh’s chariot.”

Farm worker leader Cesar Chavez responded to those who argued against impoverished farm workers paying union dues saying, “…we told them we had nothing to give them except the dream that it might happen. But we couldn’t continue unless they were willing to make a sacrifice.” By doing so they took ownership.

\*To revisit a debate from twelve years ago about Alinsky, I encourage you to also read two important histories: *The Square Pegs Find Their Groove: Reshaping the Organizing Circle* by Francis Calpotura and Kim Fellner, 1996, Center for Third World Organizing, available online at the University of Wisconsin’s Comm-Org (http://comm-org.wisc.edu/) Gary Delgado’s *The Last Stop Sign* can be found at Shelterforce Online (www.nhi.org)