**Alinsky for the Left: The Politics of Community Organizing. Mike Miller. (Earlier versions of this essay appeared in *Dissent,* Winter, 2010, and as a chapter in the French language book, *SAUL ALINSKY: Conflit et democratie locale*, edited by Suzie Guth, L'Harmattan, 2013.**

Introduction

For seventy years the disparate American “Left” supported, belittled, glamorized, ignored, or attacked Saul Alinsky and his tradition of community organizing. Today, it should embrace community organizing, participate in it, and play the role that non-sectarian left organizers do in the labor movement—supporting greater social and economic equality, a viable public sector in the economy, significant extension of the social safety net, break-up of concentrated corporate power, worker ownership, cooperatives, credit unions, full civil liberties and open discussion, greater democratic participation, and greater political democracy in the country.

Community organizing includes electoral and non-electoral strategies and tactics—negotiations with institutional decision makers and, in the absence of mutually acceptable agreements, nonviolent disruption, public shaming, economic action (strikes, greenlining, corporate campaigns, and boycotts), mutual aid and alternative institutions (co-ops, credit unions, support groups), mass lobbying for reform programs and legislation (rather than merely endorsing candidates who make vague promises of change), and the usual voter education, registration, and get-out-the-vote—but with differences I will elaborate below.

A Brief History

In the late 1930s, in Chicago’s “Back of the [Stock]Yards” neighborhood (made famous in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*), Saul Alinsky and Joe Meegan, a local Catholic recreation and park director, organized the Catholic churches and other voluntary associations of the feuding Slavic neighborhood groups in an effort to address the poverty of the Great Depression. They added to the mix local merchants and small businesses along with the growing Packinghouse Workers Union, led in Chicago by an open member of the Communist Party, Herb March.

Delegates from all these organizations gave birth to the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC), a multi-issue, nonpartisan, democratic populist “voice of the people.” Divisions between the communist-led Packinghouse workers local and the Catholic church, between various ethnic groups, and among other antagonists were overcome by an approach that created a lowest significant common denominator platform on issues and united all against the power of the meatpackers and the Chicago political machine. BYNC launched Alinsky as the preeminent community organizer in the United States.

When CIO unions backed away from Alinsky (in the era of Joe McCarthy and the expulsions of “communist-dominated” unions), the Catholic bishops were joined by “social gospel” Protestants, a handful of foundations, and several wealthy benefactors who funded Alinksy’s Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Alinsky died suddenly in 1972, but the IAF continued, and a number of other “organizing networks” were initiated.

When I was a young organizer in the late 1960s and 1970s, effective “people power” groups were few and far between. Where they existed, Alinsky-tradition community organizations defeated urban renewal; won jobs for minorities; stopped planned freeways that would destroy working-class neighborhoods; halted redlining; preserved neighborhood shopping strips; defeated slum landlords; achieved education reform; negotiated policy changes in health care, transportation, recreation, and other public services; and even won national anti-redlining public policy victories. But they failed to build permanent institutions that could connect for city, state, and national action, challenge local power structures more fundamentally, and do more than win concessions from the powers-that-be. Alinsky himself observed that the life span of one of his organizations was five years; after that it was either absorbed into administering programs (rather than building people power) or died.

Still, Alinsky-tradition community organizing grew and took different forms. Organizer recruitment, training, and retention improved dramatically with better support and pay; there was a strategic shift aimed at uniting multi-racial and ethnic majorities in city- or metro-wide organizations; leadership education within community organizing focused more systematically on the workings of corporate power; funding stabilized as bottom-up money combined with religious and foundation grant-making; greater attention was given to revitalizing religious congregations—always key constituent groups of “organizations of organizations.” ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) developed as a national community organizing group based in individual membership chapters instead of the typical federated structure.

Instead of death or co-optation after five years, some “organizations of organizations” and direct membership groups are now more than thirty years old. Community organizations have had an impact in such cities as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver, San Antonio, El Paso, Houston, Miami, Baltimore, New York, Boston, Chicago, and Minneapolis. Three-to-five-million people are in one or another of these community organizing networks. They are growing and have won or helped win impressive victories.

But fundamental change remains elusive. When, for example, a co-opted labor movement, developers, builders, investors, lenders, and the tourism industry join to sponsor urban renewal, and the Democratic Party is in bed with them (as much as the Republicans), it’s not hard to understand why very few urban renewal and private developer projects have been defeated. That the majority of Americans have been in a slow but steady economic decline is irrelevant to the power equation. The majority needs to be organized. Until we have significant presence and power in a substantial majority of congressional districts and the ability to defeat those who promise something before the election and behave differently afterward, we will continue to have the politics we now have: lesser-evil Democrats who soften the edges of neoliberal economics and do better on civil liberties and civil rights.

The country deserves more.

What Is Community Organizing?

To understand community organizing, a starting place is an article Barack Obama wrote before deciding to become a politician in the August/September 1988 *Illinois Issues* (to which I’ve added a couple of bracketed comments):

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| …community organizing provides a way to merge various strategies for neighborhood empowerment. Organizing begins with the premise that (1) the problems facing inner-city communities do not result from a lack of effective solutions, but from a lack of power to implement these solutions; (2) that the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and the money [they raise] around a common vision; and (3) that a viable organization can only be achieved if a broadly based indigenous leadership—and not one or two charismatic leaders—can knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions [and “grassroots” people]. |

The community organizing discussed here is rooted in democratic values and the social justice teachings of the world’s great religious traditions. Discussing its tactics apart from this value base is like calling a Tupperware party “community organizing” because it makes use of house meetings to sell its wares.

Some of the major things that distinguish community organizing from other approaches to social change are its focus on power, the large-scale and continued involvement of people from the base, a continuing focus on leadership development, attention to core values and constituent’s diverse interests, and the strategic role played by the professional organizer.

Organizing begins with the assumption that small and great injustices are typically the results of power imbalances. Those most hurt by the system are those who are most powerless to act on the system. The problem is not the absence of good policy ideas—in fact, there are lots of them that demonstrably work. Rather, the problem is the institutional resistance by people in positions of power. Further, this resistance is based on different self-interests, not lack of knowledge by decision-makers or incompetence—though in any given instance one or both of these factors may play a role.

Here’s the joker in the deck: the powerless will remain powerless, and therefore exploited, discriminated against, marginalized, and otherwise taken advantage of, as long as they remain isolated and divided. They typically don’t get involved because their past experience proves the adage, “You can’t fight city hall.” And their socialization in a mass, consumer, media-driven society tells them that they need some hero, advocate, charismatic leader to speak for them.

For people to shift from nonparticipation to engagement, they have to anticipate success in the not-too-distant future. Only the experience of winning will undo the socialization of powerlessness; it isn’t something that you can talk people out of. So organizers seek what Alinsky called “immediate, specific, and winnable issues.” These are tools to build people power that can subsequently address more deeply embedded problems. Success can be used to convince the skeptics on the sidelines to participate. When more people participate, more people power is built and more recalcitrant issues can be addressed.

Multi-issue organizing is required because different people experience different problems with different degrees of intensity at different points in their lives. The single working mother without extended family supports is interested in child care; the homemaker mom with teenagers is interested in the local middle or high school. The retiree who depends on public transportation has yet a different concern. The organization that wants to involve all of them has to offer the possibility of addressing all their concerns in the not-too-distant future. A believable picture of what people power can accomplish must be painted; the initial painter is a professional community organizer.

In Alinsky’s day, the professional organizer was an outsider—a peddler of hope who aimed to replace himself (they were all men) with a locally recruited successor. The best organizers listen empathically to the hopes, fears, dreams, and specific concerns of the people; challenge them to act, as Alinsky put it, by “rubbing raw the resentments of the people…fanning [their] latent hostilities to the point of overt expression. [The organizer] must search out controversy and issues, rather than avoid them, for unless there is controversy people are not concerned enough to act.”

Organizers think through with the people they are organizing how to move from point “A” to point “B” in order to achieve changes in practices, policies, and structures, and they train people in the skills necessary to build a powerful organization.

When I worked from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s as “lead organizer” in San Francisco’s Greater Mission District, a largely Latino, multi-ethnic and racial area with upward of 100,000 people, the Mission Coalition Organization (MCO) brought together as many as 1,400 delegates and alternates from 100-plus member-organizations. At its peak, 500 people were meeting weekly in leadership and issue committees. Our organizing staff was only four people.

It is relatively easy for a small group of dedicated activists to mobilize hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people to march, picket, or vote against or for something. Organizing has to do more. It focuses on the development of leaders for whom civic participation becomes an important part of their identity. It provides meaning in their lives by rooting action in deeply held values. It offers the possibility of relationships of mutual confidence and trust among diverse people. It substitutes being a co-creator of an organization for being the passive recipient of what others decide for you.

Professional organizers focus on building community and power. Issues are simply tools for the building process. What is won is no doubt important.

But the organizer’s questions, and increasingly the questions of a growing core of committed leaders, have to do with changing the relations of power: How did our leaders grow in self-confidence? What did they learn? Which new people assumed leadership responsibilities? Are they going to continue in these roles? Who are new recruits or potential recruits (organizations or individuals, depending on whether you’re building a federation or an individual membership organization)? What relationships were developed or deepened in our constituency? How was our reputation enhanced? What new allies were made? Have we gained respect from power structure figures who will now negotiate with us differently? Are new fundraising possibilities available? Are various media treating us with greater accuracy and respect?

If an organization doesn’t remain connected with its constituency and true to its values, today’s victory becomes tomorrow’s defeat—or, at best, it creates a pocket of privilege that does little for the vast majority of the powerless. Negative co-optation is the most powerful of the weapons in the arsenal of the powerful.

Examples are numerous: civil rights victories are now commonly evaded, ignored, or eroded; organized labor is too often a privileged stratum fighting take-backs rather than improving benefits and working conditions and organizing the unorganized.

Some policy gains may strengthen the power of corporate America rather than making it more accountable and/or replacing it. The history of the struggle for affordable housing is illustrative. Lenders, developers, and builders were financed with tax dollars to build some affordable units, but at the same time public housing was defined by stigma and so limited by guidelines and funding that only rarely did it provide affordable and attractive living spaces. The total number of affordable units in many cities actually fell. Similarly, the question in the debate on health care is just how much we will have to bribe insurers, providers, and pharmaceuticals for them to extend affordable coverage to most Americans.

This focus on building organizations and changing power relations frustrates observers and analysts who want to know about ideological correctness. From this organizing perspective, that’s the wrong question to ask. Freedom is a constant struggle, and we should be focused on the road we’re traveling as much as on the destination.

So long as we hold greater equality, community, and justice in our sights, the important question is whether we’re moving in the right direction. Critics say this is “organizing for organizing’s sake,” or “process without goals.” Not true.

Winning Battles, Losing the War

Organizers like to tell victory stories—describing the unfolding of talents and self-confidence in tens of thousands of people, active participants instead of victims and passive observers; pointing to new positive relationships in multi-constituency organizations among previously hostile groups; and analyzing how a community organizing approach revitalized a religious congregation or union local. They recount with pride campaigns that made politicians accountable to the people they’re supposed to represent—like the early 1970s anti-crosstown freeway effort in Chicago or the 1980s New Orleans effort that redefined the drug issue as one of health care, education, and prevention rather than a “war on drugs.” In both cases, community organizing groups made politicians respond to their agendas, publicized the responses, engaged in voter education, registration, and get-out-the-vote drives, and saw their issues dramatically affect electoral outcomes. Instead of endorsing politicians, these organizations got politicians to endorse them and win because of those endorsements.

But organizers have greater difficulty dealing with a question asked by one of the field’s most friendly observers, Peter Dreier: “Why is the sum smaller than the parts?” I think there are two things to say in response.

We are not dealing with a paper tiger. Tremendous power is concentrated in the hands of an unaccountable few. Capital’s mobility destroys neighborhoods and regions by disinvestment or gentrification; undermines union organization with threats to relocate and intimidation of workers; fosters destructive competition between ethnic, racial, native, immigrant, age, and gender groups; and plays local, state, and national governments against one another in efforts to create “union-free” low wage, low tax, low regulation environments. The Reagan revolution made government and the civil service enemies rather than tools for the common good.

And there’s a lot of complicity on the “progressive” side of the struggle: a co-opted labor movement generally accepts either private or public sector employer definitions of what is to be produced, created, or served, and how work is to be organized, and limits its demands to getting a piece of the action. Rarely do building trades unions oppose construction projects that destroy working-class and poor neighborhoods; rarely do industrial unions question what they are making, its environmental impact, or whether (as in transit) there might be better public alternatives; rarely do public service unions ally with the presumed beneficiaries of their work to fight for the quality and effectiveness of what their employers provide. Most of the labor movement is afraid to engage its members in the ongoing life of unions, creating people power and a counter-culture analogous to what evangelical and Pentecostal churches have created—and thus far handed over to the Republican Party because of the priority they place on “social issues.” Labor leaders prefer speaking for their members and providing services to them, whereas a fully participatory labor movement is a necessary condition for a truly democratic United States.

The social movements of the 1960s made mistakes, including the strategy of “community control,” lumping organized labor together with the power structure, ignoring the legitimate aspirations and fears of lower-middle- and middle-class “whites,” and pursuing maximum agendas rather than looking for lowest significant common denominators that, in the slightly longer run, would make for more effective organizing and bigger victories.

All this creates the context, and establishes parameters, for community organizing. But community organizers also need to look at some of their own weaknesses. Many organizers think they are now at the negotiating table and don’t need the mass action of the past. They may be there, but only as junior partners. The gap between most community leaders and professional organizers in understanding the strategy and tactics of people power results in too much dependence on the organizers. Rivalry between organizing groups needs to be replaced by ecumenism and by structures like the AFL-CIO or the National Council of Churches. In efforts to avoid ideological sectarianism we have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Radical alternatives need to be discussed. Public, worker, community, and consumer ownership; radically progressive taxation; breakup of corporate giants; internal democratization of large bureaucracies; and de-centralization all need to be part of internal leadership and membership education programs. Organizers today need to articulate a vision of what a good society would look like in the same way that earlier organizers articulated an understanding of neighborhood based on mutual support, diversity, stability, and human scale. Bottom-up (dues and grassroots fundraising) money needs to be a larger part of budgets, and community organizing needs to learn to negotiate with foundations over their grant making just as they negotiate with other decision-makers.

Third Force Versus Third-Party Politics

The election of former Alinsky-tradition community organizer Barack Obama as president put community organizing on the map—and confused a lot of people about what it actually is by calling his electoral mobilization “community organizing.” That confusion was ramped up when right-wing opponents of a strong public option in health care reform said they were using “Alinsky tactics” to disrupt town-hall meetings across the country.

The president would like to eat his cake and have it too. He continues to tell us that “change comes from below.” (If so, why did he want to run for president?) The truth is that change comes from both above and below: without Franklin Roosevelt *and*the CIO there wouldn’t have been the changes in the 1930s that we now fight to retain and improve. In 1940, had A. Philip Randolph and the Sleeping Car Porters not threatened a demonstration of a hundred thousand African Americans and their civil rights allies in the nation’s capital, FDR wouldn’t have issued a fair employment hiring executive order. Without Lyndon Johnson and the civil rights movement, there wouldn’t have been the changes of the 1960s. Obama offers Organizing for America (OFA) as the vehicle for popular participation. I don’t think so. Obama wants Organizing for America to help him with his agenda. Nothing wrong with that, but it’s not community organizing.

Community organizing’s agenda should be to push the president. There are plenty of people pushing him from Wall Street, the health care industry, and others in elite circles. If there is not a countervailing push, organized independently of Obama, we will be disappointed in him as a president—and will have ourselves to blame. Can community organizing provide that countervailing push?

I call the earlier-mentioned Chicago and New Orleans approach to electoral politics described earlier “partisan non-partisanship,” or “non-partisan partisanship.” It is partisan on values and issues that flow from those values. It asks politicians, “Whose side are you on?” It uses their responses to make distinctions among them and affect electoral outcomes.

The Chicago and New Orleans campaigns provide clues as to how this could be done in the country as a whole. We can imagine a national federation of community organizations—analogous to the AFL-CIO, but with deeper levels of member participation—adopting a multi-issue economic and social justice agenda that deals with affordable housing, home foreclosures, health care reform, immigration, job creation and training in the public sector, education reform that lowers class size and increases pay for teachers, vigorous civil rights enforcement, expanded grants for college education, labor’s right to card check recognition, taxation to pay for all this based on ability to pay, clear measures to break up concentrated corporate power, and a foreign policy based on mutual respect among nations. There are single-issue instances of organizing networks entering the political arena with some success. But we are not yet at the point where these networks are able and willing to give up some part of their individual identity in the name of greater people power. In the absence of that will, the observation that “the sum is less than the parts” is apt.

Who will push community organizing in this direction? I don’t think it will be the old generation of professional organizers. Rather, it will be younger organizers, religious leaders of the major faiths that fund and legitimize organizing, local leaders seeking more cooperation among the networks right now, and sympathetic public intellectuals who recognize the contribution that community organizing has to make.

Such a multi-issue national force, funded by dues and money raised by membership activities, with the millions of members now already engaged in community organizing, would have a capacity to reach deeply into thousands of precincts across the country and an ability to keep the heat on politicians. It would constitute a “near-party” in American politics. An organization that defines a platform, provides the apparatus that gets someone elected, and remains capable of defending its platform would be a force to be reckoned with. It does not have to be a political party to accomplish its aims. It doesn’t have to face the third party versus Democratic Party choice. (For space reasons, I have omitted from this discussion the “fusion” approach illustrated by New York’s Working Families Party. Only a few states allow fusion so the strategy is limited in its applicability. Otherwise, it is promising.) Ironically, it is the Tea Party on the right that has most explored these possibilities. In some circumstances, though they are increasingly hard to imagine, it might be a Republican who is willing to stand on the side of the people’s platform (as was the case in the earlier told Chicago story); elsewhere it might be an Independent or a Green.

This partisan/nonpartisan, non-party/party approach can move people beyond current stalemates in strategy. For labor, it implies a step back from the first-name, insider, often-too-cozy relationship with Democratic Party politicians. For community organizing, it means a step forward toward ecumenism and a serious engagement in electoral politics. Perhaps discussions initiated now would aim for the 2012 national election. It will take that much time for trusting relationships to develop, agreements to be made, and kinks worked out.

For the vast majority of the American people, and for the people of the world who are so deeply affected by what happens here, this approach just might point to a way out of the present morass. The fundamental problem in the United States has two parts: the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a relatively small group of people and the lack of a powerful democratic social movement to effectively challenge the status quo. In the absence of the latter, the former will continue and get worse.

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