**Building at the Base: An Example from Brazil. Mike Miller. May, 2014.**

A continuing weakness in U.S. community organizing of whatever approach or “school” is its failure to build depth at the base of organizations. Whether we are looking at institution-based, direct membership, coalition, single-issue campaign or some other organizational form, the same weakness appears. Yet it seems self-evident that failure to do so necessarily has two major consequences. First, the power to enforce victories won in the heat of a major mobilization is diminished. Second, the ability to form a small “d” democratic counter-culture which requires nourishing discussion, reflection, integration of deeply held justice values with daily practice, egalitarian relationships among diverse groups of people and in individual relationships, and more is similarly weakened.

At the same time, almost any practiced organizer has experiences, or at least knows stories, of the benefits of attention to these matters when it comes to sustaining people power. To get a deeper experience of these lessons, one would have to look at the life of some union locals at the height of CIO organizing in the 1930s. There are also lessons from elsewhere in the world.

The focus here is on the “community” part of “community organizing” or on the “solidarity” part of labor organizing. Each implies depth of relationships among and between people. Each is essential to sustained people power.

**Community**

Let me offer a specific meaning for the word “community” and put it together with our common understanding of “organization.” By community, I mean a group of people, sharing a common bond, faith/belief system, or tradition, who affirm, support, and challenge each other to act powerfully on their values and interests. The values of the community I’m interested in building are freedom— both the absence of external and imposed restraint and the opportunity to realize one’s full human potential; equality—no great disparities in wealth, income, or status; democracy—as both means and end, both majority rule and minority rights, and highly participatory in character; justice—fairness, due process, and absence of arbitrary and capricious action by those in authority; solidarity, fraternity, interdependence, or community—the understanding that we are our sister’s and brother’s keepers; security or stability—the sense that life is not random, that a family’s home is its castle, that one’s job is likely to remain. Except for a narrow understanding of freedom, these values are under attack and have been on the defense for some time in the United States and other “advanced” industrial countries. Yet, their power with everyday people manifests itself whenever there is a believable option for specific action to realize them.

In summary, “community” refers to a group of people who understand that their destinies are interdependent and intertwined. Another way of thinking about the steady erosion of civil society, and its replacement by mass society—is the erosion of community.

Community is built at the base of society, where people can engage in ongoing face-to-face relationships. Whatever might be said for the Internet, it is not a substitute for community. We are so estranged from a meaningful understanding of community that I want to go more deeply into what it would look like.

**An Example from Brazil**

To do that, I want to use the example of base Christian communities in Brazil when they were at their peak of development in the 1980s and 1990s because nothing we have done in the US quite approximates what they achieved in the period of emancipatory Catholicism that once characterized large parts of Latin America. I have drawn what follows from conversations with Latin American organizers and priests and, in particular, from the work of the Presbyterian Reverend, Dr. Richard Shaull, who taught at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Base Christian communities (BCCs) were face-to-face meetings of a group of lay Catholics who supported and challenged each other to act on their faith.

Typically, they met weekly, and sometimes more often. In a BCC meeting, the agenda had some combination of these elements:

* Stories about life experiences and problems told by attendees. These might be problems regarding a landlord or employer, spousal abuse, drinking, difficulty with a child, or something else on the mind of the participant.
* Stories of resistance to oppression by those present. Someone may have stood up to a landlord, a bureaucrat, an employer, or an abusive husband. A group might have gone to a person in charge of sewage to demand action to install sewer pipes under a street. These were thought of as examples of action in behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world.
* Biblical reflection that connected the life stories of the people to passages from the Bible meaningful to them.
* Reports or business items on mutual aid projects (buying clubs, a credit union, small producer coops, etc.).
* Plans for future group action—in the form of mutual aid or efforts to change the system. If the latter, people dealt openly with fear of retribution. Responsibilities were assigned, leadership determined, action plans adopted, etc.
* Prayer and conclusion of the meeting.

BCCs were religious communities, not social action groups. Action came organically out of participant’s stories and shared values. The “expert” (priest, nun, or deacon) who was present facilitated a discovery process and was a resource, perhaps supplying historical information. The people discovered the meaning of the Bible for themselves. Fundamentally, then, a new community emerged out of the poor people participating in the BCC.

BCCs recreated in the city the community of the old village or rural area that had previously existed for most participants—one based on kinship and extended family structures. The kinship structure was no longer able to function as a source for mutual aid because of changes in the economy and technology. The BCC recreated the extended family in a new form—perhaps building on the old, or perhaps not.

In the BCC, participants discovered themselves as fully human; there was a realization of self-worth. They discovered their talents, their calling; they shifted from a fatalistic view of the world—the passive recipients of whatever was given or done to them—to become people who challenged injustice, whether in the world at large or in their own family, and who sought to bring about change. The process of empowerment that went on was one in which people concluded that society must be restructured from the bottom up. The BCC was the new society in embryo—it was prefigurative.

Lay people became pastoral agents. That is, they became organizers. The laity accepted or adopted a new vocation of training for mutual empowerment. Priests and women religious walked alongside or accompanied the people, sharing experiences with them and offering support and assistance, but they were not hierarchically “over” them. Put another way, this was power with, not power over.

The community of faith as a humanizing experience was an alternative to violence against the oppressor as a liberating experience—a view widely held by revolutionaries throughout the world, particularly in this period. Implicitly, this approach challenged the notion of the vanguard party and a transitional stage in which victims of oppression are freed by a dictatorship of the proletariat. The BCC was a profoundly democratic expression.

Richard Shaull noted three reasons for there being radical political implications or consequences from BCCs:

1. They were a new form of social organization; other forms might be created as a result of the experience of people in the BCC. Among these, for example, are the Workers’ Party in Sao Paulo, from which Lula-- Luiz Inácio da Silva--later emerged to become president of Brazil, and the Landless Workers’ Movement, now perhaps the largest social movement in the world with hundreds of thousands of members. While these latter formations are not BCCs, many of their leaders received their most important formative experience in them.

2. Mutual aid, or communal self-reliance, is a powerful tool that emerges from BCCs. People who used this tool would often move into politics and action, in part, because the system—in Brazil, the military dictatorship that preceded democratization—would not even allow for the creation of mutual aid institutions. BCCs supported strikes and other efforts at change.

3. BCCs became politically powerful when people took their reading of the Bible into the world (Miller 1983).

Note that the development of the BCC was a slow process. The early communities were typically formed after a priest or nun lived in a barrio for four-to-six years, developing trusting relationships with the people there. A first “core group” might have been only four people, and it was likely that the group grew very slowly. This group might have involved itself in simple mutual aid and support activity along with Biblical reflection for a couple of years before moving into “direct action” or anything directly challenging dominant political and economic institutions.

In discussing the application of the BCC experience to the United States, it is important to note two things that make Brazil of that period qualitatively different: (1) there were, of course, clear cultural differences and (2) the need to choose sides was more apparent in the Latin American context. The second point is becoming less true, however, as more people in the US are increasingly willing to view America’s current system as a plutocracy, and understanding our politicians to be servants of big money, not people.

It is not the differences, but the application of BCCs to our context that I want to call forth. For social, political, and economic action to be sustained, it must come out of the vital experiences lived in a community where mutual support, shared history, faith (which, by the way, can be secular as well as religious), a sense of vision, and deep values are shared and championed. As a result of these experiences, a belief in the possibility of a better world—one without exploitation and oppression—can be created.

Looking at the failure to apply BCC principles to the United States might help to explain the failure of many US organizing efforts to reach low-income, working-, and middle-class constituencies, and to create the counter-dominant culture that is necessary to bring about the fundamental changes we want to create in this country. Without it, we will not successfully slow, halt, and reverse the present concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few, even though we may win minor and even major campaigns.

This slow, careful, multifaceted way of organization building is quite different from the narrowly issue-driven way in which a lot of community organizing and advocacy work proceeds in the US. But it is not alien to our experience in this country, as I will soon describe.

**Building at the Base in the United States**

If we look back on the experiences of organizers and activists in the United States, or on what we’ve read about the experience of others, we learn of labor union locals where a similar community to the BCC existed. Here, there was a rich fabric of mutual aid, negotiation, and confrontation with employers, coalitions with neighborhood, religious, small business, and other organizations on issues affecting working people where they lived, electoral involvement, member education, and a social life that included dances, dinners, picnics, athletic teams, parades, choruses, and drum brigades. The member education program was organized by full-time labor educators who helped workers, some of whom did not even have a high school degree, explore past struggles for economic justice, and taught them how the power structure worked and how the union was part of the small “d” democratic story of this country. The result was a counter-culture created by a vibrant industrial union movement in the 1930s. Looking even earlier, we can find the same development in parts of the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century.

Look at the experience of current institution-based or faith-based community organizations, particularly at some of the congregations or parishes that are their members, to find a similar sense of community. Danny Collum (1996) captures how congregations are being renewed so that they can again be vital communities for their members. Union locals need to be renewed as well. Some of these organizations are now participants at state- and nationwide decision-making tables on such issues as health care, immigration, education and foreclosure reform. They are there because of what they have done over the past thirty-five years in order to build at the base. But it is not their presence at these decision-making tables that requires attention (indeed, it is arguable that they are prematurely there, but that is a diversion from the main point). Rather, it is what they did at the very base of their organizations to get themselves there that is my focus.

The reweaving of the fabric of community is not limited to religious congregations. A look at some of the chapters of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) before its demise in 2010, as well as the organizations that have arisen to take its place, will reveal a sense of people united to pursue purposes larger than themselves. In many other community organizing efforts around the country, you will find this deep and rich sense of community as well.

For reasons too complex to elaborate in this chapter, I believe it is the institution- or faith-based community organizing groups that have most effectively addressed the issue of community. Conversely, it is in part because of the continuous emphasis on issue campaigns that much of community organizing in the United States has failed to build deeply at the base.

Reweaving the fabric of community in this country will require a mix of the social gospel of Protestantism, the social encyclicals of Catholicism, Qur’anic justice, and the social justice tradition of Judaism, as well as an exploration of the people’s history of the United States; of Thomas Paine and his agenda for the American Revolution; of the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights as documents that were better than their slave-owning authors’ behavior; of slavery’s recognition in the US Constitution; of the abolitionists, suffragettes, Knights of Labor, Populists, and Wobblies; of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the mix of political and religious ideas that were its underpinning; of Saul Alinsky and the various strands of organizing that grew from his work; and of Ella Baker and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

If nothing of substance is built at the base, no single campaign victory, or even combination of several issue victories, will address the fundamental inequities that lie below the surface of whatever issue is at stake in that campaign. That is because these victories will not change the relations of power. They will not create competitive capitalism, turn present corporate capitalism into worker, consumer, community, or combined cooperatives, nor expropriate and make public the dominant institutions of financial and corporate power that are at the center of the inequities of the world.

**Other Experiences**

Ironically, most present U.S. experience with equivalents of Brazil’s Base Communities doesn’t come from the community or labor organizing world. Here, for example, is what Willow Creek Community Church, a major evangelical congregation near Chicago, says about its small groups: “At Willow Creek, we believe that people grow better in circles than they do in rows. Small groups are a great way to grow deeper in your faith with those you enjoy being around;” and, “…we believe that transformational spiritual growth happens best in community. We offer a variety of small groups designed to help you connect with others and grow in your faith. A small group is a gathering of friends, neighbors, or people with whom you share a common interest seeking to develop deeper relationships while studying together. The size is usually between 10 and 15 and the groups meet weekly for 10 weeks three times a year.” More than 24,000 people attend services at Willow Creek each week. Might we learn something from them?

In the workplace, occupational groups like construction crews, longshore gangs and other units are places where democratic culture can be fostered. Workers recognize their interdependence; teamwork is essential for efficiency, effectiveness and safety; mastery of complex work demonstrates to workers their own and the competence of others. These groups can become the mini-forums within which workers discuss the business of their union or other issues affecting them. Longshoreman Herb Mills writes about them in his union. Sadly, it is more often the case that business is their promoter. For example, trainer Kermit Burley writes for a business audience. He says, “Workplace groups are becoming more common in today’s organizations. Companies are seeking the synergy that develops when people come together to work on a project…Groups help improve the communication and problem solving abilities of team members…Using the collective power of each team member, the group accomplishes much more…Opportunities to work with people…brings increased understanding and cooperation to your organization. Empathy for the work of other departments also develops when groups work together toward a common goal…Groups develop a team spirit over time, and everyone in your company benefits.”

Historically, the pub or bar was a gathering place for workers to engage in the face-to-face conversation that builds community. As these more natural groupings have dissolved in the face of lengthy commutes, TV and other forms of consumerism, and other pressures, it becomes more incumbent upon organizers to find ways to re-create them. They are the natural basic unit for people power organizations.

**Organization**

By “organization,” I mean structured, coordinated, and disciplined activity that seeks to accomplish a purpose in the world. Any organization that is going to act powerfully in the world will have leadership—whether formal or informal, hidden or open—and this leadership will involve either individual leaders or collections of leaders. In large organizations that want to exercise significant power, there will be various groupings of leaders (delegate bodies, steering, coordinating or executive committees, or boards of directors). They may be structured hierarchically or horizontally, but they are structured nonetheless. In a democratic organization, leaders are accountable to levels below them that are, in turn, ultimately accountable to an engaged membership. “Power,” as used in this context, can be used for good or evil; it is neutrally defined as the ability to act effectively in the world.

Without community organization (which could be in a workplace—I am using the word “community” here in the narrower sense that I defined earlier), even the victories that are won cannot be enforced. Incumbent power is wily; it knows when to concede; it backs off; it coopts; it lives with regulations while it whittles them away until the regulated regulate the regulators; it engages in, or supports, repression—as in the toll taken in the CIO by the purge of its left unions or the systematic infiltration of the black movement by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and local police “Red squads” (including the Black Panthers, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and local community organizations such as Chicago’s Organization for a Better Austin); it waits for opportunities to reassert itself—as corporations did in the early 1970s with organized labor whose leaders had the illusion they had become partners with corporate America. Even the basic right to vote for minorities, low-income people, and others is now under assault by the Republican Party, the Tea Party, and their corporate and foundation allies.

Community organizations acting on these understandings of how power structures work can use the power of organized people to influence, hold accountable, transform, and, when appropriate, disband dominant institutions of society that are organized around different values, structures, policies, and practices. But none of this will happen if we cannot reconstitute the civil society base of democratic organizations.

**But Brazil Isn’t the U.S.**

Borrowing from the experience of people in other countries is always open to charge, “They live in a different culture.” For example, in current discussions of worker-ownership and the lessons of Mondragon this point is made about the national identity and solidarity of the Basque people in order to dispute application of the lessons of their cooperatives for the United States.

Of course we have to pay attention to cultural context. That applies within the United States. Indeed, it applies to differences between neighborhoods, occupations and any other grouping of people in which people power organizing might take place. Having said that, and now having taken that into account, we need to look deeply at the experiences of people around the globe if we are to fully appreciate the capacities of everyday people to accomplish transformational change.

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