**Counterpunch**

**Tells the Facts and Names the Names**

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***Time for Direct Action Against Billionaire CEO's Who Have Displaced the Bay Area's Poor?***

# The Decline and Fall of San Francisco. Mike Miller

The recent story, (“Dropbox, Airbnb, and the Fight Over San Francisco’s Public Spaces,” by Julia Carrie Wong in The New Yorker,10/23/14), captures the continuing struggle between the city’s lower-income, mostly minority, especially Latino and Black, elderly Irish- and Italian-American, and struggling artists, writers and other more marginally employed, on the one side, and the new, young, mostly “Anglo” and Asian techies, who, like an occupying army, are swarming into the city to take advantage of good-paying jobs in the booming tech economy.  I use the metaphor of an occupying army with hesitation because these invaders are often friendly and, for the most part, intend no harm. It is the consquence of their presence, not what they do, that manifests the problem.

Here’s The New Yorker’s description of what happens:

In an amateur video taken in Mission Playground, a group of adults—mostly white males—approach a dozen or so Latino teen-agers and ask them to forfeit the field. A college student named Kai, who seems to be the leader of the neighborhood kids, explains the pickup rules (seven on seven, no time limit, whoever scores first keeps the field) and asks the men how long they’ve lived in the neighborhood. “Who gives a shit? Who cares about the neighborhood?,” one of the men mutters off-screen. [Truthfully, he is likely not to be representative of his peers, but he sure made a good target for critics!]

The men explain that they paid to reserve the field, and a man named Conor arrives with a printed document. “It’s pretty simple, man. We paid twenty-seven dollars to reserve the field for an hour,” Conor says to Kai, holding the piece of paper up to his face. “Read it. Read it.”

“I know how to read,” Kai says. “I’m an educated person. I also know that this field has always been a pickup field where you play seven on seven and wait your turn. You guys think that just because you have money you can buy the field and play.”

The tragedy of displacement in San Francisco, and especially the Mission, continues…but, unlike an earlier time when the Mission Coalition Organization (MCO) was a community organization capable of defending resident interests, there is no real fight back. At the time, I was MCO’s “lead organizer.” MCO “created an atmosphere inhospitable to investment.”  It was a “multi-issue” people power organization, formed along the lines of similar Saul Alinsky-inspired organizations around the country. In its housing committee, it fought back by organizing building-by-building tenant associations, and then relentlessly going after landlords with pickets at their homes, workplaces and wherever else they were to be found.  Some of the landlords literally walked away from their investments (down payments) for reasons MCO could never figure out.  In another case, MCO turned an adversary into an ally because it discovered he (a retired seaman) couldn’t get a loan because of the beginnings of red-lining in the neighborhood.  MCO’s committee went with him to Bayview Federal Savings & Loan and reversed its decision not to make the home improvement loan.

MCO also won recognition from the city government as its negotiating partner for the creation of a neighborhood model cities program—the successor to the “war on poverty.” Russ Keil, a conservative Republican mayoral appointee to the Mission Model Neighborhood Corporation (MMNC)—the neighborhood planning body–, and I became friendly when we worked together in the model cities planning process. We shared a common antagonism to urban renewal, and he respected the fact that MCO had stopped urban renewal from coming into the Mission—one of the few neighborhoods in the country to do so.  In a moment of friendly advice, Keil used the line “atmosphere inhospitable to investment” to describe the impact of MCO’s militant non-violent direction action. He thought he was doing me a favor.  He was, but not the one he thought.  It was the greatest compliment an organizer could receive!

At the time, there was no rent control, and the only legal protection available to tenants was the “warranty of habitability” implicit in a landlord renting a unit to a tenant; it was part of the state’s housing law.  When tenants went to the poverty program’s legal assistance program with a grievance against their landlord, lawyers would tell them they had a choice:  “you can have us file a lawsuit, which will delay things but ultimately not lead to the result you want, or you can go next door (our office was next to theirs) to MCO and they’ll help you, and you’ll have a better chance to win.”

Many of them did come.  Our procedure was to tell them we had a Saturday morning housing committee meeting to which landlords were invited to negotiate on matters of rent, maintenance, repair and landlord-tenant relations (the last a catch-all to deal with intimidation, rudeness and similar abuse by landlords).  To get their building on the Saturday morning agenda, the tenants had to get 51% (ideally more) of the building’s tenants to sign a statement authorizing MCO to be their bargaining agent.  MCO assigned an organizer to help them get the authorizations, and to convene a meeting at which they would decide among themselves what they wanted from the landlord and who their spokesmen—along with MCO’s more skilled negotiating team member—would be.

Many buildings organized. There were many agreements reached without a battle, and more battles were won than lost. But we didn’t reach a stage of organizational development where, for example, we might have negotiated an area-wide agreement with a landlord’s association, or an agreement with realtors on what defined a “good landlord,” or anything remotely resembling that.

What happened instead in the “left coast” city by the Bay?  Regulation replaced organizing as the strategy to protect tenant interests–a voter-passed initiative created a rent control law, and a Rent Control Board to administer it.  Electoral politics rather than mass, disruptive, nonviolent action became the means to enforce the strategy.  Each, alone, is insufficient.  “The market” overwhelms them:  too much demand for too little supply. Unfortunately, there is no capacity now to negotiate with landlords, developers, lenders and others who profit from this run-amuck market.

There is no longer a mass organization that might hurt profits and politician’s careers by its capacity for boycotts, disruption, lobbying and electoral action. Such an organization can evaluate its strategies to see if they actually stabilize the housing market; its members get radicalized as they learn that more moderate approaches don’t work. Such an organization is an on-going citizenship school for hundreds of community leaders, and thousands they can influence. In its absence there is no way to move the electorate to support and finance the kinds of policy options that could solve the housing affordability crisis.  The policy solutions are simply to radical and, therefore, prone to defeat in the face of massive media campaigns against them. Without direct experience to challenge media “lessons,” citizens remain consumers, not co-creators of history.

It is now too late.  The gentrification, barring a big recession/depression, is irreversible.  Its tentacles now reach into the Excelsior, Bayview, Ocean View-Merced-Ingleside, Portola, Visitacion Valley, and other neighborhoods in the southeast quadrant of the city–the last places where semi-reasonably priced homes could be purchased or rented.  The Mission, Western Addition/Panhandle, South of Market and others are gone.  The problem is now spreading across the San Francisco Bay to Oakland.

If you live in public housing, and are prepared to deal with your landlord’s outrages (illness-breeding mold, endless delays in getting repairs, a climate of crime, elevator disrepair in high-rises, etc), or in a vastly-insufficient supply of non-profit sponsored housing, you have some protection and pay rent reasonably proportionate to your income.  Section 8 housing “vouchers” provide additional affordable housing, and have their own problems—for example, landlords might drop out of the Section 8 market as they realize just how much they can charge (going beyond the maximum for Section 8 vouchers).  Long-term renters who have decent landlords are well protected, but their units aren’t–rents go to what the market will bear when a unit becomes vacant.  And if you don’t have a decent landlord, you’re likely to experience all kinds of pressures to move out, or a landlord says he’s going out of the landlord business and you’re “Ellis Act-ed out.” (The state Ellis Act allows a landlord to evict if he goes out of the landlord business; the Act can provide cover for a transfer to tenants-in-common or condos.)

What follows if you care about economic justice and the lives of everyday people who aren’t in the top 20% of incomes in the region?  It seems to me the strategic focus needs to shift to organizing beyond San Francisco.  The interdependency and interconnectedness of the region is crystal clear.  As upper-middle and upper income earners reclaim the core cities around the country, the working class and poor are increasingly pushed into first-, second- and beyond tier suburbs, and in some cities so is the middle class.  Nowhere is that clearer than in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Here are some strategic avenues to explore:

\* Massive increases in public transit, including BART, including increases in frequency, sufficient equipment so people don’t have to stand on long rides, comfortable waiting places, and subsidies to make the fares lower.  The subsidies can be negotiated with the big corporations if they can’t be achieved by legislation and appropriations.

\* Terrific childcare centers at-or-near mass transit stations.  Build on the air-rights above parking places, and in facilities adjacent to the stations.  If you can’t do that, create drop-off points at the stations with paid child-care workers accompanying kids to nearby centers.  Or, create parking at the nearby centers, and parent-worker shuttles to the stations.

\* After the first 20 minutes-or-so in transit, pay people from their point of entry into the transit vehicle. That could be documented with a transfer or an electronic payment device.  (When you get on a Google bus in San Francisco for the commute to Silicon Valley, as soon as you plug in your computer at your seat you are “clocked in” as being at work.)  It is now common for people who don’t have this paid-while-you-ride benefit to spend an hour each way going to-and-from work, and not uncommon for their roundtrip to be three hours and even more.  I’ve met people who leave the San Joaquin Valley town of Merced at 4:00 a.m. for an 6:00 a.m. show-up time near their workplace, and a two-hour nap before 8:00 a.m. clock-in. They often don’t get home until small children are put to bed, so their kids only see them on the week-end.  Conservative evangelicals could get behind this one because it surely supports family values.

At the same time, the excesses of wealth are nowhere more abundant than in the Bay Area.  Some of the high-tech corporate CEOs are philanthropic, but they want control.  They think because they’re wealthy they have a right to make public policy.  So they give millions, for example, to school programs they support, or hospital wings that bear their names, or research projects seeking cures to illnesses that may have afflicted a family member or friend.  We are increasingly moving toward policy by feudal lords of the manor whose beneficence is solicited by hat-in-hand mayors who rely on them for campaign financing and then ask for their charity.

The billionaire CEOs should become the targets of direct action.  But smaller targets should come first in order to build a record of small wins that will overcome the present feeling of powerlessness among the many. Small wins build bigger armies; they are the guerrilla warfare of nonviolent action. They also build civic competence: the abilities to research solutions to problems, understand specific power structures, formulate proposals for action, negotiate adoption of these proposals with public and private landlords, and, failing good-faith negotations (which will entail compromise), engage in nonviolent direct action to bring decision-makers to the negotiating table in a different frame of mind.

The direct action needs to be broadly-based.  (MCO was a federation that, at its peak, had more than 100 member churches, block clubs, civic associations, ethnic groups, tenant associations, neighborhood merchant associations and more.) Herein lies the difficulty.  It is easy for a handful of activists to use disruptive, nonviolent, direct action.  They may get arrested; there may be a story in the evening news; the issue gets a little play in public discourse; no changes in policy follow; the arrestees claim “public education.”

On the other hand, massive, disruptive, nonviolent action by thousands or even tens of thousands can paralyze business-as-usual and force negotiations.  To get large numbers of people to engage in, or even support, such action requires an organizing process in which rather mild requests for meetings with CEOs, or other decision-makers, are the initial step.  It is their refusal to meet, or to make mutually-acceptable agreements if they do meet, that constitutes “the reaction” in Saul Alinsky’s well-known aphorism, “the action is in the reaction.” People get radicalized by the reaction of specific decision-makers in the power structure, not by marches between buildings, rallies in public squares, or protests in front of anonymous offices.

Let me illustrate “the reaction is in the reaction.” When the tenants at what we called the “24th & Treat Building” organized and brought their building to the MCO’s Housing Committee, the Committee’s assigned person to be the principal negotiator with the landlord was St. Peter’s Catholic Church’s pastor, Fr. James Casey. Deeply committed to justice for the poor, Casey was also a moderate man. He expected, as he and the tenants met with their landlord, that an agreement would be reached. Like many engaging in such meetings, he thought that it was simply a matter of making known to the landlord how impossible it was for his tenants to meet the new rentals, and appealing to his better nature, that would bring an agreement. He had the implicit theory that “the system (in this case the landlord) doesn’t know.” When the landlord called him a communist, and refused to budge, Casey got radicalized; he was now open to the theory, “the system (landlord) has different interests”, i.e. wants to make more money, and that reason and politeness weren’t going to be sufficient to reach agreement—something more militant was required—something that would affect the landlord’s interests, in this case his rent.

As I’m using the words, “radical” has to do with how one understands what makes the system work, especially what makes it change. It is common for everyday people to think that a decision-maker with whom they’re meeting either doesn’t know the consequences of his action—in which case you simply need to let him know and he’ll change, or is incompetent—in which case he simply needs training or retraining, or in some larger institutional settings there has to be reorganization. That the system has different self-interests—making more money, getting more votes, increasing prerogatives and power—is not the typical initial understanding people have about specific decision-makers. That is the case even when in general they might think something like, “it’s money that counts.”

“Militant” has to do with the tactics everyday people are willing to use. At first, they want a meeting where a believable and reasonable proposal is presented to the decision-maker. Typically it requires of the decision-maker that he refuse to meet or, in a meeting, that he act with arrogance toward the people that an escalation in tactics will be accepted.

Another example: Jack Bourne, salesman, Irish-American, moderate lay leader in St. Peter’s was Chairman of MCO’s Planning Committee. The organization was in a struggle with Mayor Joe Alioto over the rules that would govern model cities planning in the Mission District. During a meeting with the Mayor, Bourne thought the mayor was being duplicitous and called him a liar. He was acting far outside the parameters of our agreed upon negotiating strategy. MCO President Ben Martinez called an immediate caucus. The committee told Jack he was out of line. The mayor returned, and negotiations resumed. Had you told Jack Bourne before that meeting that he would call the mayor of San Francisco a liar, he would have been amazed at how deeply you misunderstood his character. But in the face of what he thought was hypocrisy on the mayor’s part, he became a different man.

The action is in the reaction.

Imagine this:  a thousand people, dressed to the nines, show up at the Twitter or DropBox or Salesforce building for a “mill-in”. They tell the security desk, “We’re here to see \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (the CEO).  “Do you have an appointment?”  “No, we’re here to make one.” “You can call his office, but he won’t see all of you.” “We’ll we’re here now, so we want to make the appointment.” “You can’t all go upstairs.”  The details will vary.  But how do you arrest 1,000 people for waiting to talk with someone who can make an appointment with the CEO?  And you don’t have to march to the building.  You can infiltrate it:  people show up spread over a half hour time frame, coming from different directions.  They look indistinguishable from everyone else going into the building.  You get the idea.

I hope that valuable lessons of yesterday aren’t forgotten or ignored by the new generation of energy, commitment and talent that is now arising in such things as Occupy, The Dreamers and other manifestations of the ongoing struggle between the haves and have nots, between decision-making by the few and by “the people.” Perhaps we really don’t have to re-invent the wheel.

Post-election postscript: big money was able to defeat even Proposition G, the relatively modest reform measure that placed a tax on speculative transfers of property. David Chiu’s slim Assembly victory over David Campos (two Democrats duked it out as a result of our primary election rules) is another illustration. The details aren’t widely known outside the city, but ask activists who live here and they’ll tell you: the people’s side didn’t do well in this election.

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