

People Power in San Francisco: The Mission Coalition

By Mike Miller

"We had a sense of power. People saw they could make changes. People who got jobs through the Committee would come back to give something back to the community. People on the street knew... that this Committee was doing something for them. I learned things in the Mission Coalition Organization that I'd never have learned anyplace else. And they worked other places, too." So said the late Rich Sorro, executive director of the Mission Hiring Hall, a nonprofit job placement agency in San Francisco's Mission District, in a 1996 interview shortly before his death.

Over 25 years ago, Rich Sorro was a leader in the Mission Coalition Organization (MCO)—an important organization in the history of the neighborhood and the city. The MCO grew out of the Mission Council on Redevelopment (MCOR), formed in 1965 to either control or stop a plan to make San Francisco's Mission District an urban renewal area. San Francisco's low-income communities had already experienced the bulldozer approach of federally-funded urban renewal and had learned that early community action was the only way to halt the bulldozers.

When the city's Redevelopment Agency began eyeing the Mission, organizers and activists were ready. The urban renewal proposal for the Mission was defeated in early 1967 by a slim 6-5 majority in a combined city council/county board of supervisors meeting. MCOR suffered the fate of single issue organizations—it won its victory and disbanded. But many of its leaders and organizers remained in the Mission.

Then in 1968, Mayor Joseph Alioto announced his intention to include the Mission District in San Francisco's Model Cities application to the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), if a broadly-based group of Mission District leaders came together and asked him to do so. Afraid that this might turn into a Trojan Horse for urban renewal, veterans of MCOR banded together early to provide leadership for the coalition, which was called

the Temporary Mission Coalition Organization (TMCO) and recognized as the neighborhood's voice in Model Cities planning. The leaders, however, agreed that the organization, unlike the MCOR, would be multi-issue in character and would not limit itself to participation in the Model Cities effort. After a founding community convention was attended by over 800 delegates and alternates, "Temporary" was dropped from the name.

The MCO was a federation, or "organization of organizations," including both previously existing and well-known organizations and newly formed tenant associations, block clubs, and youth groups. At its third Annual Convention in 1970, the 1,100 delegates from over 100 organizations adopted a platform of issues for the MCO and elected its leaders for the coming year. By this time, the organization had won control of the Model Cities program and was a well-known force in San Francisco. Its list of accomplishments was long and brought about through a combination of direct actions and negotiations with landlords, employers, local merchants, the school district, and other public agencies.

Hundreds of people were placed in jobs; dozens of buildings organized tenant associations and won improvements and rent decreases from landlords; education reforms were achieved in the school district; city services of all kinds improved; and a "plan for the Mission" was developed.



Photo:

Mission District tour with public officials by MCO to demonstrate community support for the organization during Model Cities negotiations with Mayor Alioto.

Flor de Maria Crane (left) speaking with Supervisor Terry Francois (right) Also pictured (upper right), Father Peter Sammon, Pastor of St. Teresa's Church
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Rise and Fall of People Power

Two traditions—Saul Alinsky's urban people power populism and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's pioneering grassroots organizing in Mississippi—blended to create the MCO. In *The City and the Grassroots* (University of California Press, 1984), radical sociologist Manuel Castells called MCO "...the largest urban popular mobilization in San Francisco's recent history... showing a remarkable capacity to combine grassroots organization with institutional social reform."

Until it took control of Model Cities, all MCO activity was based on a strategy of "institutional change." People power was used to pressure business, government, and others to make changes in structures, policies, and practices, so that the community would be better served. As MCO's people power grew (and its reputation with it), it was

able to make demands that reached more deeply into the sources of social and economic injustice. But when it came to Model Cities, MCO's membership rejected the "institutional change" strategy in favor of "community control."

The year before he died, I had an opportunity to interview Rich Sorro about his thoughts and opinions and experiences as a majore leader in MCO. And he had this to say about the MCO's past and present:

"The Mission Coalition fell apart over Model Cities. When MCO got started, it drove Model Cities [but by the 1971] convention... Model Cities was driving MCO. People were fighting for titles, positions on boards of directors, and administrative jobs in the funded agencies. The [MCO] rank-and-file

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How MCO Found Victory in The Unity of Diversity

Diversity of membership. An "organization of organizations," it consisted of Catholic parishes, Mainline Protestant churches, Evangelical Baptists and Latino-immigrant Pentecostal store fronts; conservative and moderate homeowner and civic groups; militant Progressive Labor Party-led tenant and Latino nationalist organizations; newly formed tenant associations, block clubs, parent groups and youth clubs; community-based nonprofits; the merchants' association; and some unions. Delegates from this diverse constituency met at a totally bilingual (Spanish/English) annual convention to elect officers and leaders, establish policy, and adopt or revise rules of governance.

Diversity in leadership. MCO's weekly Steering Committee was a micro-

cosm of its membership with 34 elected members representing about 16 nationalities (including, Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, Colombian, Cuban, Mexican, Italian, Irish, Puerto Rican, African American, Filipino, Native American, and Pacific Islander) and interest groups (including business, labor, clergy, block club, senior citizen, youth, and national organizations). It was a very effective strategy in terms of making everyone an "owner" of the organization and building people power.

A multi-issue approach with strategic concentration on big campaigns. People power requires involving the broadest base possible, which means working with different people with different agendas. However, by employing a "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," approach to the smaller issues,

MCO was able to create a "we need each other to win the big issues strategy." MCO got groups that hadn't talked with one another working together in a powerful organization.

A willingness to find the lowest significant common denominator. Through negotiation and compromise among members, the organization as a whole was able to tackle issues as a tight federation.

Mass participation in the various committees. This built people power as well as powerful relationships. In any given week, as many as 500 people would be meeting in the jobs, tenant-landlord, neighborhood improvement, or education committees. This was in sharp contrast to most organizations which operate with a small, dedicated activist core and a passive, nominal membership.



didn't care about any of that stuff, but the leadership got caught up in it. You had a whole pack of neighborhood people carrying brief cases around. People got divided up into different agencies [to receive] Model Cities [funds]. And it wasn't all that much money to begin with.

"In the old Mission Coalition, it wasn't competitive because there wasn't a screening process. Employers took people as we sent them, and they got good people. [Now] We send four or five people to apply for one entry-level job. We [can] advocate for resident hiring, go through the legislative process, but we can't raise hell. The leverage is gone. With all the [other]

jobs programs in place, the situation is worse as far as the quality of jobs [for] Mission residents. It's awful."

The old MCO operated on a "point system" for jobs. People "earned" points by participating and jobs were allocated according to the number of points a committee member had. A member could take a job, refer it to someone else, or retain his/her points and "pass" the job to the person with the next highest points.

What Sorro said about people power then is true today, whatever the issue might be. Indeed, the Mission as a neighborhood for immigrants, struggling students, minimum wage workers, retirees, and others of low-to-moderate income may soon disappear.

Photo:

MCO pickets landlord's beauty salon in protest of rent hikes.

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Courtesy of Mike Miller

The MCO's Accomplishments

Forty years after its birth, the MCO is still seen as one of San Francisco's most powerful "people power" organizations. Its accomplishments on behalf of the low-to-middle income people of the Inner Mission, Potrero Hill, Bernal Heights, and Noe Valley neighborhoods were extraordinary, and included:

- Defeating the urban renewal—known in the Mission as Latino removal—program.
- Temporarily freezing neighborhood gentrification through the creation of an "atmosphere inhospitable to private investment," demonstrating the power of broadly supported, nonviolent, disruptive direct action.

- Bringing good paying jobs (through a combination of negotiation and direct action, such as boycotts and sit-ins) to the unemployed and under-employed community members at corporations with facilities in the Mission, such as PG&E, Wonder Bread/ Hostess Cupcakes, Pacific Telephone & Telegraph, Pepsi Cola, Foremost McKesson, and Safeway.

- Organizing dozens of apartment buildings into small tenant associations, which reversed rent hikes, and bringing much-needed repairs and maintenance to properties through picketing and rent strikes.

- Demanding and winning the transfer of Mission High School's top administrators out of the district because of their refusal to deal constructively with students and the community on quality of education issues.

- Bringing accountability to the dealings of the private sector (cheating merchants, red-lining banks, overcharging lawyers and accountants, to name a few) and the public sector (including departments of health, public works, police, recreation, public education, and social services) with members of the community.

Mike Miller was lead organizer of the Mission Coalition Organization from 1968 to 1971. Prior to that he directed Saul Alinsky's Kansas City, Missouri project and was a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the Mission.

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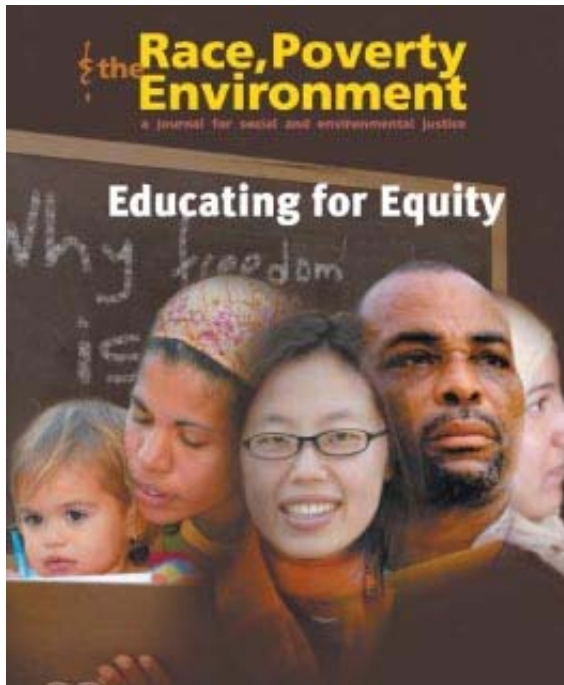
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