**The Gold Standard. Mike Miller. November, 2019.**

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**Preface**

An organizer acquaintance of mine likes to refer to the work his network does as “the gold standard”. Apart from the presumptuousness of the claim, it did raise the interesting question, “What constitutes the gold standard for the work of small “d” democratic people power organizers?” I hope my answer will apply to both the work of community and labor organizers.

**PART I. CHANGING THE WORLD**

**Institutional change**

The promise of organizing is that it will create a vehicle (organization) in and through which powerless or relatively powerless people will gain the ability to address the conditions of their lives—at work, where they live, where their children go to school, the health care system they use, the public transit they ride, the parks in which they recreate and whatever else they may be. They do this by negotiating with decision-makers in the worlds of business, major non-profits and government. When these decision-makers refuse to engage in good faith negotiations, action is taken to force them to do so.

The gold standard in this area can be measured by four standards that I will call “more and less”, prerogatives, qualifications, and relative wealth, status and power. They are inter-related, but analytically separable.

**More**

More money, more frequent transit service, more doctors in public health clinics, more immediately available beds for drug abusers who want to kick their habit, fewer children in a classroom, less cost for housing, better pay per hour, more benefits, fewer hours worked, greater safety, no hazardous job site materials…you get the idea. A gold standard organization would be in a continuous process of winning victories in these and other areas of importance to their members. And what was won in the early years of that organization’s life would be less than what is won currently because, presumably, the organization is gaining power to “up the ante” as time passes and it grows in numbers, experience and reputation

Some examples:

* An organization that got a reduction in public transit fare should ten years later be at the table with its transit agency designing a plan to increase citywide service, particularly in low-income neighborhoods where people are most dependent upon public transportation, and the fare should by now be greatly reduced with the revenues lost made up by progressive taxes on wealth and upper incomes.
* The city’s public housing authority and/or community and housing development organizations should have built, and be building, decent, safe, sanitary, attractive, well and respectfully administered, service-rich housing affordable to low- and moderate-income people.
* Class sizes in pre-K, kindergarten, elementary, middle and high school should roughly approximate those in elite private schools (often 12 students), if not be smaller. Children of upper-middle-to-wealthy families have educational opportunities from day one of their lives. The public education system should compensate for such advantages.

**“Who gets to decide what?”**

That is the prerogatives question. Here are examples from labor and community organizing.

Before the union, hiring was at the pleasure of the boss. There might be favoritism, with even a “kickback” (bribe) required to get the job. Supervisors could demand sexual favors with impunity. The treatment of workers was subject to arbitrary, capricious and unreasonable management action and demands. Requests for time off to take care of a sick child, take a vacation or go on a honeymoon were made “hat in hand”, and often not granted. Ditto for other important things to the worker. Their culture revolved around work, bar, team (if they played), family, friends, church (if they belonged) and ethnic club or organization, none of which gave them effective voice in the world. Their lives were, in the deepest sense, contingent.

After the union, democratically-elected leaders negotiated on a basis of mutual respect with their members’ employers. An efficient and effective grievance procedure made it possible for rank-and-file workers to obtain *at the job site* rapid redress of contract violations and other management behavior that wasn’t right. In cases of health and safety, stoppage of work could take place at the initiative of workers. The pace and organization of work were themselves contested areas between the union and management. Entrance into the field was through the union or through a joint management-labor apprenticeship or similar program. Active intervention by “the union” on questions of race, national origin and gender reversed or diminished previous views and treatment of “The Other.” Workers’ culture now included an effective voice at work as well as in the wider world as the union provided a vehicle for legislative, electoral and direct action on other issues of justice and a means for solidarity with struggles across the globe—as, for example, west coast longshoremen acted in solidarity with the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.

In its relationship with the employer, the union might enter into a variety of programs to improve the quality, efficiency, effectiveness and/or appropriateness of the work done by its members—and the union would insure that these did not undermine its authority or power to represent its members.

Most important, the union took control of work from the boss and gave control or effective voice to the workers. Being a longshoreman on the West Coast, for example, was a low respect job before the 1934 General Strike that led to a collective bargaining agreement. Soon the job was one of the most respected working class occupations.

Too many young radicals and community organizers are dismissive of unions. Whatever may be wrong with many of them, they are the most important voice workers have--if they are fortunate enough to belong to one. And for the most part, what is wrong with them can be remedied by reformers from within.

The gold standard for community organizers would include at least three dimensions of work in relation to the world of work: action in solidarity with union organizing, collective bargaining and strike activity; action within their own organizations that provided members tools to organize *within* their union if it was corrupt or ineffective, and, in some cases, action to directly organize workers. It is rare to see the first of these, though it does happen. It is even rarer to see the second, though historically the political left and religious bodies have each in their own way sought to strengthen workers who wanted to organize or who wanted to reform corrupt unions. The only example I know of the third is when Baltimore BUILD entered into a partnership with AFSCME to organize city contract workers.

Clear parallels in community organizing also exist. With a variety of power structure institutions, a community organization might enter into a relationship to plan development in a neighborhood, curriculum in a school district, or design and implementation of a mental health program for the residents of the city. In my “on the ground” days, in San Francisco’s Mission District, the organization for which I was lead organizer negotiated an agreement with the mayor that created a planning body for the Federal Model Cities program that had to initiate all programs that were going to be in its neighborhood. In effect, fears that Model Cities was a Trojan Horse for a bulldozing urban renewal program were laid to rest. The organization nominated 2/3 of the planning body’s board of directors (the mayor formally appointed 17 from a list of 25), *and the organization had the authority to recall them if it believed they weren’t serving the interests of the people.* That the program became a sad tale of cooptation wasn’t inevitable. (I tell that story in gruesome detail in *A Community Organizer’s Tale: People and Power in San Francisco.*)

**Qualifications.**

When I was a field secretary in the mid-1960s for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), I was struck by how deeply the power structure of Mississippi had been able to get everyday Mississippi African-Americans to believe they weren’t qualified to vote. And when SNCC decided that it would no longer try to teach black people how to take the literacy test whose passage would qualify them to vote, I discovered that it wasn’t only in Mississippi that these views were held. Paraphrasing Mississippi Project Director Bob Moses when queried by a Federal District Court judge, “you can’t deny a people an education then use their lack of education as the reason to deny them the right to vote.” SNCC won elimination of literacy tests as a requirement for voting.

This question went deeply into the African-American community where, before SNCC decided to confront it head-on, the assumption was that a literacy test for voting was appropriate, and the issue was whether it was applied fairly. Accompanying this question was the internalized oppression of many Black people who expressed it in such phrases as “politics is white folks business,” who deferred to their own middle-class in meetings, who called me “Mr. Miller” despite all my efforts to get them not to. (In a compromise solution, I became “Mr. Mike.”)

“Unqualified” people defer to those who are “qualified”, not because the latter have demonstrated leadership or competency but because of a status having to do with class, race, ethnicity, gender or some other identity unrelated to the matter at hand. Organizing shifts people from being the objects of the decisions of others to “subjects” actively engaged in public matters having to do with their interests and the common good. One of the most common refrains I heard from people I worked with in my years as an organizer was, “Mike, If you had told me before I got into this organization that I would be doing \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank), I would have told you, ‘you’re crazy’.”

Gold standard organizations shift increasing numbers of people, and finally categories of people, from the internalized oppression of feeling “less than” to a sense of full personhood. This shift happens both in the course of action itself and in internal programs and procedures of training, evaluation, reflection, celebration and education—which I discuss further below. (Just to be clear: none of this is to say that you don’t want licensed plumbers, board certified doctors or any of a host of other qualifications that are related to specific jobs. In the gold standard organization members would know how to speak up for themselves; they wouldn’t automatically defer to anybody—though they certainly would respect the words of trusted leaders.

**Relative wealth, status and power.**

Writ large, if we take small “d” democracy seriously, we should have in our minds’ eyes ways of breaking up all concentrations of power, hierarchies of unearned status, and sharp inequalities of wealth and income. Programs and policies our organizations support should contribute toward these ends. The notion that “one person/one vote” has meaning when people with vast sums of money can make big contributions to political campaigns makes no sense. It deserves the aphorism, “if you want to keep a man a slave, give him the vote and tell him he’s free.” Nor does it make sense that corporate executives and managers can offer high paying jobs to politicians when they leave office if they do that corporation’s bidding while in office. Similarly the idea that wealth confers status is contrary to the rough equality of standing that is prerequisite to constituting a democratic people.

Finally, no corporation, government or nonprofit should have the power as to be able to impose upon the body politic its interest or way of thinking. When a corporation says (and can implement), “if labor union ‘x’ does ‘y’, we will move our factory to a place where there aren’t such unions,” or “if a community requires that we do ‘x’, we will not locate there (or move away from there),” it has power that is incompatible with a democratic society. When government “slum clearance” efforts destroy low-income and working-class neighborhoods so high cost developments can replace them, the democratic premise is undermined.

The gold standard organization carefully uses small issues to build its power so that it can engage in issues that more and more deeply deal with present vast inequalities in the distribution of wealth, status and power. Failure to do so limits organizing to tinkering at the edges of problems whose center must be addressed. To address them without power is one kind of mistake; to fail to address them when the power to do so can be assembled is another. The worlds of community and labor organizing are prone to the latter.

In today’s circumstance of climate change and species extinction, vast inequalities of wealth, status and power, deep problems of student debt, homelessness and inadequate health care, and a military-industrial complex that fosters foreign policy goals of domination and control, and a list of others requires power that no one center of people power possesses. No single union or federation of them, no single community organization or network of them, can successfully address these problems.

The gold standard organization would take the lead to create coalitions whose sum is greater than its parts. Without such a coalition, for example, environmental disaster will be unavoidable. Severe effects from the climate crisis will already be visited upon our grandchildren, and for the younger of us our children. Without such coalitions, we will not be able to stop capital strikes that take place when big investors don’t like the direction public policy is taking. Isn’t that what’s happening when the news tells us, “the stock market took a turn downward in the face of new uncertainties resulting from Trump’s freeze on Chinese imports”? Isn’t that what’s taking place when wealth seeks offshore shelters against progressive taxation?

**Big Campaigns**

On occasion, a people power organization ought to undertake a campaign on an important issue that it can’t win alone. It ought to reach out to others who have been unwilling to join it and, in effect, say, “you don’t have to join us but we should come together on an ad hoc basis to fight for ‘x’ which directly affects all our people and which none of us alone can do anything about.” Such coalitions are difficult but necessary. To an initiating organization, they might have a benefit beyond the possibility of wining the campaign: if others like working with you, learn from your organizing staff, like the discipline you bring to strategies and tactics for change, gain meaning from the way you build internal education and values reflection into your action, then they might want to join you.

Big campaign coalitions can be on an issue or for a candidate or candidates. If the latter, I like the partisan/non-partisan approach in which incumbent politicians and rival candidates are asked where they stand on the people’s program—whatever issue or issues are centrally important at the time. How the politicians respond is the subject of a widespread voter education, registration and get-out-the-vote drive. Nobody is directly endorsed, but the voters themselves will be guided in their voting by the stand taken (or not taken) by rivals running for office.

**At The Table**

The demonstration of power gets you to the table. At the table, proposals are made by people power organizations. They are accepted, rejected or negotiated. If agreement is reached, your power to enforce them will be tested. If rejected, you must demonstrate the capacity to negatively affect the interests of your adversary. Campaigns seek to do that. When you win, you are back at the table—this time with the likelihood of reaching agreement.

Now a new danger arises: getting too comfortable at the table. Its more formal name is “cooptation”. That’s where most American unions ended up in the 1950s and 1960s, after the militant ones were for the most part destroyed by McCarthyism. Most 1960s and 1970s community organizations ended up there as well, only in their case coopted by the administration of programs—seduced by the opportunity to, for example, build houses they lost sight of building power.

The alternative to cooptation was, and is, to up the ante once at the table: new proposals must get more-and-more deeply at the root of problems. *As long as injustices remain, that is the necessary role of people power.* But power must precede program: to make a more radical (going to the root) proposal for which you lack the power to negotiate is to reject power for prophesy. Prophetic voices are needed, but that is not the role of people power organizations. They have to win or they soon shrink or die.

When Baltimore BUILD decided to organize workers—an effort that led to the country’s first living wage—they were told by the business community with which they had negotiated important education and other agreements that they were going outside their purview. BUILD had entered into a partnership with AFSCME. It looked like community and labor were making an alliance, something the business community and local government didn’t look upon with friendly eyes. BUILD replied, in effect, you run your organization and we’ll run ours. They weren’t coopted.

**Values, Vision and Program**

The organizer’s saying, “power precedes program” is a wise one. Most people don’t want to sit around arguing about, or even discussing, policies or programs which stand little-to-no chance of being adopted by decision makers. Those might be good topics for university coffee houses and activists, but they don’t contribute to building mass-based people power.

On the other hand, it seems to me there is something absent in most organizer conversations in the Alinsky tradition: the question of vision. Vision is more specific than values and less specific than policies. It fleshes out, but not concretely, what it is for which we are struggling.

In their effort to be practical and to focus on building power, some organizers have narrowed their field of vision. They speak about organizing the moderates. When Alinsky used similar terms to distinguish himself from people who couldn’t organize their way out of a paper bag, he didn’t eliminate from conversation the identification of where we should be heading. In a moment, I will quote him at some length on this question. But before going there, I want to clarify two things.

First, everyone has an ideology. Too many organizers distinguish themselves from others by saying they don’t have an ideology. Frankly, that is nonsense. Alinsky used the term “rigid ideology” to distinguish himself from those he thought were locked into systems of thought that distorted their understanding of the realities in which they worked, and blinded them to new opportunities. He didn’t claim to have no ideology.

Second, the focus on “moderates” can be too narrowing. Would an organizer in New York City in the heyday of Local 1199, District 65 and other “left” unions of the period not want to include them in a mass organization he was putting together? I would hope not. Would an organizer in San Francisco largely-Latino Mission District in the late 1960s (I was such an organizer) not want to include Latino youth who were militant, or the Farm Workers Union support group, or any of a number of other groups that were members of the Mission Coalition Organization (MCO)? We didn’t. And when they raised program and policy ideas that were too far out for the vast majority of our church, union, block club and tenant union members they were voted down.

As a matter of fact, in Alinsky’s first organizing effort—the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council—two path-breaking power building accomplishments took place: Alinsky and his associate Joe Meegan got feuding Catholic parishes, each dominated by a particular Eastern European nationality group plus an Irish and a largely Mexican parish, into the same organization with the blessings of the Archdiocese. Further, they got the Communist-led local of the Packinghouse Workers union in as well. The power of BYNC was in its ability to bring center, left and right in one organization and move it in a “progressive” direction.

Now let’s look in some detail at what Alinsky had to say about vision:

The Radical believes that all peoples should have a high standard of food, housing, and health…places human rights far above property rights…is for universal, free public education…is antagonistic to any idea of [social planning] which works from the top down. Democracy to him is working from the bottom up…believes completely in *real* equality of opportunity for all peoples…insists on full employment for economic security but is just as insistent that man’s work should not only provide economic security but also be such as to satisfy the creative desires within all men…will fight privilege and power whether it be inherited or acquired by any small group…recognizes that constant dissension and conflict is and has been the fire under the boiler of democracy…

“What Is a Radical”, pp 24-25

*Reveille for Radicals*

His [the radical’s] is a quest for a future: where everyone would have a job, a real job—more than just a paycheck—a job that would be meaningful to society as well as to the worker; a future where everyone would have full opportunities to achieve his potentiality; where education, good housing, health, and full equality for all would be universal; a promised land of peace and plenty; a world where all the revolutionary slogans of the past would come to life: ‘Love your neighbor as you would love yourself’; ‘You are your brother’s keeper’; ‘Liberty, Fraternity, Equality’; ‘All men are created equal’; Peace and bread’; ‘For the general welfare’; a world where the Judeo-Christian values and the promise of the American Constitution would be made real.”

*Reveille for Radicals,* p. xvii

Introduction to 1968/69 edition

…we are concerned with how to create mass organizations to seize power and give it to the people; to realize the democratic dream of equality, justice, peace, cooperation, equal and full opportunities for education, full and useful employment, health, and the creation of those circumstances in which man can have the chance to live by values that give meaning to life. We are talking about a mass power organization which will change the world into a place where all men and women walk erect, in the spirit of that credo of the Spanish Civil War, ‘Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.’ This means revolution.

*Rules for Radicals*, pp 3

Saul Alinsky

[During the 1930s Great Depression…]A new mood began stirring in the land and a mutual misery began to eat away the traditional American virtues of rugged individualism, dog-eat-dog competition and sanctimonious charity. People began reaching out for something, anything, to hang on to -- and they found one another. We suddenly began to discover that the ruthless law of the survival of the fittest no longer held true, that it was possible for other people to care about our plight and for us to care about theirs…[N]ew voices and new values began to be heard, people began citing John Donne's "No man is an island," and as they started banding together to improve their lives, they found how much in common they had with their fellow man. It was the first time since the abolitionist movement, for example, that there was any significant black-white unity, as elements of both races began to move together to confront the common enemies of unemployment and starvation wages. This was one of the most important aspects of the Thirties: not just the political struggles and reforms but the sudden discovery of a common destiny and a common bond of humanity among millions of people. It was a very moving experience to witness and be part of it.

…The giant corporations were unbelievably arrogant and oppressive and would go to any lengths to protect their freedom -- the freedom to exploit and the freedom to crush any obstacle blocking the golden road to mammon. Not one American corporation -- oil, steel, auto, rubber, meat packing -- would allow its workers to organize; labor unions were branded subversive and communistic and any worker who didn't toe the line was summarily fired and then blacklisted throughout the industry. When they defied their bosses, they were beaten up or murdered by company strikebreakers or gunned down by the police of corrupt big-city bosses allied with the corporations, like in the infamous Memorial Day Massacre in Chicago when dozens of peaceful pickets were shot in the back.

…… I can sympathize with the impatience and pessimism of a lot of kids, but they've got to remember that real revolution is a long, hard process. Radicals in the United States don't have the strength to confront a local police force in armed struggle, much less the Army, Navy and Air Force…

America isn't Russia in 1917 or China in 1946, and any violent head-on collision with the power structure will only ensure the mass suicide of the left and the probable triumph of domestic fascism. So you're not going to get instant nirvana -- or *any* nirvana, for that matter -- and you've got to ask yourself, "Short of that, what the hell can I do?" The only answer is to build up local power bases that can merge into a national power movement that will ultimately realize your goals. That takes time and hard work and all the tedium connected with hard work, which turns off a lot of today's rhetorical radicals. But it's the only alternative to the continuation of the present system.

…[I]t's the continuing fight against the status quo that revitalizes society, stimulates new values and gives man renewed hope of eventual progress. The struggle itself is the victory. History is like a relay race of revolutions; the torch of idealism is carried by one group of revolutionaries until it too becomes an establishment, and then the torch is snatched up and carried on the next leg of the race by a new generation of revolutionaries. The cycle goes on and on, and along the way the values of humanism and social justice the rebels champion take shape and change and are slowly implanted in the minds of all men even as their advocates falter and succumb to the materialistic decadence of the prevailing status quo.

……[P]hilosophically, I could never accept any rigid dogma or ideology, whether it's Christianity or Marxism. One of the most important things in life is what judge Learned Hand described as "that ever-gnawing inner doubt as to whether you're right." If you don't have that, if you think you've got an inside track to absolute truth, you become doctrinaire, humorless and intellectually constipated.

…[Now, this doesn't mean that I'm rudderless; I think I have a much keener sense of direction and purpose than the true believer with his rigid ideology, because I'm free to be loose, resilient and independent, able to respond to any situation as it arises without getting trapped by articles of faith. My only fixed truth is a belief in people, a conviction that if people have the opportunity to act freely and the power to control their own destinies, they'll generally reach the right decisions. The only alternative to that belief is rule by an elite, whether it's a Communist bureaucracy or our own present-day corporate establishment. You should never have an ideology more specific than that of the founding fathers: "For the general welfare."…

… Of course there's [the present danger of a police state], as this whole national fetish for law and order indicates. But the thing to do isn't to succumb to despair and just sit in a corner wailing, but to go out and fight those fascist trends and build a mass constituency that will support progressive causes. Otherwise all your moaning about a police state will just be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

That's one of the reasons I'm directing all my efforts today to organizing the middle class, because that's the arena where the future of this country will be decided. And I'm convinced that once the middle class recognizes its real enemy -- the mega-corporations that control the country and pull the strings on puppets like Nixon and Connally -- it will mobilize as one of the most effective instruments for social change this country has ever known. And once mobilized, it will be natural for it to seek out allies among the other disenfranchised -- blacks, chicanos, poor whites.

Interview with Saul Alinsky by Eric Norden,

*Playboy.* April, 1972

How do we get people to expand their horizons in the period we’re in? One way is to send delegations to see how other people do things, and report backon what they learned: how does the Finnish public education system—first in the world—work, and why? What has NAFTA done in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America that has pushed people off their land and into the migratory stream that heads for the U.S. border? Does the coup d’etat the U.S. supported in Honduras (during the Obama Administration) have anything to do with the large numbers of Hondurans who are seeking entry into the U.S.? What are the Mondragon (in the Basque region of Spain) and Emilia-Romagna (in Northern Italy) worker-owned cooperatives like, and does their success suggest that we don’t need to reward CEOs with mega-millions to achieve quality and productivity in business enterprises? What is the Swedish health care system like, and why does it work without similarly rewarding pharmaceutical companies, hospitals and doctors as the American system does?

**Mutual aid**

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives has “four major themes” for its “mission, work, and accomplishments…” They are: to develop cooperatives and credit unions as a means for people to enhance the quality of their lives and improve their communities; save, protect and expand the landholdings of Black family farmers in the South; …provide information, skills, and awareness, in a cultural context, to help our members and constituents to build strong rural communities; develop, advocate and support public policies to benefit our membership of Black and other family farmers, and the low-income communities where they live.”

In the Basque region of Spain, the internationally-known Mondragon Cooperatives run a wide range of businesses, welfare and educational institutions that have dramatically altered the quality of life for tens of thousands of members and their surrounding communities. The same is true in the Emilia-Romagna region of Northern Italy.

When Cesar Chavez organized farm workers in California in the mid-1960s, his first organizing tools were a tire and other auto parts-buying club (farm workers drove long distances from their “shoe-string communities” to their workplaces—a reliable car was a necessity), a burial society and other mutual aid activities.

Unfortunately, few unions or broadly-based community organizations directly engage themselves in mutual aid activities, and when they do they are administered in very traditional ways. That need not be the case. A gold standard organization of low-to-middle income members might start with a food buying club—members would come together to make direct purchases from producers or producer warehouses thus achieving substantial savings in their food costs. Over time, with this small beginning a buying club can grow into a consumer cooperative that offers quality, affordable goods, well-paying jobs to those who work there, and the possibility of democratic forms of management. The workers could have representation on the coop’s member-elected board of directors.

Integrating mutual aid into an organization whose primary mission is changing the dominant institutions of society can be a tricky business. Mutual aid typically doesn’t rock the boat; it thus tends to be a conservatizing influence within such an organization. A strategic balance has to be achieved so that it doesn’t become the tail that wags the dog, urging caution when militancy is what’s required.

**PART II**

**BUILDING COMMUNITY and POWER**

**Growth.**

If what an organization is doing is of value, it should grow. Organizations with a mission to transform the world should want to persuade the un-persuaded to join them. Growth in numbers is central to building the people power required for social, economic, political and cultural transformation. If we are serious about challenging a “watch out for Numero Uno” culture, breaking the concentrated power of major financial and corporate corporations, ending great disparities in wealth and income, and ending a society in which people are centrally valued for what they buy and own, then we should be aggressively recruiting.

The gold standard organization of organizations or federation would show a steady path of growth in member organizations. It would be developing pressure “from the bottom up” within resistant organizations such that their leaders would come around and want to join or they would be replaced. Why wouldn’t I tell my neighbor who is in “x” non-member congregation that our organization of congregations is living out our faith and solving material problems in our lives. Why wouldn’t I ask her to come to one of our “actions” so she could see what we do. Why wouldn't she, then, try to convince some of her co-congregants to check this community organization out. And why wouldn’t they be acting within their organization to get it to join ours? And why wouldn’t the leadership of the people power group be respectfully talking with non-member leaders as well.

The same standard should apply to a “direct membership” organization in which individuals, not organizations, join.

It puzzles me to see an organization that has more or less the same number of members, whether organizations or individuals, as when I first learned about it ten or more years later after a track-record of delivering results.

**Organize The Unorganized**

In its heyday in the 1930s, the United Mine Workers Union contributed funds that were central to organizing steel, auto, rubber, electrical, packinghouse and other industrial unions in the newly formed Committee (later Congress) of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Those funds came from miners’ dues. Men working in the mines understood that the more workers were organized across the country, the better of it would be for the miners…and for those other workers and for the country. Today, the organizing department of most unions, as well as that of the AFL-CIO is small, indeed very small. That budget line item tells you a lot about the state of labor in this country.

The details are even more revealing. The question of reallocating money to organizing, or a dues increase for organizing, is typically thought of as serving members versus organizing non-members. That’s the wrong framework. The disease of American labor is that its principal voice is seen as a provider of services to and advocate for interests of the members. That’s what “the union” (meaning the full time people at the headquarters) does. Contrast that with “us members are the union and our power is directly related to how many workers in our sector and as a whole are organized *in the world*.”

The Gold standard organization has a speakers’ bureau or an “organize the unorganized” committee or some similar formation in which its leaders and rank-and-file activists act as missionaries for the cause. Its best spokespeople address hundreds if not thousands in public meetings and gatherings, as well as in one-to-one face-to-face meetings. It spends a significant portion of its budget on organizing the unorganized.

**Community**

Over the years I’ve developed a careful and relatively precise definition of this feel-good work: “a group of people who support and challenge each other to act powerfully, both individually and collectively, to affirm, defend and advance their values and interests. Organizing must walk a tight rope between the relative isolation of, for example, the Amish who are able to stand for their beliefs because they essentially separate themselves from the society around them, and, at the other end, absorption into the dominant culture. Community with that capacity is built with specific tools that organizers and leaders have identified and have used over the years to deepen meaning and understanding of what we do and why we do it.

The gold standard organization would be making full use of these tools, including:

**Reflection.**

Whether a brief statement before and/or after taking action, or a lengthier statement in the form of a sermon or discussion, the idea of reflection is to relate deeply held beliefs to the action at hand. If engaging in a rent strike is initially about concrete benefits for housing and respectful treatment by the landlord, think how much deeper its meaning becomes to participants when they see themselves as acting as Jesus did when he threw the money lenders out of The Temple. Or if today’s picket line in front of a struck enterprise is an example of living out the preface to a union’s constitution, won’t that make participation in it much more valuable to the pickets? The art of reflection is taking texts—the Bible, Koran, Torah for instance; the Bill of Rights or Declaration of Independence for instance; the preface of a union constitution to take another example and relating that text to the immediate situation. My favorite example is this from Abolitionist Frederick Douglass:

*Let me give you a word of the philosophy of reform.* *The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.*

*This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress*.

**Interpretation**

What story do people who participate in an action tell to their family, neighbors and friends when they return home? What response to the common, “I don’t waste my time going to meetings” is appropriate? There must be a message that responds to such questions. Organizer and experienced leaders provide that message in brief interpretations they provide after an action or meeting takes place.

I distinguish interpretation from reflection and education because it is more closely connected to the action at hand. It is best done right after an action, before participants leave to get on with their business-as-usual. It answers, “What did we accomplish today?” Armed with the answer to that question, when a family member, co-worker or neighbor asks in a skeptical tone, “What did you accomplish?” there is a clear and compelling answer.

**Internal education.**

An internal education program places current struggles in the context of democratic struggles that have taken place throughout our nation’s history, and that now take place throughout the world. If our people can look at history through the lens Frederick Douglass proposes, they gain deeper understanding of the world around them. How have cooptation, divide and conquer, marginalization and other adversary strategies undone powerful social movements and organizations in the past? What is to be learned from great strikes, electoral campaigns, social movements and organization building of the past? What patterns are to be found in ‘x’ campaign that might provide guidance for the campaign we are now in?

In 2013, I taught an organizing class at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee campus. Enrollment in the class was very diverse, with many African-American and Latino students, an age range from recent high school graduates to grandparents, and education from high school to PhDs. I used a role-play to teach political theory. The situation I proposed was this: a landlord (I played him) raised his tenants’ rent $200.00 a month. They sought and obtained a meeting with him. As Mr. Landlord, I was quite candid: “the market will support this increase; if you can’t afford it, you can move. That’s the way the market works.”

Initially, the tenants told me about the hardships this would impose on most of them. None of their stories moved me to change. With my guided discussion during breaks in the role play the tenants-as-students concluded that it wasn’t that I didn’t know the impact of my decision. The next approach they took sought to convince me that they were good tenants, stable, took care of their places, and that the market I was looking at was unstable and would have high turnover. That didn’t budge me either. Another break for discussion and the tenants-as-students concluded that I knew what I was doing, and their effort to persuade me that they were more competent than I as a manager of my apartments wasn’t getting them anyplace either. It was now clear that I wanted to maximize the profit I could make on my investment. I had different interests.

Every action undertaken by a people power organization offers the opportunity for this lesson on how the world works. It might be that the system (in this case the landlord) doesn’t know the ill effects of what it is doing (or not doing), in which case informing it would solve the problem. It might be that the system is incompetent to solve a problem, in which case training, reorganizing or abandoning it might be the solution. Finally, and typically the case, it might be that the system has different interests, in which case solving the tenants’ problem requires changing the interests of the landlord or changing the system by which housing is provided.

The community organization is a seminar on politics—if organizers treat it that way. And what I’ve found is that people are anxious to conceptualize the lessons their experiences are offering them.

**Creating a counter culture to the dominant one.**

The most powerful experiences I’ve had in this dimension of community building took place when theater was introduced to action. In the Mississippi Delta and on the United Farm Workers peregrinación (pilgrimage) from Delano to Sacramento, skits were performed under the directorship, in Mississippi, of John O’Neal, and, in California, directed by Luis Valdez. Audiences of African-American plantation sharecroppers and day laborers, and of Mexican and Mexican-American grape workers came alive when, on an impromptu stage an organizer agitated, a sheriff intimidated, a citizen or worker got engaged, an uncle tom or tio taco got silenced, and people decided to act. In a more recent production, more than 100 trade unionists attended the performance I attended of Gene Bruskin’s new play *The Moment Was Now*. They alternatively cheered and booed depending on what his drama’s characters were doing.

**Celebration**

Recognition of participants, a negotiating team, planning committee and others creates a new story of how change comes about. Not just “big name” people, but everyday people are the creators of history. “I am somebody” is how striking Nashville garbage collectors spoke of themselves on picket signs they carried. It is no accident that the word “recognition” describes the change in relationship with status quo power of isolated individuals versus organized people.

Creating heroes and heroines builds self-confidence in people who are celebrated, and make them important to the celebrants. And it tells the story to others that you, too, can be somebody beyond the various statuses you now hold and the ways in which you think of yourself.

**Social, Cultural and Athletic Activities**

Athletic teams, drill teams, dances, dinners, concerts and other activities that bring people together are another set of activities that can solidify community.

The gold standard organization engages regularly and deeply in reflection, interpretation, internal education, celebration and social activities. We can see how well it’s doing by listening to local leaders, activists and members talk about what they’re doing, what it means to them, and how they see themselves as makers of history.

**The Foreign Policy Question**

We must include the role of the United States in the world in a discussion of gold standard organizing. Most organizer friends of mine will disagree, with many good reasons for doing so. This is a question that can no longer be avoided.

Since the 1950s, when I was old enough to pay attention to these matters, he U.S. government has directly or indirectly participated in coups against democratically elected governments in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. One of the major reasons for the 25 million refugees now in the world is this kind of activity. Chickens come home to roost when those forced from their homes because of our foreign policy become the undocumented people crossing our border.

Can we have within our government large-scale secret operations and still have a democracy? Can we have an executive branch that with seeming impunity can make war without going through the constitutionally required declaration of war by Congress, and still have a democracy? Can we make enemies of people throughout the world who are striving for democracy, and justice and not alter the character of our country?

The ideology of “American exceptionalism” provides a rationalization for American empire that is widespread in the electorate. It provides a fig leaf to cover what is simply called intervention or imperialism when other countries do the same thing.

Vietnam and Iraq awoke vast numbers of the American people to the fact that their government lied to them about its foreign policy. The hearings on the Vietnam war held by Senator Frank Church’s Foreign Relations Committee eroded whatever confidence may have existed among anyone who was paying attention. Mass media now are willing to criticize foreign policy. The U.S. Labor Committee Against The War got the AFL-CIO to officially oppose the war in Iraq—the first time in its history that organized labor dissented from American foreign policy.

Speaking of the “cold war” with the Soviet Union, President Dwight Eisenhower said,

…What can the world, or any nation in it, hope for if no turning is found on this dread road? [What can be expected?] The *worst* is atomic war. The *best* would be: a life of perpetual fear and tension; a burden of arms draining the wealth and the labor of all peoples; a wasting of strength that defies the American system or the Soviet system or any system to achieve true abundance and happiness for the peoples of this earth.

**Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.**

**This world in arms…is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.**

**The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities.** **It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population.** **It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals…**

**…This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.**

…This is one of those times in the affairs of nations when the gravest choices must be made, if there is to be a turning toward a just and lasting peace.

Because of the distribution of armed services bases and military production facilities, the military-industrial complex has a constituency in a large number of congressional districts throughout the country.

The threats of war and environmental disaster raise serious difficulties for organizers. In this work, you begin by careful listening to learn the stories, hopes, fears, concerns and problems of people with whom you’re working. You challenge (or agitate) them to act on the things they have told you are important to them, but about which they are typically doing nothing—mainly because they feel, and in fact are, powerless to change the status quo. You think through with them what can be done. In the course of doing that, you tell stories of the successes of others who have organized. You train people in the skills required to build people power.

American foreign policy, global warming and species extinction questions can be discussed with leaders who already have the competence and self-confidence to think they know how to challenge the status quo and change it. These questions, however, violate an organizer axiom: “stay within the experience of your people”. Here we are going outside their experience. What gives us the license to do that is the fact that there are now on-the-ground community and labor organizations that have histories, are deeply rooted in their members and constituencies, whose organizers and organizing networks are trusted both by local leaders and by a range of mid- and upper-level leaders in churches, synagogues and mosques.

Many of my activist friends think organizations like unions and community organizations should take a stand on this complex of issues. In general, I disagree though there are specific instances—the Vietnam War was one of them—where taking a stand was important and broadly-based organizations could do so without bitter internal division. But for the most part, I think we would do better to foster a genuine discussion and debate within unions, congregations and broadly-based community organizations. We ought to push for debates on these issues in schools and other public forums. Spokesmen for intervention in, for example, Iran should be invited; opponents as well. This approach could reach the unreached. While it takes an organization’s leaders “outside the experience” of its members, it doesn’t speak for them on something they typically don’t feel competent to speak about. I believe it could have a major impact in American politics.

**Who Pays?**

This is tough. Most community organizations are around the tinfoil level on this question (far from the gold standard), dependent upon a mix of foundation grants, wealthy donors, direct mail, social media, government programs and corporate gifts. Even worse, these funds are not granted as a result of actions, but instead are the result of a careful courtship done by full-time staff so the process of fundraising is totally separated from leadership, activists and members of the organization. Unions are generally member-funded because of “dues check-off”. How many of them could collect dues if check-off didn’t exist? And increasingly the foundation trap seduces some of them as well.

Members will pay dues. They have to be asked—from the very beginning. They have to make budgets through their internal planning processes. They have to assess and collect dues. They have to have events like raffles, souvenir books and others that can raise substantial sums of money. The core budget of gold standard organizations comes from members dues and fundraising activities.

The importance of bottom-up funding was well-expressed by the United Farm Workers’ initial organizer and leader Cesar Chavez. In an oft-cited interview, he addressed the important topic of members funding the union in its early days. What he said then is no less true today for people-power democratic organizations.

We started with [the principle that] no matter how poor the people, they had a responsibility to help the union. If they had two dollars for food, they had to give one dollar to the union. Otherwise, they would never get out of the trap of poverty. They would never have a union, because they couldn’t afford to sacrifice a little bit more on top of their misery. The statement “They’re so poor they can’t afford to contribute to the group” is a great cop-out. You don’t organize people by being afraid of them. You never have. You never will. You can be afraid of them in a variety of ways. But one of the main ways is to patronize them. You know the attitude: Blacks or browns or farm workers are so poor that they can’t afford to [pay for] their own group…

The union’s initial 1962 dues were $3.50 a month. That’s worth about $30.00 in 2019. See: http://www.in2013dollars.com/1860-dollars-in-2017?amount=1 inflation indicator.

Foundations can be treated as targets just as public administrators, politicians, corporate executives, landlords and others can. When a foundation refuses to meet with leaders of an organization, that is an actionable matter. The tactic doesn’t have to be the same as might be used against rip-off neighborhood merchant, but pressure does need to be applied. I am acquainted with a program officer of the highly respected San Francisco Foundation. He tells the story of a phone-in campaign from members of a broadly-based community organization that led him to say to his grants committee, “This proposal has more community support than most of what we fund. We need to fund it whether it conforms exactly to our guidelines or not.”

**Striving for the Gold**

There is a big difference between “We are a gold standard organization (or network)” and “Our organization (or network) is or sets the gold standard.” The former can be attained by many. The latter only by one. When I became a professional organizer, there was a king of the mountain machismo that characterized many, if not most, of the people doing the work. And they were overwhelmingly men. That is changing. It needs to change more.

**Is The Moment Now?**

It’s time for truth telling. As a result of organizers’ work in the past 60 years there have been important changes for the common good. Advances to the common welfare have been made. Marginalized and discriminated against workers went on strike and won. Community organizations won important victories, as did identity and interest groups. But other truths outweigh those: wealth and power in the world is more concentrated, in the hands of fewer people, than it has ever been. Global climate change threatens unimaginable disasters for future generations, and continues apace. Lip service is paid to nature’s wrath, but she isn’t negotiating. American empire has tentacles reaching around the world, with endless war in the Middle East one of its results. The “isms” of race, gender, national origin and others persist. Authoritarian populism now is incumbent power in countries like India, Hungary, Philippines, Brazil and our own.

We are now in a time of social movement. Millions of people across the globe are voicing anger at the status quo. A more humble and ecumenical spirit among organizers is called for. The 1930s Popular Front, an old term discredited for its deep problems, had some positive qualities as well. We need a small “d” democratic version of it today.

**Standing for the Whole**

Broad- or mass-based community organizing should stand for the whole. Two things are required to do that.

The positions, strategy and tactics an organization adopts must be supported, or at least not opposed, by the constituency for which it claims to speak. That is one of the things that distinguishes this organizing from prophetic or activist mobilizing. This is not to say there isn’t a role for the latter. The Deep South civil rights movement would not have been launched in the Deep South without the sit-ins and freedom rides that preceded the community organizing and voter registration of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Further, the organization itself must include as members all walks of life that constitute the overwhelming majority of that constituency. At one end of the spectrum, that includes conservative small business associations and homeowner groups, and cautious interest and identity organizations. At the other, it should include militant and radical groups. And the bulk of its membership should be the vast majority who are typically between these two ends of the political spectrum. When one or the other end proposes policies or actions that most people can’t support, they will vote them down. If there internal way of proceeding alienates that majority, they will demonstrate to all that the speak for no one beyond their narrow base. Can that be done? I know it can: I did it in my own work as an organizer, as did others I know.

**My Debt**

One of the negative consequences of dependency on foundation money is the tendency to claim uniqueness used by self-promoting groups as they seek to prove to a program officer that they are new and different—values that most foundations promote. The dangers of such invidious distinction are several.

Being different, of course, is related to being better. The organizer acquaintance who calls his network “the gold standard”, and whose use of that phrase prompted this article, is not unique in his claims. Lots of people say about their work that it is unique, implying it is better. That makes cooperation with one another a little more difficult. It’s different from saying, “we do good work”, or even “we do excellent work.” Others can do good or excellent work as well. The claim to a monopoly on the gold implies everyone else is silver, brass, tin, iron, cooper or some other lesser value.

It doesn’t help make organizing an attractive field. Years ago I met an organizer who came to the Bay Area looking for a job. She interviewed with affiliates of three different networks. She asked each of them what made their network different. If it wasn’t so sad, the response would be humorous: “We take leadership development seriously,” implying that others pay lip service to it. When she spoke with me she found that response disheartening. “How are we ever going to build the power to transform the country if that’s how we talk about others doing this work?” she asked me. I didn’t have an answer.

We need a different kind of statement of who we are. Here’s mine. I stand on the shoulders of many who came before me and some who are my contemporaries, and more generally on all those throughout history who have engaged everyday people in the struggle for justice for themselves and a broader common good. The specifics in my case are these:

* From my student movement days at the University of California, Henry di Suvero, who opened the path for me to campus political engagement, Fritjof Thygeson, a utopian socialist, Carey McWilliams, Jr, a tough minded communitarian realist, and Herb Mills, my best friend, an independent radical and principal mentor of mine with whom I discussed most of the major organizing efforts in which I engaged during my lifetime were all important mentors.
* James Foreman, Stokely Carmichael/Kwame Ture, Bob Moses, Sam Block, Wazir Peacock, Cynthia Washington, Casey Hayden and many other field secretaries of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, whose courage, imagination, determination and intelligence were a central force in the Deep South civil rights movement. Among them, Bob Moses had the greatest influence, and channeled through him because of her influence on him is Ella Baker.
* Saul Alinsky, who watched, participated in and learned from John L. Lewis and the industrial unions, and imaginatively developed a parallel concept of “mass organization” that he applied to working class neighborhoods and later to Mexican-American and African-American communities.
* The cadre of organizers Alinsky mentored, several of whom I got to know fairly well. Ed Chambers, Richard Harmon and Fred Ross in particular shaped much of my thinking. Because of Ross, I came in relationship with Cesar Chavez and was co-coordinator of the first farm workers’ union boycott. And fellow organizers in this tradition, including Arnie Graf, Larry Gordon, Mary Ochs and Gerald Taylor.
* Priests, women religious, ministers and rabbis whose faith propelled them to work for justice. Among those who were important to me: Fr. Jack Egan, Sr. Margaret Cafferty, Rev. Robert Davidson, Rev. William R. Grace, Rev. David Knotts, Rev. A. L. Johnson, Rev. Richard Turner, Rev. George Todd and Rev. Aurelious Walker.
* Wade Rathke and the ACORN promise he lifted up, though only partly realized, of a national organization whose local units were specifically and deeply rooted in local neighborhoods where continuing face-to-face relationships took place, and whose national presence made its mark—a rare combination .
* In the background, John L. Lewis, Harry Bridges, Lou Goldblatt, Walter Reuther and other giants of the 1930s labor movement whose strategic and tactical brilliance built industrial unions and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).
* The on-the-ground organizers who worked within factories, mines, mills and on docks as rank-and-file “internal organizers”. Some of them became full-time organizers, the majority of them Communists and other leftists, who were dispatched by the CIO to build unions. I’ve known several of them.
* And professors and others whose writing I read and/or classes I took, including: James Baldwin, Luke Bretherton, Lewis Coser, Farrell Dobbs, William Domhoff, Charles Gulick, Sidney Coontz, Ruth McKinney, C. Wright Mills, Charles Payne, Mike Quinn, Robert Slayton, and Sheldon Wolin.

Gold Standard organizers emphasize common purpose and seek to accommodate their differences. If we fail to do that, insisting on the purity of our own approach, we will not build the people power required for our times.

***Learn more about Mike and his work at*** [***www.organizetrainingcenter.org***](http://www.organizetrainingcenter.org)