***Remarks by Mike Miller in his “Deliberation” with Frank Bardacke on Bardacke’s understanding of Saul Alinsky in his book,* Trampling Out The Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers*, on Friday, May 11, 2012, at the International Longshore & Warehouse Union, San Francisco.***

**Thank you all for coming, and to Craig Merrilees and Peter Olney and ILWU for hosting this deliberation. I’d like also to thank Frank for his very generous treatment of me in his book. Frank’s book is long. I encourage you to read it. It’s a very important book. I’ve read it twice.**

**Frank and I share a deep commitment to small “d” democracy, and to the idea that everyday people can and should be the agents of their own liberation. I think that’s why we can have this deliberation.**

**I also think Frank is in basic error in his understanding of Saul Alinsky. Placing the origins of Chavez’ authoritarianism in the lessons he took from Alinsky is like placing the origins of Mussolini’s fascism in what he learned from Antonio Gramsci. The important thing to understand is what Chavez rejected of Alinsky’s, not what he implemented.**

**This error is important “for the record,” but that’s not why I’m interested in correcting it. Major sections of the left have a general, and I think counter-productive, antagonism toward Alinsky. I concluded from five years on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and directorship of an Alinsky Kansas City, Missouri organizing project that Alinsky has a great deal to teach that is a necessary but not sufficient platform upon which to build anything that might remotely come to be real people power for transformational change in this country.**

**Our mutual friend Terry Cannon wrote us last night asking “What is this deliberation all about?” Here’s how I replied: “For me, it is about what is required to build people power sufficient for social transformation. And by social transformation I mean a society that is organized around the central small "d" democratic principle that the people (not unaccountable elites, not oligarchies of wealth, not so-called "markets") shall rule.  I have been convinced for a long time now that without building broadly-based, democratic, multi-issue, autonomous, member funded, multi-tactic, multi-constituency or majority constituency, etc, etc organizations, we won't move in the direction of that small "d" democratic society.  Such organizations are required if we are to do more than win specific campaigns (like stop the draft or even the war, end redlining, defeat urban renewal, elect whomever, etc).  They are required to win victories, enforce those victories, build upon those victories so that in the next round our side can up the ante and make demands that go more deeply toward social transformation, and alter the relations of power."**

**Saul Alinsky built such organizations. Full-time outside organizers were the people he hired and dispatched to communities that invited him to work with them. But they couldn’t be built without the investment of time, energy, ideas and talent of local leaders who invited Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) to work with them. And they were built on the interests of local people, guided by the values of the secular democratic tradition and the social and economic justice teachings of the world’s great religious traditions that already existed in those communities.**

**Frank’s Alinsky**

**I want to take exception to three major areas of criticism of Alinsky that are found in Frank’s book: first, the nature of the community that existed prior to the arrival of Alinsky and his organizer; second, the role of the outside organizer, and; third, the adequacy of Alinsky’s ideas if they are to make a contribution to transformational change.**

**Frank’s Alinsky sees the community as, and I’m going to quote and paraphrase Frank, apathetic, powerless, divided, incapable of defining an agenda around which it could unite, parochial and narrowly self-interested. Frank’s Alinsky “has no confidence that individuals can learn, through their own leadership, to measure their interests against the community interest, and to think of the good of the whole as well as of themselves. There are innumerable rivalries, fears, jealousies, and suspicions within the community. Blinded by their own ambitions, indigenous leaders will never find a way to unite a neighborhood, or a city, or a region. This problem…is solved by the organizer.”**

**Indeed the communities in which Alinsky worked were powerless, divided and had not built an organization through which they could realize their values and interests. But they weren’t apathetic. Alinsky explicitly said that apathy was the label put on such communities by outsiders who didn’t appreciate the fact that powerless people don’t want to bang their heads against a wall that constantly reminds them of their powerlessness. Nor were these leaders blinded by their own ambitions. It is precisely these leaders who invited Alinsky to come and work with them because they recognized that they weren’t getting together on their own, and that an outside catalyst with a great deal of skill could assist them in coming together.**

**For Alinsky, a leader is a person with a following. The organizer works through leaders—i.e. people with a following—and potential leaders—i.e. people who might develop a following—and brings them together so that they can create a people power organization. It is not his organization, but theirs. And Alinsky had a number of specific procedures to define the distinction between organizer and leader, including insisting that the outside organizer recruit a local successor and leave after a defined period of time.**

**Typically leaders are not activists. Leaders have something to protect beside their own positions. They want to know how others in their organization will think about something before endorsing it, and how endorsing it might affect the relationship of their group to other groups with which they have relationships. They want to know whether it will deliver something of meaning to their people. There are positives and negatives in this. The negative is that they can be too cautious. The positive is that when they agree to participate they can deliver other people.**

**Note, by the way, that though they are related, I’m making a sharp distinction between building an organization and, for example, winning a recognition election, or even getting a contract after winning that election, or running for public office, or winning an issue campaign by a boycott or legislation.**

**You can’t understand the success of the Community Service Organization—in which Chavez learned organizing from Alinsky’s organizer Fred Ross—without understanding the importance of the very same kinds of leaders that Frank identifies in farm worker crews. It is around such leaders that people power organizations are built. Alinsky is consistent, repetitive and unrelenting on that point. Whatever reasons Chavez may have had to oppose such leaders in Salinas Valley, they weren’t based on Alinsky’s understanding of the importance of local leadership.**

**Alinsky’s outside organizer, according to Frank, has a lot of techniques, but only two main ideas—popular participation and a specific form of organization. He is a juggler who keeps many plates in the air, but in putting them together doesn’t change the character of what he tosses. He manipulates “competing interests in such a way as to create community.” He uses “a whole arsenal of dirty tricks against the community’s external enemies.” Frank worries about their use within the organization, and claims, “Alinsky ignored this question...”**

**We need to do some deconstruction. Alinsky’s outside organizer has core values that she will not sacrifice. She will not, for example, organize one group of people to segregate another. She certainly has an arsenal of techniques or tactics. That’s what any good union organizer has. She uses tricks to get rivals and antagonists within the community to come together in mutual respect so they can build a common broadly-based organization that will be the vehicle for their interests, hopes, dreams and values. She is able to do that because those leaders hired her to do it. What is created is something new because out of the particularities of interests and concerns comes a vehicle for the common good.**

**Indeed Alinsky thought that popular participation was central to any meaningful idea of democracy. To get people power, you had to bring together a broad base of people and the institutions that were important to them. That required a lowest significant common denominator program. Getting to that lowest significant common denominator required discussion, discernment, debate, negotiation and compromise. The organizer could get people engaged in these activities because they either already knew, or it didn’t take much for them to see, that past differences were the basis for divide and rule by incumbent power, and that a democratic process within a mass organization was the means to resolve them.**

**Alinsky’s organizer is not “above” in some superior sense the community. But she is clearly detached from it. Indeed, local leaders’ willingness to work with Alinsky’s organizer was because they wanted a party who was neutral in their intramural disputes. That detachment makes it possible for people who sometimes hated each other to all talk with her. And it made it possible for her to use her tricks, typically a combination of agitation and flattery, to get them talking with one another.**

**We are not talking here about politicians who relate to constituents primarily by means of the mass media, speeches in mass meetings or patronage—organizations in which members don’t participate, or participate by means of polling, focus groups, occasional voting and other non-deliberative means. In Alinsky’s community organizations continuing relationships are deep. Lying to your fellow organization leaders and members as a means of self-promotion isn’t going to work for very long because they are carefully watching one another to decide who is going to provide continuing leadership in the organization. That’s why the tricks won’t work internally.**

**Had there been, for example, real locals in the United Farm Workers this kind of testing of each other would have taken place. That is precisely what Alinsky imagined his community organizing work to be—building locals that could at some point come together in city, metropolitan, state and national coalitions capable of addressing power structures that were beyond the reach of any local organization.**

**Finally, Frank’s Alinsky is limited in his ideas which are described as “incantation; there is no real attempt to analyze the connections, or possible contradictions, between the various goals and principles.” This Alinsky is simply another American pluralist dressed up in popular front rhetoric of the 1930s. In his understanding of the organizer, Frank’s Alinsky has a “a rather peculiar view of democratic leadership.”**

**Alinsky “doesn’t challenge how American political institutions are structured nor does he ever ask how there can be a democratic society without a democratic economy—that is, how capitalism can be compatible with democracy. For Alinsky, the problem—the essential problem of American democracy—is the people’s lack of participation. It ends up being our own fault.”**

**Again we need to do some deconstruction. In part, I am baffled by Frank’s assertions. Alinsky-trained organizers carefully analyzed the communities within which they worked and the power structures that were their context. Indeed, careful power analysis is central to developing effective strategy and tactics.**

**Alinsky had a vision for something new, but he thought you had to create it by starting with people where they were. That something new took particular, typically parochial, interests and wove them together into a vision for the common good. You couldn’t get to that vision without a multi-issue, multi-constituency organization.**

**Regarding it being your own fault, I think Frank got infected by the juggler metaphor and is juggling ideas here in a way that doesn’t work. Yes, you will continue to be oppressed, exploited, marginalized, and discriminated against until you do something about it. Don’t expect to be saved by some charismatic leader. You have to act. The choice is yours.**

**But most people will not make the choice to participate in the absence of a believable proposition regarding likely positive outcomes from that participation. Organizers paint believable pictures. They listen to learn the things people care most about. They agitate people to act on those things. They tell stories of how people just like the people in the community they’re now working in achieved those things. They train people in the skills to build people power organizations. But this is hardly saying it is the people’s fault that they are exploited.**

**Alinsky does not pose alternative structures to those that exist. But he doesn’t say you can’t pose alternatives either. He simply says that without power it doesn’t matter what options you have in your head, on a piece of paper, or in a speech, because they will never go any further than speculation if you don’t have organization. And he says that power gravitates to two poles: organized people and organized money. If, for example, you are interested in worker ownership, you have to have the power to negotiate with owners and/or government for a transfer of ownership from capitalists. If you are interested in public ownership, you have to have the power to get politicians to adopt a program of expropriation. All this is possible if you have the power to accomplish it. If you don’t, you can’t meaningfully fight for these transformational goals. Why is it incumbent upon Alinsky to talk about alternatives? There is nothing in Alinsky’s method or principles that precludes those discussions from happening. In Back of the Yards, the key Packinghouse Workers Union leader and organizer was an open member of the Communist Party, Herb March. March told me, “Saul and I had no strategic differences in Back of the Yards.”**

**What Happened To UFW**

**I’d like to say this about the farmworker boycott. Organizing the boycott is what Snick people called “mobilizing.” The lessons drawn from it are the same lessons that were implemented by Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008. They are the lessons that are implemented in most of what organized labor now calls “organizing.” Snick distinguished “mobilizing” from “organizing.” Organizers, in the Snick understanding of “organizing” built, or contributed to building, permanent, continuing, small “d” democratic, units of people power that were deeply rooted in the black community. In contrast, the boycott was interested in getting people to stop buying something, just as Obama’s Organizing for America was interested in getting people to vote for him, just as most of what labor now calls “organizing” is interested in getting a majority vote in an NLRB election or a vote to approve a contract.**

**In mobilizations, even those by democratic organizations, control necessarily remains for the most part at the top. In contrast, the deliberative processes in democratic organizations that lead to mobilizations are necessarily from the bottom up.**

**Alinsky didn’t use this terminology, but in his distinction of social movements and community organizing, he was making the same point.**

**From 1964 – 1966, I tried on various occasions to get Snick and Alinsky together. History might have been different in a good way had that happened. We are now in a new period of motion, at least I hope we are. History will be different if Occupy and the new motion it has precipitated learn from Alinsky, or otherwise learn his lessons. If not, there will be another upsurge of popular action. Those now in power will learn how to grant concessions, divide and conquer. There will be our counterpart of 1968, which, from my point of view, was the last outburst of a movement already in steep decline. I hope it will be otherwise.**

**Thank you**