**Winning Battles and Losing the War: The Progressive Advocacy World**.

***Mike Miller***

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IS t h e r e a new social movement brewing in the United States? A few signs are there, but they are far from certain. Was the initial surge of Occupy Wall Street energy the opening step on the long march it will take to slow, halt, and reverse the power of the plutocracy? For those of us who thirst for a new social movement, we need to be careful that we do not ignore the realities that are on the ground and consider the following questions. If we fail to consider these questions, we will continue to win battles—for example, millions of dollars for this or that program—but we will continue to lose the war—for example, billions of dollars taken from the low-to-middle class people of the country by means of foreclosures, destruction of good jobs, undermining of public education, weakening of social security and Medicare, and an increased concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few.

If there is a new surge of populist spirit and small “d” democratic energy, can it both win concrete victories and alter the relations of power? We have many examples of the former, but few of the latter.

What does it mean to alter the relations of power rather than just win a campaign, or even a series of campaigns? We have paid a steep price for not looking carefully at this question in the past.

If winning campaigns is not sufficient to alter the relations of power, what is missing in the conduct of our side of the war? While our army wins campaign battles, we are marching backward and getting smaller.

For the past fifty years, I have been attentive to these questions and to the question of building people power. Along the way, I have been involved in major and minor campaigns that won major and minor battles and achieved major and minor changes in public, corporate, and nonprofit policy and administration. I have seen people gain self-confidence and civic competence and overcome antagonisms toward the “other.” I have watched them shift from feelings of powerlessness to believing in the efficacy of collective action. I have seen other positive results as well.

But the truth of the matter is that as I look back at my history of organizing and campaigns, there was relatively little success at changing the relations of power for more than brief periods of time. Observing the past fifty years of labor and community organizing, issue campaign mobilization, electoral engagement, community development, public policy advocacy, and other approaches aimed at realizing democratic values, I draw the same conclusion: with exceptions deserving serious attention, our side—the side of small “d” democracy and social and economic justice—has been on a steady march backward for—give or take—forty to forty-five years.

For the most part, our victories have changed the composition of the lower levels of a hierarchy of wealth and power that is ever more concentrated at the top, with ever more people suffering from its decisions. I welcome people of color, women, gays, the disabled, and others who were once systematically excluded from these hierarchies. But it is the present hierarchy itself that is the problem, not only who occupies its tiers. We have opened American culture to diversity, which is good. But too often diversity is limited to advertising, one of the marketing tools fostering consumerism. Lest we be too self-congratulatory about even these victories, heed this from Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow:* “The mass incarceration of poor people of color, particularly black men, has emerged as a new caste system, one specifically designed to address the social, economic, and political challenges of our time. It is, in my view, the moral equivalent of Jim Crow” (Larkin 2012).

Yet, if you ask just about any organizer or activist about their accomplishments, you will hear a litany of victories. This is cognitive dissonance—where detachment from reality is utilized in order to avoid confronting what I believe is now a bleak picture. Some years ago, I heard Peter Dreier make the observation about us that “The whole is smaller than the sum of its parts.” He was right then, and his observation is true today.

To tell the truth, I feel rather peculiar as the bearer of this message of gloom about where we stand in the struggle for democracy and social and economic justice. Usually, I am a hope peddler; all organizers are hope peddlers. We could not do what we do if we did not believe things might get better if people became engaged and organized.

The observations in this chapter are, therefore, a caution, a warning against illusions that might be created by Occupy or any other current expression that looks like a significant social movement. I think we need a sober, realistic appraisal of where we are if we are to begin to get to where we want to be.

**The Nature of the Times**

Where are we after the first decade of the twenty-first century? Where have we been for the past fifty-or-so years? I would like to begin by looking at those questions.

A main problem is that there is a continuing decline of the voluntary associations that are central to civil society. Ask any organizer who was around in the 1960s and who is still in touch with work on the ground, and he or she will tell you about the decline.

The decline in voluntary associations is both a source and consequence of growing isolation, alienation, loneliness, and powerlessness among the vast majority of Americans that, in turn, is accompanied by the destruction of any meaningful sense of community upon which an understanding of the common good can be built. The new social media consolidates that isolation with the fantasy of huge numbers of “friends.” In combination, these factors contribute to xenophobia, a culture of rugged individualism, a “watch-out- for-number-one” mentality, and blind consumerism. Together, they result in the continuing erosion of any meaningful idea of democracy.

Even nominally democratic membership associations are, for the most part, advocates for and service providers to relatively inert members. You pay your dues and collect your benefits. But you are not a co-creator of the life of the organization. This is, unfortunately, the character of most unions and many religious congregations.

Without addressing the problem of civil society, we will be unable to address the other two major problems that I will name in a moment. If we had serious, small “d,” democratic people power in this country, the housing, employment, education, food, environmental, and other crises we read about daily would not be taking place. If we had serious democratic people power in this country, Huey Long’s economic populism would be common sense. In the early 1930s, Long, then governor of Louisiana and threatening to run for president against Franklin D. Roosevelt, had a soak-the-rich campaign. He said at one point, “We do not propose to say there shall be no rich men...We only propose that when one man gets more than he and his children and children’s children can spend or use in their lifetimes, that then we shall say that such person has his share. That means that a few million dollars is the limit to what any one man can own” (Long 1934). (In the Basque region of Spain, the Mondragon cooperatives go further and say the top-to-bottom income ratio (after taxes) should be roughly 6.5 to 1 (Ormaechea 1991).)

Without the pressure from below of Long’s campaign (aborted by his assassination in 1935), the Townsend movement’s stirrings among the elderly, Upton Sinclair’s near-win gubernatorial campaign in California running on a populist and socialist program, and, of course, the stirrings of the industrial union movement, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s leadership for a New Deal would not have been possible. If we had serious democratic people power, there would be no private institutions “too big to fail;” no corporations that could move jobs with impunity; no banks that could foreclose on loans they should not have made in the first place; no destruction of between one half and two-thirds of the wealth of Latino and African American households; no jobs that did not pay a living wage and offer dignity in the workplace; no closure of a vast array of needed public services; no ownership of our politics by people with vast sums of money—I need not continue the list.

Here is the punch line: *We cannot build democratic people power without renewing civil society. And we cannot renew civil society by a series of small or large victories on issues, no matter how important any one of them may be.* We cannot look at issue campaigns through the single lens of what they might win. We need bifocals so that we can simultaneously look at what we might win and what we are seeking to build.

I will return to the question of what we need to build, but first let me note this important contemporary exception: Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are building community and growing. Historically, these revivals in American Protestantism were central to the abolitionist movement and the Social Gospel’s prophetic message for economic justice; today, they are the captives of conservative social, political, and economic ideology. These churches, in combination with a mix of small business, property-owner, homeowner, service, interest, and other face-to-face organizations, are the civil society base for American conservatism. Our side has no serious counterpart to them.

The second macro problem we face is the persistence and growth of poverty, near-poverty, and economic stress in growing numbers of the American people, which is magnified by discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, place, and other characteristics, as well as various unique or particular injustices that exist and persist because of particular identities—such as those faced by undocumented immigrants.

The scope of economic stress for a majority of Americans is partially hidden by two and even three jobs replacing one—whether performed by a single worker, by a second or even third worker contributing to household income not by choice but by economic necessity, by “doubling-up” in housing, by foregoing health insurance, or by other belt-tightening strategies. It is also hidden by the massive amount of debt now borne by tens of millions of Americans. This debt burden, especially among college graduates, is a glowing timber waiting to burn.

The stress is further hidden by large numbers of people participating in the underground economy, where they have no rights and no benefits. It is finally hidden by the loss of public goods (transportation, schools, parks, and other public services) that are cut back or eliminated as a result of the policies of neo-liberalism.

Finally, and a primary source of the first two, is the increasing concentration of social, cultural, economic, and political power in the hands of one percent (or less) of the country’s population. Their rapacity knows no bounds. Our side seems incapable of reining it in.

But it is neither the evils of the 1, .1, .01, or .001 percent nor the stress upon the majority of Americans that I want to focus on. Rather, I want to look at the opportunity lurking in the context of our times. It is the combination of economic stress, widespread sense of alienation, feeling that the country is going in the wrong direction, and anger at both big business and big government that provides the fertile soil in which base building, of the kind I will soon elaborate, can be cultivated.

Let me be crystal clear: this is a struggle for power. Those now at the pinnacles of institutional power have it, want to keep it, and want more of it. We read endless discussions and arguments about who they are, what they are doing, why they are doing it, the horrendous consequences of their actions, and so forth. But if we do not address the problem of powerlessness, these are irrelevant to the course of history. When we focus there, we are forced to ask the question of how to shift people from their experience of, and resignation about, powerlessness to becoming engaged in civic and political life. That is the central question.

Friends who have read drafts of this chapter tell me, “You are blaming the victim.” Let me enlist an impeccable source for support. Albert Einstein said, “The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing” (Einstein Online 2012). Why are they doing nothing? I don’t think it is because they like the status quo. Rather, it is because they do not think they can do anything about it. To put it another way, we cannot successfully address evils if we do not look at what we are building. And let me stress that word: building. That is distinct from, though interdependent with, what we are winning or hoping to win.

**Building at the Base: An Example from Brazil**

Let me offer a specific meaning for the word “community” and put it together with our common understanding of “organization.” By community, I mean a group of people, sharing a common bond, faith, or tradition, who affirm, support, and challenge each other to act powerfully on their values and interests. The values of the community I’m interested in building are freedom— both the absence of external and imposed restraint and the opportunity to realize one’s full human potential; equality—no great disparities in wealth, income, or status; democracy—as both means and end, both majority rule and minority rights, and highly participatory in character; justice—fairness, due process, and absence of arbitrary and capricious action by those in authority; solidarity, fraternity, interdependence, or community—the understanding that we are our sister’s and brother’s keepers. Except for a narrow understanding of freedom, these values are under attack and have been on the defense for some time in the United States and other “advanced” industrial countries. Yet, their power with everyday people manifests itself whenever there is a believable option for specific action to realize them.

In summary, “community” refers to a group of people who understand that their destinies are interdependent and intertwined. Earlier, I noted the steady erosion of civil society—that is another way of saying the erosion of community.

Community is built at the base of society, where people can engage in ongoing face-to-face relationships. Whatever might be said for the Internet, it is not a substitute for community. We are so estranged from a meaningful understanding of community that I want to go more deeply into what it would look like. To do that, I want to use the example of base Christian communities in Brazil when they were at their peak of development in the 1980s and 1990s because nothing we have done in the US quite approximates what they achieved in the period of emancipatory Catholicism that once characterized large parts of Latin America. I have drawn what follows from conversations with Latin American organizers and priests and, in particular, from the work of the Presbyterian Reverend, Dr. Richard Shaull, who taught at Princeton Theological Seminary.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lay people became pastoral agents. That is, they became organizers. The laity accepted or adopted a new vocation of training for mutual empowerment. Priests and women religious walked alongside or accompanied the people, sharing experiences with them and offering support and assistance, but they were not hierarchically “over” them. Put another way, this was power with, not power over (Miller 1983).

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

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

1. They were a new form of social organization; other forms might be created as a result of the experience of people in the BCC. Among these, for example, are the Workers’ Party in São Paulo, from which Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva later emerged to become president of Brazil, and the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST), now perhaps the largest social movement in the world with hundreds of thousands of members. While these latter formations are not BCCs, many of their leaders received their most important formative experience in them.
2. Mutual aid, or communal self-reliance, is a powerful tool that emerges from BCCs. People who used this tool would often move into politics and action, in part, because the system—in Brazil, the military dictatorship that preceded democratization—would not even allow for the creation of mutual aid institutions. BCCs supported strikes and other efforts at change.
3. BCCs became politically powerful when people took their reading of the Bible into the world (Miller 1983).

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

In discussing the application of the BCC experience to the United States, it is important to note two things that make Brazil of that period qualitatively different: (1) there were, of course, clear cultural differences and (2) the need to choose sides was more apparent in the Latin American context. The second point is becoming less true, however, as more people in the US are increasingly willing to view America’s current system as a plutocracy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Purposive Organization**

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

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

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

**Cautionary Tales**

There is now a muddied understanding of community organizing that needs to be clarified. I want to use two examples to try to do that. The first is the Deep South civil rights movement during the 1960s. The second is National People’s Action during the 1970s.

From 1963 to the end of 1966, I was a field secretary on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or “Snick” as it was nicknamed. Snick developed a distinction between mobilizing, which is what we thought Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) did, and organizing. The former was episodic, dramatic, shook the country, and won the passage of important new legislation, but—and this was the critical element—it left nothing lasting on the ground. When Martin Luther King and SCLC left Birmingham or Selma, we thought there was no change in the relations of power between African Americans and the white power structure. That, we believed, was the Achilles’ heel of mobilization. (We ignored, by the way, the fact that the black churches upon which SCLC built its mobilizations were the most enduring and stable institution of the African-American community.)

Snick, we said, did organizing. It engaged local people to build their own organizations that would serve as voices for the marginalized, be there when the media left town, and engage in disruptive direct action, such as boycotts of local merchants, voting rights protests, or whatever tactic was required to express democratic people power. We imagined ourselves building permanent units of democratic people power that would be around for the long haul and capable of not only winning campaigns but also enforcing the victories, and moving on to more recalcitrant issues as its people power grew.

We built upon and sought to deepen a real sense of community in local organizations in which African American domestics, day laborers, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, independent farmers, and others of the excluded gained their own voice. Snick made music and theater central to participation. There was not a mass meeting without the songs of the movement or skits that acted out the roles of the brutal sheriff, Uncle Tom, civil rights workers, and courageous local citizens. The cultural richness of the Deep South civil rights movement offers important lessons for building community.

I thought we were on the right track. But, truth be told, none of the organizations Snick built in Mississippi, for example, were deeply rooted enough to withstand the onslaught against them that came from the national Democratic Party and the cooptation of the Child Development Group of Mississippi. While extraordinarily important victories were won in public accommodations, voting rights, early childhood education, and other arenas, the broader economic and social justice agenda (let alone the antimilitarism agenda shared by both Snick and SCLC) was not realized. Snick’s efforts at economic cooperatives and union organizing did not get far off the ground; its plan to organize the white poor barely left the piece of paper on which it was conceptualized. Snick’s efforts to build and sustain a counter-community failed.

Gale Cincotta is properly celebrated as a heroine of the 1970s. Hers was the single most important voice from the grassroots movement attacking redlining, blockbusting, racial steering, and other policies and practices that locked African Americans in ghettos and destroyed hundreds of white working-class communities across the country. Her base was National Peoples Action (NPA). NPA ran some of the most militant and imaginative direct action campaigns we have ever seen in this country. With great tactical imagination, they won many important policy victories and even saw the implementation of some of those victories.

But there is a downside to what NPA did. With local exceptions that can be found here and there, it failed to build deeply at the base. If you went to its member organizations, their membership was limited to a relatively small number of activists—passionate about their cause, but lacking a strong base in the constituency for whom they spoke. The kind of organizing that changes the relations of power was missing. The results of that failure were to be seen in hundreds of community development corporations that lacked the resources to make a significant dent in the country’s affordable housing problems and are now to be seen in the foreclosures that are robbing millions of their dream of homeownership.

Snick was destroyed partly by itself, and much of what NPA did was coopted. As I noted earlier, this has been the fate of most of our work of the past fifty years. Pay attention to that and do not get swept up in new movement euphoria that confuses mobilizing with organizing and, as a result, leads us to battle for new victories while our army retreats.

We cannot build the community that is required to create an army that can advance if we do not pay attention to cooptation. The 1960s saw the War on Poverty as the major source of cooptation. Saul Alinsky (1965) characterized its citizen participation component and meager funding as “political pornography.” In the 1970s, the Model Cities program and the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration were the sources of cooptation. But then, and now, it is the foundation-nonprofit industry complex that requires our greatest attention because it is closest to us. Among its members are people who share our values and whose analysis of what is wrong with American society is often like our own. We have to engage in a conversation with them about the impact of their present funding strategies because if we do not, we will be crippled from the start in our efforts toward social transformation.

**Exceptions to the Rule**

I noted earlier that there were a few exceptions to our failure to alter the relations of power and that we should look more closely at them. I would like to note two of them: (1) collective bargaining and (2) the elimination of literacy qualification to register to vote in the South.

Because most unions have a very narrow purpose in collective bargaining, and because the law constrains what they can bargain about, there has developed in more radical circles a certain disdain for collective bargaining. I think about it differently. Before collective bargaining, employers could essentially pay and otherwise do what they wanted with their workers. Except in times of labor scarcity, if you did not like working on the employer’s terms, you could find another job. If you complained, and especially if you tried to get others to complain with you, you were fired.

With collective bargaining, and its institutionalization in the National Labor Relations Act, workers could democratically decide to be represented by an organization paid for with their dues in which they elected the leaders. That organization could bargain with the employer on wages, hours, benefits, and working conditions. That was, in itself, a qualitative change in the relations of power. Under the rubric of “working conditions,” workers were able to stop work if they thought a situation was dangerous or unhealthy. Elected stewards, sometimes given released work-time to perform their union responsibilities, enforced the collectively bargained contract at the work site. Union-run hiring halls sent workers to jobs, substituting fair rotational dispatch for the system of favoritism and kickbacks that preceded them. Seniority protected workers from arbitrary or capricious assignment or firings. “Lead men,” who were part of the union bargaining unit rather than in management, did work once reserved for supervisory personnel and, in some cases, they were elected.

Lou Goldblatt, former secretary-treasurer of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, once told me, “We are in a continuous struggle with the employer over prerogatives.” To put it another way, the union was altering the relations of power. In one brief visionary moment, the United Automobile Workers union said it would not agree to wage increases if they were at the cost of increased prices for automobiles. The fact that labor now is primarily interested in a fairly narrow agenda, one typically limited to its own members and its sector of the economy, should not make us lose sight of how important its gains were, and are, for the lives of everyday people.

Today, radicals often view collective bargaining as a means of cooptation. I think that confuses the process with the proposals that unions are willing to put on the table and meaningfully struggle for. When militants replace moderates in the leadership of today’s unions, they might get more money or benefits for workers, or they might take up and win more grievances. But the agenda they pursue and the means for its pursuit are, for the most part, militant versions of what they replace. They typically do not alter the insurance company culture of the organization, which remains one in which members pay their premiums (dues) and expect the benefits. Nor do unions engage in issues having to do with the quality, effectiveness, appropriateness, or efficiency of the products or services that are the outcome of their members’ work. Nor do they enter into ongoing alliances with community groups. As long as unions retain that organizational culture, they will be limited in what they can contribute.

The other exception I would like to note came out of the voter registration work of the Deep South civil rights movement and is more cultural than structural. Snick was its prime instigator, though it was soon adopted across the entire movement. In the early days of trying to get African Americans the right to vote, the civil rights movement’s main thrust was to overcome discriminatory application of voter registration literacy tests. At first, Snick and others offered workshops to people so they could learn to take and pass the test. The objective was to obtain equal application of the law and not to challenge the law itself.

But the very notion of voting qualifications soon became the subject of debate. Snick challenged the notion when it rejected literacy as a voting requirement. In so doing, Snick put meat on the skeletal American idea of equality. No longer was Snick willing to paraphrase Anatole France (1910) and say, “The written voter registration test, in its majestic equality, forbids the illiterate from voting.” Snick’s view was that the segregated South could not deny blacks adequate education and then use their illiteracy to exclude them from voting. And it argued that formally illiterate African Americans had an experiential wisdom about politics that fully qualified them to vote.

From Snick’s conclusion came a wide discussion of class as well as race. Many African Americans who were active in the movement had to think twice before they agreed with this conclusion. Without that discussion, it is unlikely that a sharecropper by the name of Fannie Lou Hamer would have had the courage to challenge the Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic Convention. Nor would her stirring words, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired,” be part of our civil rights history (Hamer 1964). Nor would President Lyndon Johnson have given a graduation speech at Howard University that called for an expansive view of equality and not simply equality of opportunity.

There are lesser examples of victories that altered relations of power as well. Tenant unions borrowed from labor and negotiated landlord-tenant agreements. Community organizations negotiated agreements with employers requiring the employer to take qualifiable unemployed persons referred by the organization and train and pay them “on the job” in entry-level positions. Parent organizations demanded and won a say in who would be the principal of their children’s school. But these are exceptions that tend to prove the rule. Further, none of them relied on dues, fees, or member activities for their budgets, and thus none of them was independent.

**The Foundation-Nonprofit Industry Complex**

A hallmark of authentic civil society is the independence of the organizations comprising it. They are either small and totally voluntary, or large—whether local, regional, or national—and their leaders and staff are paid with the dues, fees, and activities of their members—for example, conservative building trades unions, are funded by their members’ dues. These organizations are often what in normal discourse would be considered nonpartisan. Sometimes, they are relatively moderate in their view of the world. It is upon them that we must build because they are the authentic voices of the constituency whose present powerlessness allows the plutocracy to continue on its rampage. Speaking of the black church, I heard Rev. Amos Brown, former pastor of San Francisco’s oldest African American congregation, say, “the black church is the only institution we own lock, stock, and barrel.”

The engagement of congregations, unions, and neighborhood, small business, merchant, and other existing voluntary associations is one of the prerequisites to reach the scale required for transformative power—that is, the ability to alter the relations of power. Renewal of these organizations to address the internal problems they face and reconnect them with their deepest core values is essential to the task of transformation. Transformative social action can emerge organically from these organizations if we engage respectfully with them on their own terms.

At the same time, we have to create from scratch new organizations at the base that can become the authentic voices of the marginalized and excluded. Building at the base in new organizations is equally of merit if we require that these organizations be paid for with the dues, fees, and activities of their members. That is what Cesar Chavez did at the beginning of his work with farm workers before there was a United Farm Workers of America. When he spoke with farm workers, he told them there had to be substantial dues. The dues then charged were equivalent to roughly $25.00 a month in today’s dollars (Miller, unpublished data). In addition to insisting upon dues, Chavez built initially around mutual aid activities and not through confrontations with institutional power. These mutual aid activities included a credit union, a burial society, and a buying club for automobile batteries and tires. He also used individual services, often done as group actions, to help people with corrupt merchants, biased bureaucratic government agencies, and other obstacles to a decent life. Chavez was initially interested in solidly building at the base, and used the network of farm worker “shoestring communities”— low-income, underserved, and often unincorporated neighborhoods—to do so. He met individually in “one-to-ones” with farm workers and their families and used face-to-face house meetings as the building blocks for the National Farm Worker Association (NFWA). (Unfortunately, a discussion of what went wrong must be saved for another occasion.)

The secret of scale, that is reaching the level of membership and participation that is a prerequisite to altering the relations of power and democratizing the society, is to go deeply and broadly into every nook and cranny of the country through either existing or newly created authentic voluntary associations that, in combination, include all the constituencies that together are required for a new majority American politics. Here is what Peter Murray wrote in a June 2012 Internet exchange on *GameChangerSalon:*

The key here is understanding the absolute necessity of building Popular Social Movements in order to win, and the unfortunate inability of the non-profit sector to produce them. These have been the missing piece for 30 years and without them, we lose. All the recent gains, from Occupy Wall Street’s dramatic shifting the public narrative on the economy, to Obama’s “Dream Act” Executive Order, have been won by popular organizing initiated outside the Left’s existing professional structures. This is crucial to recognize. It’s also just as important to recognize that professionals played an important support role in both of these, which is actually the point. When professionals devote resources and skills to supporting popular movements—on *their own organic terms—*weactually achieve wins. What I am suggesting is that the more we support popular movement-building, then the more wins we will score, then the more influence we will have.” (Murray 2012, emphasis added)

(Parenthetically, Murray and many others are looking to the Internet as a tool for building—a direction I do not think they will find fruitful unless their measure of participation is clicking links on Web sites or showing up for an occasional demonstration. And some of the organizations they champion are, for example, direct mail organizations where there is little meaningful engagement of members.)

The failure to be connected with strength at the base is connected with how most of the work we do is funded. In a 2012 article, “Capitalism: A Ghost Story,” Indian novelist, essayist, peace prize winner, and nonviolent activist Arundhati Roy wrote:

In the NGO [non-governmental organization] universe, which has evolved a strange anodyne language of its own, everything has become a “subject”, a separate, professionalized, special-interest issue. Community development, leadership development, human rights, health, education, reproductive rights, AIDS, orphans with AIDS [I add housing, employment, environment, and many other categories]—have all been hermetically sealed into their own silos with their own elaborate and precise funding brief. Funding has fragmented solidarity in ways that repression never could.

Roy (2012) continues by writing:

Having worked out how to manage governments, political parties, elections, courts, the media and liberal opinion, there was one more challenge for the neo-liberal establishment: how to deal with growing unrest, the threat of “people’s power.” How do you domesticate it? How do you turn protesters into pets? How do you vacuum up people’s fury and redirect it into blind alleys?

Let me repeat a key point that Roy makes: “Funding has fragmented solidarity [i.e., the extension of community to larger arenas] in ways that repression never could.” This fragmentation is a major source for why we win battles but continue to lose the war. If you fragment solidarity and put people in separate silos, broadly based people power cannot be built.

**Connecting the Dots**

Now, let me connect some dots: I do not believe we can begin to win the war and create a meaningful version of democracy if we simply focus on winning campaigns. Nor can we win this battle if we think that by adding campaigns together into some kind of mother-of-campaigns organization, we will accomplish what is required at the base. If you look at much of today’s multi-issue organizing, or if you look at most contemporary labor unions, you will find campaign mobilization organizations that either lack, or are disconnected from, the kind of community that comes from sustained face-to-face relationships at the base of an organization.

Whatever we are doing in the way of waging defensive or even offensive battles, we need to be attending to what will build a community at its base. We also need to be searching for the kind of independent or autonomous, relatively permanent, and self-funded organization that we want to serve as the vehicle through which that community will express itself.

Will we be able to do this before climatic disaster drastically alters the very nature of the earth, before plutocracy so institutionalizes itself that it becomes relatively immune to popular pressure, or before the military-industrial complex leads us on the Roman Empire’s road to ruin? If we do not deal with the matters that I have raised in this chapter, it is in those directions that I fear and believe we will continue.

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