Educating and Organizing

By Mike Miller

Organizing is teaching. Not the academic type, which mostly consists of stuffing data into people's ears. Organizing is teaching which rests on people's life experiences: drawing them out, developing trust, disrupting old perceptions of reality, developing group solidarity, taking action, building confidence for continued action, and creating a foundation for continual questioning of the status quo. This means of education is primarily in the action. It becomes liberating only if the person develops the discipline to rigorously reflect on that action. We have to own the questions in this educational process. Our curiosity must be the engine that drives us from action to reflection to more action followed by reflection.

The organizer's story is told in Richard Harmon's classic essay, "Making An Offer We Can't Refuse." Harmon directed Saul Alinsky's organizing project in Buffalo, New York in the mid-1960s. Harmon has the advantage of working in an organization that is in action. Action creates the teachable moments when people find that the world is not the way it is depicted in civics text books. Such situations of cognitive dissonance are the best opportunities for education.

Most organizers, unfortunately, do not do much meaningful teaching. But good organizers do, and they pay attention to the writings of Myles Horton and Paolo Freire.

Educators vs. Organizers

The difference between educators and organizers is obvious when we compare Harmon's essay with educator Nina Wallerstein's "Problem-Posing Education: Freire's Method for Transformation" in Freire and Ira Shor's, *Freire for the Classroom*. Wallerstein has the student describe or name a problem, then define it along with associated feelings, relate it to their own experience, then generalize it to understand why the problem exists and who benefits from its existence. Finally, students discuss strategies for solutions and how to implement them. But such an approach is not enough for people to gain the experience of building and using democratic people power.

The questions Harmon raises are more pertinent to developing an actual campaign of action: What is the problem? How many other people feel the same way? What precisely do we want? Who do we see to get things changed? How many of us should go to see them? Who will be the spokespersons? Are we willing to caucus? What is the timetable for the response? Where and when is the evaluation session? (He recommends, right after the meeting.)

Organizing has often been criticized for focusing on winning rather than on educating. But such criticism is misguided. When large numbers of people win, it is educating. To teach people who are oppressed or discriminated against that they can, by democratically developed collective action, fight and win, is the central liberating lesson of organizing. A lost struggle, especially when experienced by people who have been persuaded to give up watching TV to join their community in doing something, only reinforces the pervasive belief that "you can't fight the powers that be."

Two Pitfalls of Organizing

Firstly, the lessons of organizing do not inherently lead to an understanding of the larger social structure and the necessity to fundamentally change it. That kind of understanding emerges more out of reflection, analysis, and discussion, as advocated by Horton and

Freire. Therefore, it is vitally important that education should go on if organizing is to do more than give one more group a slightly larger piece of a shrinking economic or public services pie, or substitute one set of oppressors for another. People need to:

1. Discuss values—their own and those of their adversaries. Often, these are fundamentally different.
2. Examine alternative visions of how cities, regions, countries, and economies could be organized.
3. Learn the workings and history of the political, economic, and social power structure within which we live.
4. Study those who sought to bring the country closer to its democratic promise in social movements of the past.
5. Structure their own organizations to embody democratic principles.

Secondly, people know too well the nature of power in America today and either withdraw in the face of what appear to be insurmountable obstacles, or become part of politically correct groups—right on some issues but powerless to do anything about others. The educator, Horton included, tends to view the steps of power-building as co-optation. "Reform within the [schooling] system reinforced the system, or was co-opted by [it]. Reformers didn't change the system, they made it more palatable and justified it..." he concludes.

Freire amends that view by saying: "Trying to co-opt is a kind of struggle on behalf of those who have power to do so. It's a tactic; it's a moment of the struggle... (I)n order for you not to be co-opted [or] …be out of the possibility of some power wanting to co-opt you, it's necessary that you do nothing."

Reform vs. Revolution

All significant organizing efforts and social movements face the problem of how to win immediate victories, while at the same time expanding their power, so they can address more recalcitrant problems in society. The reform versus revolution distinction does not provide guidance in formally democratic societies where the rights of free speech, assembly, and petition to the government exist along with competitive elections. A third choice is needed—encompassing both, fundamental change and something other than the immediate violent overthrow of a government.

The strategy for achieving fundamental change in the United States is to build autonomous, deeply rooted, broadly based, people power organizations that can act locally and work together in larger political and economic arenas. Good examples of this are in some of the work in the Alinsky tradition, the best organizing in the Deep South civil rights movement of the early-to-mid 1960s, and the best workplace organizing throughout American history. At their best, these movements included efforts to change major institutions, promoted mutual aid and self-help, and made education, reflection and training key dimensions of organizational life.

In organizing, people act and talk collectively; that's how they learn. They learn both how systems work and, by reflecting on their action, they connect deeply shared values with action. This kind of reflection is a 'time-out' from what is immediately facing the organization; it is done in both labor and religious education. The educator has a certain luxury that is not available to the organizer because the latter's emphasis is on building democratic power, while the former's is to understand what that means. There used to be a healthy tension between labor educators and labor's top leaders and organizers that, unfortunately, does not seem to exist anymore.

Democratic Movements

The difference between democratically constituted movements and organizations which come "from below," versus government, foundation, and corporate-designed "nonprofits" or "citizen participation components" is that the former are independent, raising their core budgets from member dues and grassroots fundraisers. Their scope of action isn't constrained by the terms of a grant or other externally-defined guidelines, regulations, or legislation. They are only limited by the First Amendment guarantees of the Constitution and the decisions of their members. They can enter into alliances, add new issue concerns, and otherwise act as their members decide. Rather than looking for "niches" in which they can distinguish themselves from others, they look for opportunities to unite with others to build broader people power.

Leaders and organizers of independent organizations work to aggregate political resources because

they understand that the solutions to neighborhood problems do not lie principally with City Hall, but with the private/corporate sector and with state, regional, and national levels of government. They often develop relationships of mutual interest with other community organizations, thus going beyond the parochialism of a local neighborhood, and end up meeting and working with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. They also are free to work on any issues affecting the quality of life of their members—whether it is cooperating with unions or challenging corporations on healthcare. In stark contrast, government-sponsored neighborhood associations, foundation, and corporate-funded nonprofits typically fight over how the pie is divided—not about how big it is, who pays for it, or who shapes it.

"Participation" that is limited by externally defined funding, guidelines or legislation directs discontent into manageable channels. It is about governance or administration. It may have legitimate purposes—as, for example, a parent advisory committee at a school where the principal listens. But it is not capable of altering the relations of power—only independent "people power" organizations can do that.

Although independent organizations may sometimes reach agreements that are not entirely satisfactory, they do so with the idea that they will return at a later day in greater strength and demand more—more justice, more equality.

Settling for a Place at the Table vs. People's Power

As the old civil rights movement song put it, "freedom is a constant struggle." One of organizing's lessons is that conflict and negotiation go hand-in-hand. They are not opposites. Conflict gets you to the table where negotiation takes place. New proposals are made at the table as you seek greater justice. When those new proposals are rejected because they more deeply challenge entrenched power and wealth, there is a need for people power action—more conflict. Organizations that "settle" simply for a place at the table have been co-opted in the negative sense. Organizations that use a position at the table to demand greater justice have learned the fundamental lesson of the long march through the institutions.

Formally democratic organizations are a necessary, though not sufficient condition for true democratization. Too often these organizations come to replicate the values, leadership forms, and structures of the dominant culture. To build an alternative vision requires that we begin at the base of society—in the neighborhoods, congregations, and workplaces where most people live.

We need a broader vision that combines democratic control of the economy with a pluralist society in which power is held by independent associations, not concentrated within government. Organizers need to think about how to make corporate power directly accountable to the local communities, to break up the great concentrations of wealth, and to develop a decentralized and sustainable way of economic life.

Such an enterprise will need the contributions of people like Myles Horton and Paulo Freire—people not preoccupied by the daily pressures of organization building, but who can challenge the organizers to fully reach the democratic potential that is in their work. It is difficult for community and labor organizers to generate the proposals for structural change that we need today. Their job is to create the public space where ideas can be seriously discussed and new directions agreed and acted upon.

The educators will contribute to creating alternative programs and structures; the organizers will strategize with the people on how to build the power to meaningfully struggle for these alternatives. I believe that contemporary work-, neighborhood-, faith-, interest- and identity-based independent organizing will make a major contribution to our getting to where we want to go if they root their work in the best of the small "d" democratic tradition and biblical shalom values. ■

Photo: UFCW and allies at the U.S. Social Forum march to a Publix store to ask them to stop carrying Smithfield meat, July, 2007.

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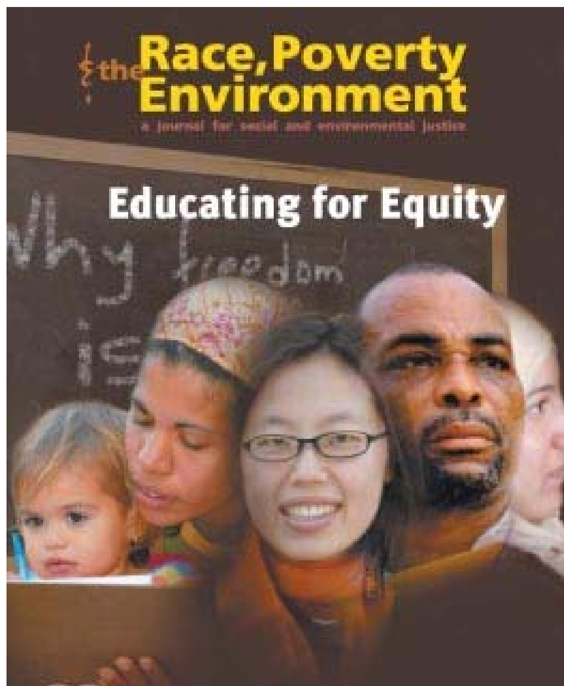

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