***EAST BAY EXPRESS:*** OAKLAND, BERKELEY, AND EAST BAY NEWS, EVENTS, RESTAURANTS, MUSIC, & ARTS. [**SEPTEMBER 09, 2009**](http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/IssueArchives?issue=1369096)[**ARTS & CULTURE**](http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/arts-and-culture/Section?oid=1063827)**»**[**BOOKS**](http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/ArticleArchives?category=1064102)

## *POWER ON*

## "Community organizer" is more than just a catchphrase.

By [*Anneli Rufus*](http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/ArticleArchives?author=1064600)

When he was fired as a very young man from a job that involved helping public-housing tenants in New York City, **Mike Miller** was told that he was getting the sack for being "too militant." It was the late 1950s; he was a Columbia grad student, fresh from years spent in the radical ferment of student government at UC Berkeley. Those who fired Miller dubbed him "a little Alinsky," but he had to ask an acquaintance what that epithet meant.

"I learned that Saul Alinsky was the dean of American community organizing, had taken on the New York City social-work establishment, and was anathema in that world." A neighborhood activist since the 1930s, Alinsky championed the poor and the marginalized, outlining strategies by which they might take power in his book *Rules for Radicals*. Shortly after having been fired, Miller tagged along with a friend to Alinsky's summer home in Carmel.

"Alinsky immediately pointed at me and asked Hank, 'What's this guy doing here?' Hank was put off-balance by the question, so I chimed in: 'I was fired for being "a little Alinksy" and wanted to meet the big one.' That tickled his big ego," Miller remembers. A few years later, Alinsky hired him.

It was an education, rife with fits and starts. By the mid-1960s, Miller was fighting urban renewal in his hometown, San Francisco, aiding the civil-rights movement in the Mississippi Delta, and co-directing the first national farmworker boycott. In 1968, he was asked to become the lead organizer for San Francisco's Mission Coalition Organization, a multi-issue confab whose many causes included protecting low-income tenants and finding work for the unemployed. Acknowledged in its time as the city's most powerful grassroots organization, MCO grew out of a late-1960s campaign blocking the kind of federally funded demolition that transformed the Western Addition.

"Having beaten the 'federal bulldozer,' Mission District residents went on to dramatically slow the gentrification tendencies that were already present at that time," Miller exults. Composed of churches, unions, block clubs, tenant associations, and youth groups, MCO was off to an ambitious start. Miller charts its rise and fall in his memoir *A Community Organizer's Tale: People and Power in San Francisco*, which was published by Berkeley's Heyday Books and which he will discuss at **Mrs. Dalloway's** (2904 College Ave., Berkeley) on Friday, September 11.

The phrase "community organizer" carries a certain cachet now that someone who used to do it for a living — and who is well-versed in the works of Saul Alinksy — occupies the White House. This bodes well, muses Miller, who began writing field notes for the book in 1971 and who offers in one of its final chapter some strategies of his own: "Celebrate our heroes and create a story that could become part of public and parochial school curricula," he urges, among other tips, and "Challenge pastors to think of themselves as organizers."

"Obama will be responsive to the kind of agenda that was developed in MCO," Miller predicts — only to add, still every inch an organizer: "It is the responsibility of the people on the ground to put that agenda front and center."

7:30 p.m., free. [MrsDalloways.com](http://mrsdalloways.com/)