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***Lessons Hong Kong Might Learn***

# Tiananmen Square Repeat? *Lessons Hong Kong Might Learn.* Mike Miller. 10/6/14.

With heavy heart I write these words.  The Chinese government and Communist Party will not grant fully free elections in Hong Kong, unless…(I will return to the “unless” in a moment).  All the evidence says that the government/party is immune to domestic demonstrations that call for democracy—as attested to by the numerous instances of jailing, beating and torture, intimidation, harassment and other sanctions visited upon those who challenge its sole right to govern.  On the other hand, demonstrations against specific problems like low pay, cheating on wages, corruption, environmental degradation and other issues are tolerated. Indeed, they serve to let the central government know things it cannot learn from its local authorities who don’t want to tell the boss what he doesn’t want to hear—a common pattern in all authoritarian structures.

Yet the demonstrators seem intent on pursuing a course that is almost guaranteed to end up in another bloody encounter with the police and/or military.  (One Hong Kong British reporter said recently the Chinese military is “waiting for the demonstrators to make a mistake.”) They are victim of a romanticized idea of what a student movement can accomplish largely on its own, and international internet rhetoric about the power of social media and mass demonstrations—despite what has happened in Egypt, Syria and, with some regularity, in China itself.  Indeed, it happened here in the U.S. in police treatment of Occupy demonstrators in various cities across the country.

Only under the duress of powerful international pressures will the Chinese government negotiate a mutually acceptable resolution to the democracy question in Hong Kong.  And that international pressure is unlikely to come—other than in demonstrations that will be similarly ineffective in moving their respective governments—without something different taking place in Hong Kong.

**An alternative strategy**

Within Hong Kong there could be a “freedom election” that provides overwhelming evidence that the vast majority of the people of Hong Kong support the democracy movement there.  This would be a parallel election, conducted in civil society-organized voting places throughout the island.  In 1964, such an election was held in Mississippi, where African-Americans were denied the right to vote.  More than 80,000 of them cast ballots in a freedom election organized by the civil rights movement.  Those voters demonstrated to themselves and the country that black people wanted the right to vote.

That “freedom vote,” in turn, was an expression of two years of organizing work done in Mississippi by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field secretaries, and local leaders and activists who knocked on doors, visited church-to-church, organized local meetings and took people to the county office to register to vote.  I was on the SNCC staff at the time.  We made a distinction between “organizing”—which is what we thought we were doing—and “mobilizing”—which is what we said Martin Luther King did with his big demonstrations that were followed by an exodus of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference from the site of the action, leaving a vacuum behind.  In truth, we were only beginning to learn what it means to build people power in depth, to root organizing in the daily lives of everyday people so that it reaches exponentially beyond the activists who can be counted upon to show up for a good cause, and local black churches that King worked through were already there.  The organizing versus mobilizing distinction is important for change in the U.S. as well as China.  But that’s a digression.

In Hong Kong, a variety of economic actions could be taken that are short of a full-strike.  These include tactics such as:

(1) “work to the rule” (do exactly what the rulebook says you are supposed to do on your job—it will drastically reduce the efficiency of your work and probably bring things to a grinding halt;

(2) slowdown the pace of your work—it’s actually called a “slowdown,” and is often used by organized workers to make a point to their employer, and;

(3) “sick-outs” in which workers stay home with suddenly acquired but undiagnosed illnesses.

There are other workplace tactics that do not expose a participant to the sanctions typically imposed if you go on strike.

“The action is in the reaction.”  That is an aphorism from Saul Alinsky who mastered conflict tactics in the service of marginalized and disenfranchised people.  Instead of picketing a building (which an organizer friend of mine called “pissing on a building”), or marching between two of them and holding a rally at the end of the march, or occupying a civic square, Alinsky used tactics to provoke a response (the reaction) from a specific person who was a decision-maker in a political or economic structure that was the target of a people power organization.  An important consideration was not to provoke a reaction greater than your capacity to mount a counter-action.  If you did it right, your adversary’s reaction would anger people on the sidelines and lead them to become part of your action, and the organization organizing it.  A series of quickly escalating, but carefully calibrated, tactics would keep your adversary one step behind.  The careful escalation would also demonstrate to moderates that you had tried “reason,” and it didn’t work.

**The Romance of Civil Disobedience**

Stunningly, Ellie Friedman, a knowledgeable person on labor happenings in China, writing in THE NATION (Sept. 12, 2014, “Why Hong Kong’s ‘Occupy Central’ Movement Has Beijing Very, Very Scared”), says of the Chinese government, “If Occupy Central presents a major nuisance, the mere intimation of an Occupy Tiananmen is a horror that must be crushed at all costs.”  And then advises exactly what led to Tiananmen:  “Let the era of civil disobedience commence.”

Also in the NATION,  (“Hong Kong’s democracy movement stands at a crossroads”; [Jeffrey Wasserstrom](http://www.thenation.com/authors/jeffrey-wasserstrom) and [Denise Y. Ho](http://www.thenation.com/authors/denise-y-ho).  September 12, 2014.):  “An open letter by Occupy Central supporters to Chinese President Xi Jinping is even more explicit, ‘Don’t stage another Tiananmen crackdown in Hong Kong. The whole world is watching.’  The whole world was watching in 1989 as well.  When push came to shove, it did not matter to Beijing.  Why should this time be different?

The same article contrasts earlier democratic claims from Communist China when Hong Kong was under British rule, or things earlier Chinese Communist leaders said when China was controlled by Chiang Kai-shek—as if consistency matters.  It doesn’t.

These writers are thoughtful, committed people, but I cannot escape the sense that they are counseling suicide.

Civil disobedience is but one tactic.  Delegations of notables, lobbying, public hearings, accountability sessions (in which a target it asked to publicly respond with “yes” or “no” answers to clearly formulated proposals) and others exist in civil society and politics.  I earlier identified some workplace tactics.  Others include corporate campaigns and boycotts.  Strikes should be a last resort, not a first step.  When you strike, how do you escalate?  You’ve fired your big cannon!  Obviously some of these are more-or-less practical depending on the extent civil liberties exist in the country in which you’re acting.

If a broad-base is organized, you can engage in massive mobilizations.  That’s what the industrial union movement did in the U.S. in the 1930s.  To give you an idea of scale, in 2011 demonstrations in Israel against Netanyahu’s economic policies brought 300,000 people into the streets—and Israel then had about the population of Hong Kong.  In the U.S. context, that would equate to 11 million people demonstrating around the country.  And we get excited about 300,000 in a climate demonstration in New York City.

**Moving Globally**

If the Hong Kong movement included significant support from trade unions, particularly its longshore union, an effort could be made to enlist the world’s longshore unions to refuse to load and unload cargo from Chinese vessels entering their ports.  The International Longshore & Warehouse (ILWU) threatened such a boycott when the authoritarian government of South Korea was about to execute Kim Dae-jung.  Word of the boycott was transmitted to the South Korean government.  ILWU let the South Korean government know that it, and its Pacific Basin fraternal unions in ports of South America, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere, would place a freeze on South Korean ships if they appeared in ports of their jurisdiction.

Kim was, instead, imprisoned.  He subsequently was released and became the first freely elected post-authoritarian government president.  ILWU was invited to his installation ceremony as an official guest of the new president.

**Don’t Count On U.S. Government**

Do not expect the U.S. government to do anything more than utter pronouncements on how evil the Chinese government’s action is.  The economic interdependencies of the two countries, and the multinational corporations headquartered in the United States, create an obstacle that U.S. politicians will be unwilling to try to overcome.  It is, after all, these corporations who fund their political campaigns.  Further, should China wish to unload on the world financial market the debt it now holds from the U.S. it could cause economic chaos on Wall Street.

In general, what I am suggesting is tactical caution combined with strategic people power that does not rely on western government’s to provide the critical leverage to make the Chinese government engage in good-faith negotiations.

Assuming that the Hong Kong movement gets to such a negotiating table, there then arises the very big question of what constitutes an acceptable agreement.  That, of course, is for them to decide.  But I hope they will look very carefully at what went on in the negotiations between the Tiananmen students and the Chinese government just before the brutal intervention on the Square.  I believe there is a fine line not to be crossed if a result other than martyrdom is what the Hong Kong democracy movement wants.

This strategy, taking into account national and regional, religious, political, economic and other contextual differences, is one I believe appropriate for all of us wherever we may be struggling with the beast of multi-national corporate power, various manifestations of the corporate state, questions of war and peace, and other issues.  We need to have our eyes on the stars and our feet firmly planted on the ground.  We need plans that will take us on the long march through the institutions of power that confront us.  Those are more difficult to organize than occupations of the public square.

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**And, part 2:**

***Negotiating with The Powers That Be***

**How Might Hong Kong’s Democracy Movement Proceed? Mike Miller.** [***CounterPunch Magazine.***](http://store.counterpunch.org/subscriptions/)**10/21/14.**

The argument presented here is that negotiating with The Powers requires ongoing people power—more than great, but brief, periods of mass mobilization.  That is the case whether one is in a democratic or authoritarian setting.  What can we learn from past experience, and what are pitfalls to be avoided by the democracy forces?

**The Negotiables**

Three major things categorize most negotiations:  less or more, sooner or later, and who decides what?

Less or more has to do with cost.  Is the wage increase going to be $.15 or $.25 an hour?  Is the appropriation going to be $50,000,000 or $100,000,000.   Is the goal a carbon reduction of ‘x’ or ‘y’ amount?  Will classroom size for middle school by 25 or 21?

Sooner or later has to do with time, and is also the frequent subject of negotiations.  Over what period of time will implementation of a new program take place?  What are the means for monitoring progress?  What are the benchmarks to demonstrate that real action is taking place as distinct from words on a piece of paper that never “hit the ground”?  “All deliberate speed,” the infamous phrase in the U.S. Supreme Court’s Brown v Board of Education school desegregation decision turned out to mean almost nothing, though the decision itself was an impetus to the civil rights movement.

Who decides what has to do with prerogatives.  In a revolution or war in which a ruling group is militarily defeated and surrenders unconditionally or flees, this question arises only indirectly.   The winners will have to decide whether or not they need the information and knowledge of the old apparatus.  That might require unanticipated negotiations.  But there is little on the horizon that indicates the Chinese are going to abandon Hong Kong or provide full democracy there, so we need not give this option much attention.

Some examples will illustrate the point:  in a labor-management contract, authority that might once have been in the hands of an employer’s supervisor is shifted to an elected “lead-person.”  Or, workers dealing with potentially dangerous or unhealthy materials win the right to stop work until an investigation of the situation by a mutually agreed upon party says it’s safe to return.  Previously, they may have had to file a grievance but keep working.  Or parents at a local school get to screen and nominate candidates for school principal from which the superintendent appoints one. Or a community organization gets to nominate a list of people from which the mayor will select appointees to a local community planning board—and the community organization has the right to recall its nominee if she or he no longer represents the interests of the community.

Lou Goldblatt, the first Secretary-Treasurer of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), said to me in the late 1960s about his union’s relationship with their employer, the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), “we are in a continuous struggle over prerogatives.”

Whether the issue is more or less, sooner or later, or who gets to decide what, it is essential to remember that what has been won can be lost.  Wages won are lost in a period of “give-backs”; timetables for implementation are postponed…and postponed…and postponed; parent organizations become adjuncts to a school principal’s program and lose their connection to the parent body, community boards and the organizations that nominate them are coopted.  The world is filled with examples of all of these. As experienced organizers are fond of saying of contexts in which there are competing or conflicting interests, “an agreement is only as good as your power to enforce it.”  A favorite slogan of mine from my days on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is, “freedom is a constant struggle.”

At the center of these aphorisms is the recognition that we, the people, need to keep our powder dry.  When our action is nonviolent, our “powder” is a mass- or broadly-based organization—one that commands the respect and involvement of sufficient numbers of people to, if necessary, force incumbent power to honor its agreements, or enter into new ones that further democratize a community, institution, workplace or nation.  That force manifests itself in various tactical expressions, including massive non-violent and disruptive direct action, strikes, boycotts, sick-ins, sick-outs, work-to-rule, voting, mass lobbying, accountability sessions, engaging in electoral politics and others—some yet to be invented.

The mobilizations of Tahrir Square (Egypt), Tiananmen Square, Paris (1968), the Battle in Seattle, Occupy Wall Street (OWS), New York City’s recent climate demonstration, and now in Hong Kong sadly lacked that power.  Others fail even to even reach their scale, and peter out with no impact on consciousness, policy or structures.  (Ferguson, MO may become an example.)

Further, the mobilizations themselves are not sufficient to build that power.  Writing in the October, 2014 issue of *Labor Notes*, Jane Slaughter points out (in a review of Eli Friedman’s *Insurgency Trap*) that a “wave of protests sometimes wins concrete gains, but stops short of forming lasting organizations that could alter the balance of power.”  Continuing, she says, “How often, though, have we been trapped by believing that because things are, they will remain that way? Most insurrections have gone unpredicted, from our own labor wars of the 1930s to the Arab Spring, and they have taken place under conditions that observers then found far too unfavorable and repressive.”

Yes, “forming lasting organizations” is key to “altering the balance of power.”  But, no, you can’t form them “under conditions that [are] far too unfavorable and repressive”—despite Jane’s implication that you can.  Putting the labor wars of the 1930s together with Arab Spring obscures more than it clarifies.

**Magical Thinking On The Left**

Despite continuing examples of mobilizations that fail to alter the balance of power, there continues to be a mythology surrounding mass non-violent disruptive direct action.  Naomi Klein writes in this vein in “A People’s Shock,” *The Nation*, October 6, 2014.

First, and importantly, she acknowledges the limits of such mass action:  “The fact that our most heroic social-justice movements won on the legal [civil rights] front but suffered big losses on the economic front is precisely why our world is as fundamentally unequal and unfair as it remains.”  She then properly points to benefits that were won.  Continuing, she says, “Winning will certainly require the convergence of diverse constituencies on a scale previously unknown,” and argues that the environmental threat of climate change offers a challenge that can create that unity.  She then makes a leap of faith that I believe is not sustained by the evidence.  Nor can it be sustained by believable scenarios for the future.

Klein writes,

“[T]here are lessons to be learned from the transformative movements of the past.  One such lesson is that when major shifts in the economic balance of power take place, they are invariably the result of extraordinary levels of social mobilization.  At these junctures, activism becomes not something performed by a small tribe within a culture, whether a vanguard of radicals or a subcategory of slick professionals (though each plays a part), but an entirely normal activity throughout society—its rent-payers’ associations, women’s auxiliaries, gardening clubs, neighborhood assemblies, trade unions, professional groups, sports teams, youth leagues, and on and on.  During extraordinary historical moments…the usual categories dividing ‘activists’ from ‘regular people’ became meaningless because the project of changing society was so deeply woven into the project of life.  Activists were, quite simply, everyone.”

Do Tahrir Square, Tiananmen Square, Paris, Seattle, OWS, or the recent climate demonstration provide an illustration of her point?  I think not.  What are the major policy, let alone structural, changes we can attribute to any of them?

We can find an example of her point in something like the San Francisco 1934 longshoremen’s and General Strike.  Briefly:  in the midst of the Great Depression, longshoremen—fed up with pay-offs to get a job, favoritism in hiring, sporadic work, miserable pay, no benefits, dangerous working conditions and lots more—went on strike.  Trade union activists and organizers, many of them Communists, had been sowing the seeds for unionization for years.  People like Harry Bridges, who later became the union’s president, had earned the respect of the longshoremen.  The employer decided to break the strike with scabs.  Fights between the strikers and scabs ensued.  Private security forces, and official police and national guard units entered the fray on the employer’s side.  Two non-violent strikers were killed by police bullets.  A general strike was called for, endorsed by the Central Labor Council, and followed.  The City came to a screeching halt as nothing but emergency vehicles moved within it. A somber march of tens of thousands proceeded down Market Street, the city’s main drag. The employers’ association recognized the union.  Both agreed to refer the dispute to the federal government which gave the union the hiring hall it was fighting for, coast-wide recognition, and some economic gains.  But when the left-led longshoremen’s union tried to extend the general strike, it lost the vote at the Labor Council.  Conservative Teamster and other leaders prevailed.  The longshoremen’s union accepted its gains, and waited for the next round of negotiations to win more.  Subsequent contract negotiations extended union prerogatives and increased material benefits for workers.

Several things make this story qualitatively different from the others.

\* The union’s leaders and organizers had immersed themselves in the constituency to be organized—the longshoremen.  Indeed many of them went to work in the industry.

\* Winnable demands were put on the table, and victories were won that made concrete and meaningful differences in the lives of the workers.

\* An institution—the hiring hall—was created that built upon and strengthened the already-existing occupational community that characterizes occupations such as longshore, mining, fishing and others where workers are in intense relations with one another doing work that requires skill and cooperation.

\* A continuing organization was built.  The union’s sole non-negotiable demand was “recognition as the sole bargaining agent” for its membership and the workforce.

\* The union knew when to back off—it did not make continuing the general strike a “principle”.  It also knew that it was going to be around so that it could extend its victories in the next round of negotiations, and that it could beat off any effort to break the strike because it had already done so.

The “historical moments” when “the usual categories dividing ‘activists’ from ‘regular people’…because the project of changing society was deeply woven into the project of life…” are rare.  And those moments that go on to win and build upon those victories to win more are those within which organization, as distinct from mobilization, takes place.  Klein, as far as I can tell in her *Nation* essay, is oblivious to that distinction.

**Organization Is Necessary But Not Sufficient**

Let me be the first to grant that “organization” in the usual sense of that word is not sufficient for transformational change, and that Klein is right in her insistence that if we care about the future of the world we need to be about more than incrementalism.  Further, for the most part the examples of mass-based, relatively permanent, people power organizations that began with transformative agendas—whether socialism or substantial democracy—did not continue on them; they were coopted or disappeared.

Without elements drawn from the longshoremen’s union story, elaborated upon by the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the early-to-mid 1960s in places like Albany, Georgia, Lowndes County, Alabama and the Mississippi Delta, and developed with great sophistication by Saul Alinsky and the community organization tradition that has emerged from his work, we will not see more than variations on the Tiananmen Square theme:  great popular upsurge followed by defeat, in some cases repressive defeat.

This is not the place to spell out the “how to” required to implement these elements. But the major point about them to be underlined here is that *organization takes place between the periods of major mobilization*.  If mobilizations are not viewed as the opportunity within which to build continuing organization then we will see only episodic upsurges of tremendous popular energy that at some point are diffused (or suppressed), followed by a return to “normalcy”.

The mobilizations of the 1930s were the near-spontaneous industrial strikes and sit-downs that characterized some years of the Great Depression.  In-plant worker-organizers as well as outside organizers sent in by the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) worked in that context to build industrial unions.  The civil rights mobilizations (sit-ins, freedom rides and mass marches) of the 1960s provided a context for organizing by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.  Stokely Carmichael and a few full-time SNCC field secretaries decided they would organize Lowndes County, terrain crossed by the Selma-to-Montgomery marchers.  The SNCC people took names of Lowndes’ residents who stood by the highway to indicate support for the Martin Luther King-led march.  At the time, many in SNCC were bitterly critical of the march.  When Stokely and his associates were asked if they were “Dr. King’s people,” they responded affirmatively—even though some of them derisively called him “De Lawd.”  In Rochester, New York, the Saul Alinsky-built FIGHT organization embodied the “black power” that SNCC called for but, truthfully, didn’t know how to fully build. The organization’s president, Minister Franklin Delano Florence said, “When you’re in Rochester, ‘black power’ is spelled ‘FIGHT’.”  Carmichael, indeed, spoke at a FIGHT rally when the community organization was battling with KODAK for jobs.  “When Minister Florence says to KODAK ‘jump’,” Carmichael said to a cheering crowd, “KODAK will respond, ‘How high?’”

I was part of those times—almost five years on the SNCC staff, and directing one of Alinsky’s community organizing projects, and I’ve continued over the last 50 years wrestling with the tension between cooptation and marginalization.  There are no magical answers.  But failure to address the question of organization—as Klein and a whole new generation of activists now are doing—will insure defeat.

**Whither Hong Kong?**

Each day’s news brings new sources of worry about the courageous young people in Hong Kong.  Their numbers diminish.  There may be a split over the militancy of their tactics.  Working people want to go to work, and may be irritated or even angered at obstacles placed in their way.  The police use violence, and no doubt hope to precipitate violent responses that they can then use to justify further violence on their part, plus arrest and incarceration of the demonstrators.  The powers-that-be offer negotiations, but it is pretty clear they are stalling and hoping to suck the momentum out of the movement.  Within the leadership of the movement, there are calls for greater militancy as if militancy alone, without far greater breadth and depth of support among Hong Kong’s people, is sufficient to achieve the prerogative-changing central demand of the demonstrators.

I hope the demonstrators will look for a tactical way out of their present impasse, one in which they win something though not the central thing which, just to be sure that it is clear, is not winnable in the present circumstances.  I hope they will use the time they might buy with a tactical win to examine the questions of organizational continuity, breadth and depth.  In particular, I hope they will examine their relationship with other forces in Hong Kong’s civil society—religious, labor, social, interest, identity, athletic—the very groups identified in Naomi Klein’s magical version of how transformative change happens—and find ways to forge relationships with those forces.  And, like SNCCs field secretaries who dropped out of school to become full-time organizers, I hope some of them will go to work in a variety of Hong Kong mass-employment occupations and bore from within becoming respected leaders among those workers.  At the same time, I hope others will become full-time “outside organizers” who seek to organize a variety of constituencies that now lack effective voices to pursue the particular interests associated with the quality of their own lives.

If they fail to do these things, I fear and predict that what I wrote in my earlier *CounterPunch* article, “[Tiananmen Square Repeat](http://www.counterpunch.org/?p=72591),” will come to pass.

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