**Have We Forgotten How to Fight?.** [**Rooflines**](http://www.rooflines.org/). Published by the [**National Housing Institute**](http://www.nhi.org/). October 8, 2015. **Posted by**[**Randy Stoecker**](http://www.rooflines.org/members/72/)**on October 2, 2015.**

  

Bottom of Form

I write from Wisconsin, now in its fifth year of rule by an entrenched right-wing government that the voters keep re-electing. In that short time, we have lost voting rights, worker rights, women’s rights, environmental and health protections, and academic freedom, just to name a few.

As I try to understand this I wonder, have we forgotten how to fight? I have been reading Aaron Schutz and Mike Miller's new book, [*People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky*](http://www.powells.com/biblio?inkey=73-9780826520425-0&PID=43325&PID=43325) in hopes it might help. This author combination of academic and organizer takes us on a journey of Alinsky's work and the work of those he influenced. Featured are Nicholas von Hoffman, Fred Ross, Tom Gaudette, John Baumann, Ed Chambers, Cesar Chevaz, Dolores Huerta, Wade Rathke, and others. As I read, I begin to see how community organizing went from a sophisticated, creative and powerful approach to a set of rigid formulas that end up overly focused on building relationships in churches on the one hand (think [DART](http://thedartcenter.org/), [PICO](http://www.piconetwork.org/), [Gamaliel](http://www.rooflines.org/4102/a_bigger_better_vision_for_the_left/), [IAF](http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/)) or only mobilizing people for actions rather than building organizations (think [Midwest Academy](http://www.midwestacademy.com/training/organizing-social-change/) and Citizen Action and[Occupy](http://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/occupywallstreet?gclid=CIvgwaGDpMgCFcOPHwodYogMxA) and [Black Lives Matter](http://blacklivesmatter.com/)) on the other. And I begin to get a glimmer of what we have forgotten. Mike Miller says "I think the organizers of Occupy Wall Street would benefit from a reading of Saul Alinsky." Aaron Schutz reflects, "the congregation-based approach, by itself, is not enough." But, with the notable exception of [National People's Action](http://npa-us.org/), and a few independent groups, congregational relationships or fleeting mobilizations are what we have.

Both models have limitations that many of Alinsky's organizers saw back when they originated. Discussing the dominant forms of organizing today, Nicholas von Hoffman asserts “I doubt that Alinsky would have much use for it in the changed society we live in." von Hoffman didn't have much use for it either. And he wasn't alone. Tom Gaudette, of the earliest PICO days, his son John, Shel Trapp of National People's Action, and even Monsignor "Jack" Egan, perhaps the most powerful Catholic Church supporter of community organizing, worried especially about the congregation-based model. Three things worried them. First, the focus on congregations grew to the increasing exclusion of neighborhoods, especially as congregations became separated from neighborhoods. Second, congregation-based organizing increasingly prioritized relationship-building to the exclusion of working on issues. This may be because, third, congregation-based organizers eschewed conflict and confrontation. John Baumann, who led PICO into its congregation-based phase, rejected the neighborhood model as "issue driven rather than values driven; it failed to understand the role and power of religious faith and values in shaping social action . . . there was something about the confrontational style of the block clubs that I was uneasy with, and so were others. We sometimes dehumanized targets in the way we treated them."

I've seen the problems with this model in Madison. Two-plus years of one-on-ones with little to show for it. Dozens of people receiving IAF ten-day training and all they remember is "building relationships"—nothing about cutting an issue, running a meeting, doing an action, negotiating with power, or any of the other actual essentials of community organizing. And they treat conflict and confrontation like a stigmatized mental illness.

The mobilizing model is no better, but in a different way. When [Tony Robinson](http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/12/us/tony-robinson-madison-killing-investigation/) was gunned down by a police officer in Madison, adding to the growing list of such tragedies, Madison's version of Black Lives Matter—[Young Gifted & Black Coalition](http://www.ygbcoalition.org/)—took to the streets. They did so in an incredibly peaceful yet forceful way, and I participated in two of their mobilizations. Both times there was a respectable crowd, but not so many that ten people with clip boards couldn't have collected the contact information for everyone there and organized us. YGB has, to their credit, developed a clear list of demands, but not a clear structure and they’re not building a place-based multi-issue organization. YGB is a definite step-up from Occupy, but still far from Alinsky. And they remain a marginalized group without enough power or legitimacy to do more than shout their demands.

The lost opportunities were foreshadowed by those skilled in Alinsky-style organizing. Schutz and Miller include a piece by Arthur M. Brazier, an African American pastor who became a leader of T.W.O. in Chicago—Alinsky's first foray into organizing in black communities. Brazier understood that “The need is not for slogans and rhetoric, but for mass-based organizations that can develop the kind of power necessary within the black community." von Hoffman agreed that "An organization that wields power as opposed to the kind that throws an intermittent stink-bomb, must be big, must be broad, must be quasi-institutionalized." Mike Miller reflects on Fred Ross' work with the UFW grape boycott, and on Heather Booth's work with Citizen Action, seeing in both a turn away from the kind of community organizing described by Brazier to a mobilization model.

Neither model is succeeding in Wisconsin. So maybe it's time to re-read Alinsky. And I can hear the response already: Alinsky's old and irrelevant to society today. But they forget that the congregation-based model has also now been around for decades, and the mobilization model has been around for as long as there have been angry people.

There are timeless but apparently forgotten truths in Alinsky's principles. First, community organizing is about community. Congregations are not communities, especially today. Neither are mobilized masses. Second, community organizing is about leveling the political playing field, and power is always zero sum. Whenever someone gets more power on the political playing field, someone else has to get less. And that means conflict, like it or not. Finally, as Alinsky was fond of saying even after writing Rules for Radicals, the only rule is that there are no rules. In Wisconsin, by refusing to fight and forgetting how to organize, we have lost everything. May we not be the first domino.

***Randy Stoecker****is a professor of community and environmental sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Center for Community and Economic Development at the University of Wisconsin-Extension. He has worked with and written extensively about community organizing and development groups since the mid-1980s. He moderates COMM-ORG: the Online Conference on Community Organizing and Development at*[*http://comm-org.wisc.edu*](http://comm-org.wisc.edu/)*.*