***“In democratic countries, knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others.”***

***Alexis de Toqueville, Democracy in America, 1831***

**Winning Battles and Losing the War. *Mike Miller*. May, 2019**

***(This essay began as a talk at the conference, “From Foreclosure To Fair Lending: Advocacy, Organizing, and the Pursuit of Equitable Access To Credit,” at the John Marshall Law School, Chicago, September 8, 2012. It became a chapter in the book of that title edited by Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, published 2013 by New Village Press.)***

**A Post-Trump Preface**

*From the perspective of this article, the election of Donald Trump was no surprise; nor is his survey-after-survey hold on 40+% of the American electorate. I hope you will agree when you read further. I also hope my claim lends weight to the broader case I make: without rebuilding a genuine civil society comprising a vast array of voluntary associations—vital unions in the workplace, interest and identity organizations, and neighborhood associations-- and without assembling them into effective people power voices, we will not defeat the Trump phenomenon.  Its international character suggests that Trump was not an accident.  For these reasons, I fear he will be reelected. Undoing the past will take more than one election; indeed it will take more than elections—as I hope you will be persuaded by this piece.*

*In the text that follows, I have incorporated post-Trump references in the text, including references to Trump himself.*

**Introduction**

Is there a new social movement brewing in the United States? 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? Will there be a cumulative effect from the dramatic teacher union strikes across the country, the youth movement against gun violence, the continuing protest energy in African-American and Latino immigrant communities, the women’s movement and others?

For those of us who thirst for a new broadly-based social movement, we need to be careful that we do not ignore the realities on the ground and consider the questions that follow. 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 also 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, erosion of past gains by women, racial and ethnic minorities and GLBTQ communities, and continuing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few.

If there is a new surge of positive 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 weaker despite the fact that our numbers now appear to be growing.

For the past 55 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 large-scale 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 and the fact of powerlessness to believing in the efficacy of collective action and achieving results from it. 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—fifty years. (And I do not address in this paper the bleak state of affairs projected for the world our grandchildren will live in as a result of climate change and species extinction. Nor do I deal with our country’s imperial role in the world.)

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 of wealth, status and power 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, and a relatively small number of people of color who now hold middle-class jobs and some highly visible positions in politics and the arts. 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 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.

These observations are, therefore, a caution, a warning against illusions that might be created by current electoral victories, successful strikes, or social movement energy. I think we need a sober, realistic appraisal of where we are if we are to begin to get to where we want and need to be if any substantive understanding of “democracy” is to prevail.

**The Nature of the Times**

Where are we as we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century? Where have we been for the past several decades? I would like to begin by looking at those questions.

**Decline of Voluntary Associations**

Beneath all the other problems 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 this shrinkage.

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 consolidate that isolation with the fantasy of huge numbers of “friends” and illusions of social movements based on little or no lasting personal relationships—essential for solidarity that endures. 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.

Isolated and powerless people, suffering a decline in their standard of living or an inability to improve it, resent their condition. At the same time, they don’t want to blame themselves for it. Nor do they blame specific decision makers with greater power because they, if directly confronted, can fire, evict, foreclose or otherwise hurt you. Instead, their resentment is focused on those immediately around them—“The Other” who has even less power than they do—to whom they attribute their problems. These are people who may be moving into their neighborhood, “taking my job”, getting more than their share of public benefits (the early image of the Poverty Program “giving” everything to blacks, affirmative action “taking my kid’s job”, or a highly visible foreigner assaulting the country’s borders, and the list goes on.

Blaming The Other is accompanied by rage over vague distant elites over whom there is no possibility of exercising influence because the organizations that once did that are now substantially weaker or have disappeared—unions, political clubs, civic associations, interest groups and other voices of civil society. These elites, it is believed, are coddling “The Other”—adopting policies that favor this rival to the detriment of “real” Americans.

Alternatively (or simultaneously), people blame themselves, resulting in the phenomenon of “internalized oppression”, a deep burden on the human soul because whatever its public face it admits to failure, to being “less than”, and at its worse to be less than human.

Demagogues appeal to frustrations and fears, campaigning with appeals to the flag of patriotism. Powerless, isolated and angry people are a receptive audience. Lacking a realistic voice they respond favorably to the “man on the white horse”, the savior who says, and I add this in 2018, as Donald Trump put it, “I, and only I, can solve your problems.”

A democratic voice instead requires leaders who deal with counterparts in other groups in order to create winning coalitions. These diverse leaders, when connected to a constituency by real relationships rather than media, explain and interpret to members why they need to be in alliances with people different from themselves. Such leaders, when engaged with their counterparts from other groups, learn that “those people” are getting hurt in the same way as “my people”, and by the same people—politicians, public administrators, landlords, employers, drug companies, health providers and insurers, banks, payday lenders, and the list goes on.

Without addressing the problem of civil society, we will be unable to address the other two major problems that I will identify 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 highly innovative and productive 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, an activist liberal middle-class 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 by the loss of home equity of one half 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 opioid epidemic created by pharmaceutical companies interested in maximizing profit, 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—even though many of their interests are not served by that ideology. Our side has no serious counterpart to them.

**Economic Stress**

The second macro problem we face is the persistence and growth of poverty, near-poverty, and economic stress among 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 health insurance with large deductibles, 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 but far from limited to them, is a glowing timber waiting to ignite.

The stress is further hidden by large numbers of people participating in the underground economy, where they have no rights and no benefits, and by the “gig” economy of so-called “independent contractors” who live from check-to-check with no protections for their income. 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 “neo-liberal” policies.

Finally, and a primary source of the first two, is the increasing concentration of social, cultural, economic, and political power in the hands of the “one percent” of the country’s population. Their rapacity seems to know no bounds. Our side has been incapable of reining it in.

But it is neither the evils of the 1, .1, or the .01 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 done.

**A struggle for power**

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 on-and-on. But if we do not address the problem of powerlessness, these are irrelevant to the course of history, the chatter of coffee houses and the discussion on college campuses. 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 essay 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. Nor do I think they are “apathetic” (which I define as the label put on people who won’t come to your meeting). Rather, it is because they do not think they can do anything about the present status quo.

To put it another way, we cannot successfully address systemic evils if we do not look at what we are building to confront them. 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: An Example**

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 and social media, they are 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 (BCCs) 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 members. 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.
* Examples of resistance to oppression. 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.
* Internal education on the subject of how the world—or “the system” works, so that people can understand the context of their lives.
* 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. 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, and the move from rural settings to large megalopolises. The BCC recreated the extended family in a new form—perhaps building on the old, or perhaps not.

In a 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 and liberating experience was an alternative to Franz Fanon’s notion that violence against the oppressor was necessary for liberation—a view widely held by revolutionaries throughout the world, particularly in that 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 in the here and now, not a period deferred until “after the revolution”.

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

* 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, were 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 who have occupied privately and publicly owned land that was not in use, and won legal recognition of cooperatives they created to till the soil. While these political and economic formations are not BCCs, many of their leaders received their most important formative experience in them.
* Mutual aid, or communal self-reliance, is a powerful tool that emerged 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.
* BCCs became politically powerful when people took their reading of the Bible into the world (Miller 1983).

Note that the development of a 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 mutual 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 made Brazil of that period qualitatively different: first, there were, of course, clear cultural differences and, second, 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 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 absence of BCC fundamentals in the United States helps 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 changes required for this country to live up to its best ideals. Without these principles, we will not 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 concessions from them.

This slow, careful, multifaceted way of organization-building is quite different from the narrowly issue- or election-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.

And this caveat: the kind of community I’m talking about might exist in any activist group. The question to be asked of that group is how deeply rooted is it among the people for whom it seeks (and often claims) to speak. Many “activist” organizations are a thin strata of people who are disconnected from constituency.

**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, a social life that included dances, dinners, picnics, athletic teams, parades, choruses and drum brigades, and services to members provided by things like an AA group.

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 organization often had its own research department making it competent to challenge “facts” that were really opinions. And its own internal media were trusted places to look for interpretations of what was going on in the world. 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—before it became a political party.

Look at the experience of current institution- 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 similarly renewed. Some of these organizations are now participants at state- and nationwide decision-making tables on a variety of important issues. 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 my 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 to religious congregations or revitalized union locals. A look at some (though not all) 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 people united to pursue purposes larger than themselves. In other community organizing efforts around the country, you can find this deep and rich sense of community as well.

To date, 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—Thomas Paine and his agenda for the American Revolution; the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights as documents that were better than their slave-owning authors’ behavior; the “We The People” Preamble to the U.S. Constitution; the Abolitionists, Suffragettes, Knights of Labor, Populists, and Wobblies; the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the mix of political and religious ideas that were its underpinning; Saul Alinsky and the various strands of organizing that grew from his work; Myles Horton and the Highlander Center; and 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 (as distinct from oligopoly or monopoly) capitalism, or 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, nor find some other form of democratic organization. Nor will they create a co-creator rather than consumer culture.

**Pseudo-Community**

In the absence of real community, a demagogue (like Donald Trump) creates an alternative: the community of shared hysteria and fear—fear of vague elites who are never specifically defined because that might mean taking action to reign them in; fear of “The Other”—criminals and rapists who want to enter our country; the undocumented who want to take your job; the pervert who threatens our families. This fear is stoked by the instant communication of social media. A single undocumented person accidently fired a stolen gun that killed a young woman tourist in San Francisco who was an innocent bystander. That story was turned into a danger affecting every person who walks the streets of any city in the United States. Fox News, talk radio, Facebook pages, Tweets and dozens of websites magnified the danger.

At his mass meetings, Trump creates momentary communities. Those who rally together are a “we” who stand for righteousness against the “them” who threaten our way of life. As a public showman, as already demonstrated in his TV success, Trump is a master. I fear for whomever is the major candidate who faces him in presidential TV debates. Trump’s audience in those “debates” is not the panel of news people who question him, or any in the live or screen audience who expect substantive answers to policy questions. Rather, it is the “we”, now watching their TV sets, who are his activist and voter base. They are not interested in the post-debate “fact checks” by public interest organizations because “facts” are not what they are looking for in the first place.

Like Roman Emperors who knew how to stir the plebeians against the Senate, or English Kings who stirred the commoners against Parliament, Trump has mastered the art of stirring politically marginalized and powerless people against the powers-that-be. His wealth, his viewers and listeners believe, make him immune to elite power. Thus the more extravagant his displays of conspicuous consumption—which should be insults to a democratically constituted people—the greater their faith in him.

**Purposive Organization**

By “organization,” I mean sustained, structured, coordinated, and disciplined activity that seeks to accomplish a purpose in the world. Any organization that is going to act powerfully will have leadership—whether formal or informal, hidden or open—and this leadership will involve individual leaders or collections of them. 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 at workplaces—I am using the word “community” here in the 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 to the consternation of labor leaders who had the illusion they were 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 and its corporate, nonprofit 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 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 late 1962 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. While SCLC did much of its mobilizing through the well-organized structures of African-American churches—the most enduring and stable institutions of the African-American community—when King and his SCLC staff let town, they did not leave a church-based mechanism that could enforce what their campaigns won. In cities in which SCLC engaged in dramatic nonviolent, disruptive, direct action campaigns these churches failed to continue as effective social action bodies.

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 nonviolent 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 their 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 by the Federal Poverty Program and the Child Development Group of Mississippi, the state’s Headstart program.

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.

Now to a second example. 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 led some of the most militant direct action campaigns we have ever seen in this country. With great tactical imagination, they won many important policy victories and saw some of them implemented.

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 local 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 when hundreds of community development corporations (CDCs) replaced what had been voluntary community organization. The CDCs lacked the resources to make a significant dent in the country’s affordable housing problems, but the groups that might have fought for more had disappeared. And their voices were insignificant when the foreclosure crisis robbed millions of their dream of homeownership and destroyed their wealth that was largely based on the equity they had in their homes.

It was these community development corporations that were the principal vehicles for weakening and destroying local community organizations. As one person who was part of that process noted, leaders (of community organizations) became boards of directors (of community development corporations); organizers became executive directors and program staff, and; *members became clients*. Members are citizens. Clients are recipients.

Snick was destroyed partly by itself, and much of what NPA did was coopted. As I noted earlier, this was 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 new victories while our army retreats. Pay further attention to the fact that a relatively small number of electoral victories is a scratch on the surface of the roughly 500,000 elective offices that exist in the nation.

We cannot build the community that is required to create a nonviolent 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.

**The Electoral Trap**

Much of the new activism is focused on winning elections. Elections are important. Defeating Donald Trump and his agenda of xenophobia, nationalism, scapegoating, Twitter politics and lying is important, as is electing a Congress that will produce real solutions to real problems. So are thousands of local elections. However necessary these may be, adding all of them up is not sufficient to the task at hand, for several fundamental reasons.

To put the matter rather cautiously, politicians during campaigns promise more than they deliver when elected. The reasons are many, but none is more important than the fact that if voters lack the people power to hold politicians accountable, they will not be able to enforce victories they thought they won when they put their faith in candidate promises and elected them.

Politicians have to make compromises unless there is a vast sweeping of public offices by candidates whose program is qualitatively different from the incumbents of their party and their party’s opposition. Further, compromise is often a good thing. Different constituencies and interests have differing points of view, all of which might be legitimate. Shaping legislative majorities requires taking these into account.

Further, like anybody else who works for a living, politicians are interested in keeping their jobs, getting a promotion, finding work if they lose an election, and having a decent retirement plan. That means the voters in a particular district that elected them are only one of their considerations when they vote on issues before them. In their mind’s eye are also the voters of a larger district in which they might run for a higher office, the organized interest groups who have influence with voters, the money people who pay for campaigns, and the private employers who might hire them should they lose office.

Change wrought by political action is time-consuming: the legislative process itself is highly technical; a bill passed must be signed by an executive to become law; often administrative machinery must be modified or put in place to implement the legislation; appropriations must accompany substance or the law never leaves the piece of paper on which it is written; court appeals might defer implementation; bureaucracies whose task is to implement might be insensitive, incompetent or hostile—any of which will undermine legislative intent. These often multi-year periods of time can lead to disillusionment among those who expected fast results when they voted. The expectations may have been raised by politicians who knew they couldn’t quickly deliver; politics doesn’t work that way. But this fact alone is insufficient to prevent disillusionment and withdrawal. No serious movement for substantive change will be sustained by electoral and legislative action alone.

Perhaps most important from the perspective of substantial, let alone transformational, change is corporate and financial power to do damage to the economy. As the banking crisis of 2008/09 made clear, “institutions too big to fail” can demand government bailouts because they know the politicians won’t take them over—whether temporarily or permanently. Politicians willing to consider such radical action legitimately must worry about whether the electorate is willing to support them. When capital says, “this action will create an atmosphere inhospitable to investment,” and threatens a downturn in the economy, expropriation might be an appropriate government response. But it might be a response unacceptable to voters who are not organized. “Consumer voters”, the kind we have in American politics, elect politicians to solve problems. They have never, at least in my lifetime of 80+ years, been urged by a legislative or executive body they elected to engage in a boycott, strike or massive non-violent disruption of business as usual to force a corporation or financial institution that uses or threatens a “capital strike” against proposed government action.

The point is also illustrated by Amazon’s 2019 decision to withdraw from a planned major corporate installation in New York City. Less publicly reported are the thousands of instances of state and local governments offering tax breaks, infrastructure improvements, zoning exemptions and other de facto bribes to get a private corporation to locate in their jurisdiction. Conversely, as the fate of entire regions of the country attest, when union power won too much, entire industries picked up and moved—either to the southern states where there were no unions or overseas where friendly dictatorships didn’t allow unions.

**Exceptions to the Rule**

I noted earlier that there were exceptions to our failure to alter the relations of power, and that we should look more closely at them. I would like to note three of them: collective bargaining, the elimination of literacy qualification to register to vote in the South, and the Mission Coalition Organization’s right to recall representatives on a neighborhood planning board.

**Collective Bargaining**

Because most unions have a relatively 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. Except when there was a tight labor market, before collective bargaining, employers could essentially pay and otherwise do to their workers whatever they wanted. 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, and use strikes, plant occupations, boycotts, work slow-downs and other tactics to force “good faith negotiations”. 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 bribes to obtain work 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. Until the Taft-Hartley Act, supervisory personnel who didn’t hire and fire could themselves be unionized.

Lou Goldblatt, former secretary-treasurer of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), 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. Or to use a different phrase, there is a struggle over position—their relationship to the powers-that-be. In one brief visionary moment, the United Automobile Workers union said it would not agree to a wage increase that was paid for by an increased price 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, and that at one time in the not-too-distant past organized labor could legitimately claim to speak for the common good.

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 benefits (service on grievances by business agents and representation by elected leaders in contract negotiations). Unions don’t engage in issues having to do with the quality, effectiveness, appropriateness, or efficiency of the products or services that are the result of their members’ work. Nor do they enter into more than nominal alliances with community groups for broader social goals. (Recent teacher strikes are a refreshing example of how a broader agenda benefits both workers and communities.) As long as unions retain present organizational culture and narrow focus, they will be limited in what they can contribute.

**“Who Is Qualified?”**

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 and ideological than structural. Snick was its prime instigator, though it was soon adopted across the entire movement. In the early days of efforts 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 for people so they could learn to take and pass the test. The objective was to obtain equal application of the law, not to challenge the law itself. In a conversation taped by the FBI, President Johnson says to Martin Luther King, Jr, “…If you just cleared out everywhere, make it age and read and write.”…To which King responded, “Yes.”

But the very notion of voting qualifications soon became the subject of debate. More deeply, Snick challenged the idea of “qualifications” which led to deference *within* the Black community to “teachers and preachers” whose literacy presumably made them better political leaders. SNCC rejected literacy as a voting requirement, and challenged it in workshops with illiterate people who said “politics is White folks business”. 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, if applied equally to both Black and White, is legitimate.” 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 *further argued* that formally illiterate African Americans had an experiential wisdom about politics that fully qualified them to vote.

SNCC’s later Chairman Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) led a brilliant workshop that asked the question “Who Is Qualified”. He drew a vertical line from the top to the bottom of a blackboard or sheet of paper; on the left he wrote the colloquial language of formally uneducated people, and on the right “the king’s English”. It looked like this (there were more examples):

I digs wine                                      \\ I enjoy drinking cocktails

The peoples wants freedom            \\ The people want freedom

Whereinsoever the policemens      \\ Anywhere the officers of the law go,

 goes they causes troubles                           they cause trouble

I wants to reddish to vote               \\ I want to register to vote

In the conversation that followed, Carmichael challenged workshop participants who had doubts about people on the left side of the left side of his two columns voting. 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. SNCC had to create a cultural revolution to convince them.

Without that discussion, it is unlikely that a sharecropper by the name of Fannie Lou Hamer would have had the courage to challenge the seating of Mississippi’s racist delegation at the 1964 Democratic Party Convention. Nor would her stirring words, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired,” have electrified the delegates and the nation, and become 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, not simply equality of opportunity.

And I should add that ending the barrier to vote was a qualitative change in Deep South politics. The Movement’s victory of that time is expressed in the continuing presence of more African-Americans elected to public office there than anyplace else in the country.

**The Right To Recall**

In the summer of 1968, I was hired to serve as lead organizer for the Mission Coalition Organization (MCO). It had formed earlier that year in response to an invitation issued at a “Mission Issues Conference” by Mayor Joseph Alioto to the neighborhood to participate in San Francisco’s Model Cities Program. MCO became the Mayor’s negotiating partner. Fearing model cities as a Trojan Horse for urban renewal, which two years earlier MCO’s predecessor organization had defeated, MCO demanded veto power over the program.

As a condition of my hiring, MCO’s leaders agreed to broaden the organization’s focus, and become multi-issue in character. That led to militant direct action. Tenants were organized and engaged in rent strikes, and picketing of landlords at their homes, businesses and places of worship. The unemployed and their allies were organized and engaged in sit-ins, boycotts and political pressure on employers.

The Mayor had not anticipated this from his negotiating partner, and threatened to withdraw from the relationship. MCO stopped that. Instead of veto power, MCO nominated two-thirds of the members of the Mission Model Neighborhood Commission (MMNC) *and received the right to recall them.* Only MMNC had authority to make plans for the Mission. In effect, public power recognized community power and gave it community control over plans for its future.

MCO negotiated another change in the relations of power. As a result of its direct action, job agreements were won with many private employers who had facilities in or close to the neighborhood. A feature of these agreements was that employers would hire people sent by MCO. The negotiations were for entry level jobs, and MCO said it would send motivated people who the company had to train.

MCO won other victories that altered relations of power as well. Tenant unions borrowed from labor and negotiated landlord-tenant agreements. Parent organizations demanded and won a say in who would be the principal of their children’s school. MCO named the members of the Board of the city’s neighborhood mental health center. Across the country, similar victories were won by powerful community organizations.

**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—with leaders and/or staff paid from the dues, fees, and activities of their members.

These voluntary 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. 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.” Union locals are similarly owned by their members. It is rare that civic or community organizations are.

The engagement of congregations, unions, 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.

We need also 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 by their members. That is what Cesar Chavez did at the beginning of his work before there was a United Farm Workers of America union. When he spoke with farm workers, he told them there had to be substantial dues. The dues then charged were equivalent to roughly $30.00 a month in today’s dollars (Miller, unpublished data).

In addition to insisting upon dues, Chavez built initially around mutual aid activities, not through confrontations with institutional power. These included a credit union, a burial society, and a buying club for automobile batteries and tires (members sometimes drove 100 or more miles a day to-and-from work). He also used individual services, often done as group actions, to help people deal with corrupt merchants, biased bureaucratic government agencies, and other obstacles to a decent life.

Chavez was initially interested in building solidly at the base, and used the network of farm worker “shoestring communities”— stable 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).

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 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 an 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)

(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 websites or showing up for an occasional demonstration. Some of the organizations they champion are, for example, Washington, DC public interest groups that use direct mail and social media to reach “members” who have little meaningful engagement beyond signing petitions, donating money and occasionally showing up at demonstrations.)

The weakness at the base is connected with how most of the work we do is funded. In “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:

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.

**What Is To Be Done?**

To everyday Americans, I say get active in whatever local voluntary association means anything to you, whether that be a congregation, union local, civic association or identity or interest group. Earn the respect and trust of your co-members. Pursue an internal agenda of active participation, making members co-creators of the life of the organization instead of dues-payers who expect full-time leaders and/or paid staff to do the work of the organization. Pursue an external agenda that broadens the focus of your organization in the world. A good example of broadened horizons is in the recent teacher and other recent strikes. In the former, the unions reached out to parents and communities, both seeking allies and asking those who were the presumed beneficiaries of their members’ work what their interests were so they could be made part of collective bargaining proposals.

Or, create such a group. It could be a block club, reading group, support group or any other kind of association in which civic engagement might become a topic of discussion that would lead to action.

To full-time organizers, I say pay greater attention to the long-standing distinction between mobilizing and organizing. Use mobilizations as opportunities to reach out to unengaged people, but use the time after a major action or a victory is won to reach out to those newly engaged to make them more than paper members. If they don’t exist, create levels of organization in which meaningful engagement demands less than an activist’s commitment, and be careful about “activism” driving less engaged members away. After campaigns are won (or lost), evaluate, reflect on the meaning of what was done in the way BCC members used their reading of the Bible, use the campaign as the textbook for internal education, celebrate by creating new local heroes—everyday people who now see themselves as history makers who don’t have to rely on the white knight to fight the evil king for them.

There is a vast literature that can tell you what needs to be done. One place to start is my co-edited *People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky*. (Aaron Schultz and Mike Miller, Vanderbilt University Press, 2015.)

**Connecting the Dots**

Now, let me connect some dots: we cannot begin to win the war and create a meaningful version of democracy if we simply focus on winning legislative or electoral campaigns. Nor can we win by adding campaigns together in a mother-of-campaigns organization. These will not 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 deep sense of community at their base. We also need to be searching for the kind of independent or autonomous, relatively permanent, and self-funded organizations that can serve as the vehicles through which community can be expressed.

Will we be able to do this before climate change and species extinction drastically alter 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 article, it is in those directions that I fear and believe we will continue.

-----------------------------------------

Mike Miller was a leader in the early student movement at University of California, Berkeley, a field-secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and lead organizer for Saul Alinsky’s black community organizing project in Kansas City, MO. He directs the San Francisco-based ORGANIZE Training Center [www.organizetrainingcenter.org](http://www.organizetrainingcenter.org), and is author of *A Community Organizer’s Tale: People and Power in San Francisco*, and *Community Organizing: A Brief Introduction,* and co-author of *People Power: The Saul Alinsky Tradition of Community Organizing.*

***References***

Alinsky, Saul D. 1965. “The War on Poverty-Political Pornography.” *Journal of Social Issues* 21 (1): 41–47.

Collum, Danny Duncan. 1996. “Reweaving the Fabric: The Democratic Hope of Church- Based Community Organizations.” *The Other Side* 32 (5): 12–18.

Einstein Online. 2012. “Albert Einstein Quotes—Humanity.” The Albert Einstein Website Online. http://www.alberteinsteinsite.com/quotes/#humanity.

France, Anatole. 1910. *The Red Lily.* Edited by Frederic Chapman and translated by Winifred Stephens. New York: John Lane Company.

Hamer, Fanny Lou. 1964. Testimony before the Credentials Committee, Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 22.

Larkin, Mark. 2012. “Michelle Alexander on the Irrational Race Bias of the Criminal Justice and Prison Systems.” *Truthout,* August 1.

Long, Huey. 1934. “Share Our Wealth.” National radio address, February 23.

Miller, Mike. 1983. “Base Christian Communities: Notes on and Commentary about a Talk by Richard Shaull.” Unpublished, available from ORGANIZE Training Center, San Francisco, California, [www.organizetrainingcenter.org](http://www.organizetrainingcenter.org)

Murray, Peter. 2012. “RE: [GameChangerSalon] Pay Scales for Progressive Activists (Branching Off from the Teacher Thread).” *GameChangerSalon,* June 26.

Ormaechea, Jose Maria. 1991. *The Mondragon Cooperative Experience.* Arrasate, Spain: Mondragon Corporacion Cooperative.

Roy, Arundhati. 2012. “Capitalism: A Ghost Story.” *Outlookinda.com,* March 26, 2012.

Schutz, Aaron and Miller, Mike. *People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky.* Vanderbilt University Press, 2015.