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## Electoralism, Mobilization and Strategies for the 80s: An Assessment of Organizing Trends in the Mid-Decade

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Electoralism, Mobilization and Strategies for  
the 80s:  
An Assessment of Organizing Trends in the  
Mid-Decade

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Community organizers in the United States have two tasks today: a short-term defensive one of holding back the rightward assault against both the social welfare state and the working class in general; and a long-term, mobilizing task of building a constituency strong enough to transform the welfare state itself. We cannot lose sight of this latter goal, for the method and objectives we set for ourselves in the short-run will greatly determine the feasibility of our long-term goals.

This is no small matter, for the assault on the welfare state is as fundamental to the restructuring of class and social relations today as the New Deal was in helping to stabilize and expand social wages for working people in the 1930s. Today, economists as varied as Silk, Gordon, Bluestone and Thurow see our society moving toward a highly stratified, two-tiered class system of very well-off professional workers and managers and a huge layer of far poorer, underskilled workers kept passive by their fears of joining the so-called underclass.<sup>1</sup> Homelessness and gentrification; the birth of yuppies and the emergence of the underclass; the rise of privatization and the decline of entitlements are all part of this new stratification. In this context, the roles of social workers, with the exception of those entering private practice, can only become increasingly marginal, less skilled, and less autonomous if this crisis is not altered politically.<sup>2</sup>

This daunting economic and social reality must inform any strategy for social change that we attempt. We, therefore, must,

confront the issues of power -- power now being utilized to destroy the lives of hundred of thousands of people through deindustrialization, gentrification, Social Darwinism -- if we are to re-emerge with our own power to combat the right. If we use the wrong tactics and create false illusions that eventually undermine long-term effectiveness, we can never attain those long-term goals.

This is why today's emphasis on electoralism, especially Democratic Party electoralism, is such a misguided tactic. A brief look at history shows no example of movement activity increasing its strength once it entered the Democratic Party. Let me cite two examples: the major gains of the welfare state and the labor movement occurred before labor's and left's entry into FDR's 1936 coalition; indeed, the movement quickly suffered defeats culminating in the debacle of Little Steel in 1937.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the major growth of civil rights organizations occurred before their entanglements with Democratic Party electoralism after 1964.<sup>4</sup>

The dissipation of movement activity occurred when the movements themselves were quite powerful. Such power gave a spurious but understandable rationale to entry into the Democratic Party. Today, no such movements exist. Thus, the possibility of resisting such cooptive tactics is even less likely. The Rainbow Coalition learned this when the Black Caucus' designate for Vice-Chair was for the first time ever denied selection. Since then, Kennedy and other progressives have admittedly moved to the right. So much for the possibilities of "internal reform."<sup>4</sup>

Electoralism itself, given strong movement support and independence, is viable. But the ideas expressed in campaigns must be sufficiently visible, even in nascent form, to connect political, economic, and social issues in some meaningful way. That simply does not exist today.

Indeed, this is true even for the Rainbow Coalition. The Rainbow Coalition, while having the outlines of the social composition we all wish, has shown itself to have limited staying power since the election. (As the Black Caucus incident above suggests.) The one exception is Chicago, where the virulent, entrenched racism of the white community has kept alive a defensive unity within the Black Community.

The Rainbow Coalition has had little staying power because its leadership has no interest in maintaining a highly mobilized, increasingly skilled and active constituency in their own trade unions, civil rights organizations, and professional groups. To do that would be to join short-term objectives with the long-term ideas and consciousness that train people in their own self-determination. Such a phrase is no longer heard in organizing circles -- self-determination would contest for power within our own organization before it threatened the right. Instead, today's emphasis is on what is popularly called "empowerment" but what, in fact, is nationalist pluralism.

Nationalist pluralism is a two-headed phenomenon -- nationalist, in the progressive, populist sense of fighting for a particular people's civil rights, anti-police brutality, pro-affirmative action, for example. It is highly conservative, however, in the pluralist sense of "empowering" only a particular stratum of its population to maintain the status quo, ignoring the changing economic relationships developing beneath them. Pluralism is concerned only with political elites and consciously ignores the disparity in economic arrangements within groupings. This is why it is possible for there to be a ten-fold increase in Black and Hispanic officials and a five-fold increase in female lawmakers since 1970 concurrent to the emergence of the so-called underclass and the "feminization of poverty."

Thus, even the Rainbow Coalition ignored the ways to join economic and political issues by working in their own organizations to change them. Many rallies would be held with thousands of people, but they were there only to listen; there were massive campaigns, but no mass participation. (For example, Jackson staffers took over every local headquarters and arbitrarily vetoed any fund-raiser that could not bring in \$3,000.) The remaining engagement of more and more people in economic and political issues that affect their lives daily just has not happened.

For this engagement must be more than simple "participation" at scattered events. It needs to involve a process that educates and socializes people to feel more confident about themselves and their ability to act on their world. Organizing is designed to carry out this process, even when movements are weak. Electoralism, especially when there are few developed community and mass-based organizations influencing it, runs counter to that

development process. Even local campaigns emphasize a narrow range of techniques: high status, given to officials and established leaders, especially those running for office; highly specific issues confined to dominant perceptions of problems that reinforce mainstream, status quo changes; and a task-oriented, "there's no time for talk!" method of functioning that limits political education and training immensely. Only the glow -- and I admit it is real at first -- of fighting on the side of progressivism against the forces of reaction creates anything sustaining for the membership. But that glow cannot and does not last, even with local-level victories, if the material conditions affecting daily life are not altered and if the likelihood of long-term social justice is not improved upon. More often than not, when those conditions do not change, that glow of idealism is replaced by the greyer passivity of fatalism.

It is the lack of connection between our short-term struggles and our long-term goals that contributes so much to our weakness at mobilization. Reagan, on the other hand, has no such problem at present. He calls for a "new, vigorous free enterprise," and concrete images of Silicon Valley and rich yuppies come into view that give hope, however illusory, to the right wing rhetoric. Likewise, his attacks against a bloated welfare state bureaucracy have equally clear, dismal images of indifferent employment counselors and hostile welfare workers which, however misunderstood, legitimate his claim for further cuts. Conservative electoralism and mobilization of the right move in easy symmetry, feeding off each other's strengths to continue economic restratification, militarism, and racist and sexist Social Darwinism.

We have no such symmetry. We need to defend entitlements, but there can be no illusions about how they are dispensed: the welfare state has too much bloated bureaucracy. Trade unionism, historically and symbolically a representation of working class independence and strength, needs to be maintained, but anyone who has worked in trade union activity knows they bear little resemblance to democratic, internally heterogeneous organizations. They need to be redemocratized and restructured if they are to be able again to fight for better working conditions and improving standards of living. All of this is true to civil rights organizations as well.

In short, the crisis of progressive politics today, be it European social democracy, Third World socialism or United States liberalism, has developed in large part because of the discrepancy between our ideas and the concrete models we have used to represent those ideas. In great measure, we have nothing to excite people to build towards a better world. While defensive mobilizations, especially against racism and sexism, are possible, such fights historically have little staying power if they are not connected to concrete formations like the CIO in the 1930s or SNCC in the early 1960s. This is why, despite the efforts of thousands of people in 1984, the power of the right is greater than ever today.

As painful as it is to face, two-party electoralism in this historical period must be viewed as counter-productive. It diverts people from the rebuilding and redemocratizing of our organizations that can then begin exciting others to consider widespread, lasting mobilization. Only such movement activity has the staying power, ideas and creativity to threaten the new powerful right wing.

In the mid-1980s, therefore, our social welfare strategies, while in the short-run defensive in character, need to concentrate in five arenas:

- (a) legislative coalitions fighting for entitlements
- (b) anti-gentrification coalitions (i.e., homelessness, tenants' rights, etc.)
- (c) rank and file trade unionism
- (d) anti-racist and anti-sexist groups
- (e) anti-intervention, anti-militarism coalitions

The first type of coalition fights for maintenance of the social wage. It does not demand sectarian perfection; such coalitions will include politicians and others not interested in long-term, wide-scale reform but who are short-term allies who can be pushed to fight for social welfare. The next two arenas will be more grassroots-based and, thus, capable of widespread internal education and activity. For example, anti-gentrification efforts often bring professionals and community people together where

there are possibilities of breaking down status illusions regarding leadership and types of expertise. Rank and file trade unionism, while fighting for specific needs of union members, also carries the possibility of reforming unions in the process by emphasizing greater democratic traditions. Anti-sexist and anti-racist groups (such as pro-abortion groups and anti-police brutality coalitions) defend people under attack from the Social Darwinism of right-to-lifers, anti-humanists, the Klan, etc. The final, anti-intervention coalition, while not specific to social welfare, serves the important educational purpose of fighting ideas that spread militarism and economic investment in the war machine. Such ideas need to be countered if investment in social needs is ever to increase again.

Such coalitions are not that different from much work now being suggested by others. But they must also join these struggles with the long-term goals discussed at the start of this paper still in mind. That means:

- (a) Political objectives must have short-term and long-term goals beneath them so political education moving in the direction of self-determination is possible. If large numbers of new people are not developed with both self-confidence and political awareness there is little likelihood for sustained progressive activity.
- (b) Coalition work, the training of activists, etc., must, therefore, always attempt to include clients, students, the unemployed, etc. whenever possible to break down elitism in our own ranks.
- (c) Feminist process must be used as much as possible so that we all relearn new ways to behave while working together.

Through this process new, more collective and supportive forms of leadership can be developed. In this way the vision of a better world and the way we shall try to work in that world take on concrete form in the present.

This work will be small-scale now: in rank and file caucuses; as parts of coalitions, often in minority positions; in work that has neither immediate victories nor illusions. It will

seem paltry, a "joke" compared to the power of the right. But let's not forget that in 1964 the right wing was seen as a joke. Yet they did the same kind of small-scale work, building to a point where twenty years later we are no longer laughing.

#### NOTES

1. Leonard Silk, Economics in the Real World: How Politics Affects The Economy, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985; David Gordon, et al. Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1982; Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, The Deindustrialization of America, New York: Basic Books, 1982; Lester Thurow, The Zero-Sum Society New York: Penguin Press, 1981.

2. Michael Fabricant, "The Industrialization of Social Work Practice," Social Work, Fall 1985.

3. David Milton, The Politics of U.S. Labor: From the Great Depression to the New Deal, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982.

4. Marvin Sussman, noted cultural historian and writer on social movements, expresses an equally dim view on the likelihood of "change from within" the Democratic Party, basing his analysis on previous attempts at internal reform. See a review of his books and comments in The Village Voice, March 31, 1985. For those who hold out that the dynamics between mobilization and electoralism are more complicated than I suggest -- and I grant they are complicated -- I ask but one question: Can anyone point to an example somewhere in the 20th Century where social movement involvement within The Democratic Party increased, directly or indirectly, movement activity? For a stimulating analysis of movement activity and electoralism, see Eric Chester, Labor and the Ballot Box, New York: Praeger, 1985.