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E-News For Social Justice Organizers

May15, 2013

Greetings!

Welcome to the Organizer's Edge -- the monthly E -News for social justice organizers to help us think about our work, and what is really working for us and what is not. As always we welcome your comments, criticism and cat-calls. Fire away...Michael

Electoral Politics and Community Organizing

As James Mumm of National People's Action pointed out in our April E-News, many community organizations have not been involved in electoral politics in large part because of their 501 c-3 nonprofit tax status and heavy reliance on foundation funding.

"The funders" (as they are often referred to) of community organizations of all kinds have financed progressive groups into an ever-changing array of issue groups: health care, education, workers' rights, child-care, crime, housing, prisons, criminal justice, jobs, transportation, environment, energy, climate change, money in politics, taxes, seniors, immigration, foreign policy, racism, sexism, GLBT issues, food, youth, and other issues. Groups jump thru ever-more complex hoops of proposals, reports deadlines, site visits while "the funders" change priorities, theories, and program officers. This is mostly undiscussable because few want to bite the hand that funds them - even if temporarily.

Just the fact that the term "the funders" is so frequently used by community organizers implies a fixed and limited source of funding for community organizations. The reliance on the funders also stops organizational involvement in partisan election.

Georgia Hollister-Isman of the Mass Alliance in Boston, MA has a different idea. She challenges one basic assumption of community organizing: that

"organized people" will influence elected officials to behave in a way that we want. (The "People United" sometimes are defeated!) Rather than relying *only* on marches, demonstrations and accountability sessions, she suggests direct involvement in elections, (obviously without foundation funding!) including going out door-knocking during election season with those candidates we want elected.

Walter Davis from Tennessee and Horace Small from Boston add important points that I hope you will think about.

What is your experience? What is working? What is not working? Your comments are more than welcome! -
- **MJB**



Georgia Hollister-Isman, Mass Alliance, Boston, MA Electoral Politics and Community Organizers

Too often community organizers shun electoral politics. They do that for some real reasons-they know most current politicians don't represent them well; they think politics is dirty or nasty; or they feel limited and hobbled by their non-profit organizations. But all community organizers need the cooperation or the ear of elected officials. And if they don't engage in electoral politics they are missing one of their most powerful tools to affect change.

The importance of election work is easy to see when you remember that politicians are people, not institutions. They make decisions based on feelings and relationships. And they are the same people when they decide whether or not to stand up for our communities and when they stand for election. Organizers can dramatically increase the power of their communities by making sure that they are forces in both parts of the process. I have seen again and again how much better, deeper, more impactful a conversation about issues I and others at Mass Alliance can

have with decision makers because we were physically there with them helping them get elected. By spending just one afternoon knocking on doors with a candidate-I can totally change the quality of our relationship for years to come. I have learned that this kind of help gets the attention of politicians better than monetary contributions and they remember it far longer. I know legislators who are always happy to see me because I spent a few afternoons knocking on doors with them-a decade ago.

Community organizers should also engage in elections (at least at the local and state level) because they will be very good at it. Those who haven't worked in politics imagine campaigns to be like what they see on TV. But in reality state legislative and local campaigns are much smaller and small groups of people make a huge impact. If you can get five people to come and knock on doors for a candidate, you become one of their most important supporters. Anyone who has been doing organizing, can make a tremendous difference in the course of a campaign.

Engaging in electoral campaigns allows community organizers to wield both of the two most powerful tools in politics-love and fear. You can develop real, warm, loyal relationships with those who share your values and pose a threat to those who don't. Both are crucial in building support for your agenda.

Of course, ultimately it isn't enough to wage campaigns that earn the love - or fear --of our current political leaders. We also need to cultivate new leaders-who look more like our communities and who are more closely connected to our values and concerns. We want community organizers and their real allies to run for office. What I've learned about this part of the process is that it take a long time and a lot of investment. This past year we had two really wonderful progressives (from community organizing backgrounds) run for and win State Representative seats. Both were in communities where Mass Alliance and our member organizations had been working for years. We would never have been able to achieve those victories when we started. In both cities, we engaged with local leaders in a series of local electoral campaigns and coached them. We didn't win all of those campaigns, but we trained the candidates and the activists who were energized by their runs. And slowly we built a team of people that was large enough, strong enough, and savvy enough to win some great victories this year. Small incursions into the political arena have bigger impacts down the road. Once local activists start understanding elections and local progressive candidates start doing even moderately well in them, you start to open up amazing new possibilities to get your own people into positions of power. But you can't get there if you keep yourself walled off from elections.



Walter Davis, of Eastern Tennessee, President of the National Organizers Alliance and Executive Director of the Tennessee Health Care Campaign, responds to Ms. Hollister-Isman's comments:

Down here in the so-called "red states," there is a tendency to show up to lobby legislators once a year in the capital city for bills of concern to us. That's okay but we have to demonstrate power in the backyards of the politician, as well as that "love or fear" described by Georgia Hollister-Isman. Waiting until a bill is in committee may be too late. Local organizing demands awareness of local electoral politics. At some point, a person has to say "yes" to our demands.

There are also good organizers who have become good elected officials. They tend to be those who built a solid community base for their campaigns and in turn that base supports them while holding them accountable. Madeline Rogero, the mayor of Knoxville, is an example. She proudly acknowledges her farmworker organizing past as a building block for her own vision of democracy emphasizing strong, safe neighborhoods; "living green and working green." Since becoming Mayor, she created a space by which neighborhood organizations could come together, share

their ideas and revitalize the urban conversations through a large city-wide Neighborhoods Conference in March 2013.



Horace Small, Executive Director, Union of Minority Neighborhood, Boston, MA

"In more than 40 years in the profession, I have learned a number of things about community organizing.

- 1) Organizing is about bringing people together on the issues that affect them
- 2) As facilitators of the change process, our work is about helping people and communities get power and find their powerful voice, and
- 3) People stay involved when they have a real say in what's taking shape in their lives, see progress, and acquire the respect that they deserve, and
- 4) Change comes when you change the rules of the game...in other words changing laws that better the condition of the people.

In my experience as an organizer, and in the cities, towns and state capitols where I have worked, I have found that it is critical, for change to occur, that a healthy and mature relationship is developed between elected officials and the community. These officials support our position, champion our position, and work with us in building the power necessary to win.

"Learning how to count" is critical in our world, with the legislator being our inside game, communicating with us, the "outside" game as to what is taking place in the statehouse...who's with us, who's not, who we need to talk to, what a legislator needs, etc. In the Massachusetts Legislature, learning to count is 81 votes...80 doesn't count. The relationship with our legislators, then, is helping how we get to 81.

This healthy relationship manifests itself in recognizing what both our jobs are. Acting on legislation is what a legislator does. Working to building support for its passage is what we do. And in the world I come from, that's life as we know it.

That means to me that I'm not, particularly in Massachusetts where the role of a legislator is to do what she/he is told by the speaker, I'm not going to pound on doors for a legislator because he's a nice guy or gave me a listen. In a mutual relationship, maturity suggests we understand our roles. Winning for the people should be the greatest reward for the legislator. It should be enough. And if I want to do something to help that legislator in the future that should be my individual decision...not an organizational strategy

[We want to hear from you, your reactions, ideas, YOUR edge of YOUR envelope. Just go to... http://michaeljacobybrown.com/contact/](http://michaeljacobybrown.com/contact/)

Who else you will hear from.....

We are just starting, but so far you can expect to hear what the following people are thinking:

Heather Booth, founder of the Mid-West Academy,

Roger Newell with the Teamsters Union and Jobs with Justice in Washington, DC,,

George Luse of the Mass Teachers Assn,

Scott Reed with the PICO Network, ,

Cathy Howell, in Oregon and El Salvador, formerly with the AFL-CIO,

Cesar McDowell of the Interaction Institute for Social Justice,

Diana Bell of Community and Labor United,

David Hernandez of the California Education Assn,

Linda Honold, of Wisconsin Voices

Quinn Rallings in Alabama with the PICO Network,

Bob Van Meter with the Local Initiative Support Corporation in Boston,

Walter Davis, in Tennessee, of the National Organizers Alliance,

Deb Askenase, of Community Organizing 2.0,

Cherie Andes, of the Industrial Areas Foundation,

Avi Green, with MassVote,

Deb Fastino, of the Coalition for Social Justice in New Bedford, MA,

Rebecca Gutman, with SEIU-1199,

Tim Dean, of SEIU-1199,

Claudia Horwitz, of Stone Circles in North Carolina,

Mary Ochs, long time organizer in Los Angeles

Fred Azcarate, of the AFL-CIO

and others, hopefully, including YOU

Other Useful Links

<http://michaeljacobybrown.com/>

[National Organizers Alliance](#)

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