

Tactical Tension (From Social Policy – Socialpolicy.org)

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Sometimes the silence itself is deafening. The daily din of CNN: full of sound and no fury. Headlines are narcotizing the daily news with show and spectacle. A full scale revolution being waged almost virtually and without real struggle. An entire country kidnapped and sold for cheap ransom. An entire people – our people – after a generation of work -- force-fed a perversion of democracy as hollow as a doughnut. Thieves in three piece suits or jurist's robes prattling endlessly an ideology of class, while we wait on our ass. Watchwords of warning no longer have the same meaning: accommodation, stability, "a place at the table," "making a difference," "doing a deal," "staying in the game," whatever! For what one wonders? Tomorrow not only comes after today, but can also be lost today!

We have built and still maintain serious institutions with hundreds of thousands of members in the community and millions of members in the workplace. We have billions of dollars worth of assets. We have real capacity – staff, resources, material. We have created tremendous social capital and represent the moral force of a substantial part of the American people.

Though we often have great influence, we are still almost powerless, partly because we are rendering ourselves impotent in the face of our opponents and greatest challenges. The opposition is becoming more aggressive, but one wonders if we have become too passive.

Looking just at recent examples within the experience of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), I can count a series of SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Private Parties) suits designed to sap resources and chill membership organized campaigns. In Baltimore in a campaign against a predatory lender – American Skycorp -- the company turned around and sued ACORN for \$30M. A couple of months before that a real estate company – Rosenberg Diamond Properties – retaliating against actions in their properties by ACORN tenant and community groups in the Bronx sued for \$16M. Business interests filed another lawsuit in St. Louis to block a successful ACORN initiated referendum establishing a living wage in that city.

Upon passing the most comprehensive anti-predatory lending ordinance in the country in Philadelphia several weeks ago, companies led by Household Finance and others are now suing to untrack the effort. Is there a pattern of intimidation here? Certainly, that's not new. Our work faces a continually escalating spiral of action, reaction, and counter reaction.

Similarly, the legal environment for labor unions worsens daily and it wasn't good already. The rule of thumb has long been for labor tactics, that if it works – it's probably illegal! Surely, it is not necessary to point out that the restrictions on secondary boycotts tie the hands of unions, preventing successful targeting of core combatants while offering them almost total cover. Fines, injunctions, picketing limits, institutionally and personally bind unions tactically from hitting their targets directly and forcefully.

These are golden handcuffs. To pursue an advantage allows the assets of the union, built at great sacrifice often by generations of union members, to be at total risk. Recently the AirLine Pilots Association paid a fine of over \$50,000,000 for refusing a return to work order. Few unions could have paid such a fine and survived. The great Brookside Mine strike was accompanied by almost \$100M in fines against the United Mine Workers some years ago. Unions are political institutions, and there are few leaders able to drive a program that would risk the financial life – or survival -- of the union. Even in these times of attempted revitalization of the labor movement, one notes that no small amount of the Carpenters' parting shots at John Sweeney and the AFL-CIO target the current deficit spending patterns of the organization and a demand to know how the money was spent in Florida. No one is immune from this kind of scrutiny within the house of labor. Having built great institutions, few want to administer their demise. Nor should they. Nor should that be our only choice.

Problematically, too often our tactics are devolving into symbolic actions blunted by mock drama, fake pageantry, and scripted scenarios. Some stage elaborate convocations where too often the targets offer the “real” action in response to the passive participation of thousands of bottoms glued in seats – a picture of a future representative democracy of inactivity. The media also increasingly drives the program as a dominant participant even though they have no formal place on the agenda. Organization and opponent sometimes seem looked in the same dance, moving simultaneously in the sequence of expectations that come with the form.

A first rule of organizing used to be that tactical repetition blunts the action of its pressure and power, nonetheless a generation of actions has not broken through these barriers. Sun-tzu joins us in arguing that the terrain where we fight dictates battle tactics. Increasingly we are fighting on harder and more unyielding ground, yet too often it seems that our tactics are rote, rather than real. Whatever the situation, we have to be willing to push the tactical envelope to the point of tension in order to be effective and win.

Arrests are a disturbing case in point. A recent article in the New York Times spoke interestingly of a post-Civil Rights period of “pax protestiana” where arrests had in some cities devolved into a summons or a ticket, essentially a small speed bump on the swift ride home from the demonstration. Time in jail, much less jail time, which was once the standard fare for the fight, had become virtually non-existent. The sentences for Rev. Al Sharpton and others for civil disobedience in Puerto Rico surprised many, but for arrests to matter and have meaning, they have to transcend mere symbol and celebrity. In Los Angeles this year ACORN members and others chained themselves to a bulldozer in an action against a developer where we were demanding lower income housing be added to the construction project. Stopping construction costs money. People get mad. No one should be surprised. The tactic has consequences and therefore a sharp pressure point applied to the target. The point exactly!

We need not be Calvinists though. The issue is not whether or not it hurts, but whether it works! Civil disobedience applied appropriately with tactical tension can still be effective and dramatic in some situations even as symbol, just as with certain targets a petition and a meeting can still move some people some of the time. Like the dog having its day, almost any tactic will work some where the first time it's used. More depressingly, too many organizations have

marshmellowed tactical selection to the point that civil disobedience of any kind is left out of the mix. There has to be some sting and bite, or we simply can not win.

For those of us who believe there is still power to be built in the reality of direct action, past the borders of symbolic protest, in these times one can still feel the heat when it fires up. There was a sizzle around the country after the WTO actions in Seattle in late 1999. Something surprising was happening. It was different, it was lively, and temporarily it seemed to be working. Labor was marching in one direction on some issues, others were holding firm in other directions on other issues. All this was combined in a colorful, exciting, smoky, hazy amalgamation of helmeted police, broken glass, and righteous rage. People and organizations seemed in motion. There was also something important about both the tactics – and the flavor – of Seattle. Dispersed affinity groups operating on “street” consensus making a range of tactical decisions and holding ground in a way that made the momentum of the actions impossible to immobilize in spite of rain, gas, and cops. This was interesting! The flavor was spicy, too. There were puppets, costumes, masks, banners, rattles, and drums. Political theater with a sense of humor added to the mix. And, there was gear! Great gobs of gear: PVP tubing on arms (called handcuffs), steel buckling people together not to count the plethora of gas masks, ropes, field kitchens, cell phones, and whatnot. People get ready!

Something was up? We saw it in our own work. In Chicago the Grassroots Collaborative which included the Chicago Coalition of the Homeless, ACORN, Illinois Hunger Coalition, and the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant & Refugee Rights along with other groups organized a march for amnesty in September 2000. Rain clouds gathered and stormed. Temperatures dropped along with the dreams of the organizers who had tallied up numbers hoping against hope for 5000 to hit the streets. I happened to be in town and drew a minor assignment forming up the front of the march at the edge of the plaza. Buses would not stop coming. Cell phones rang out as buses were having to return 2 and 3 times to some pickup areas in Little Village for overflow crowds. More than 10000 marched – often in pouring rain – through downtown Chicago to demand Amnesty Now! The largest such gathering of our forces to hit the streets there in 30 years! People were moving!

We saw it everywhere. Our HOTROC (Hospitality, Hotel, and Restaurants Organizing Committee), AFL-CIO, in New Orleans joined with the local labor movement and the community to demand labor peace after a series of firings in the hotels in July 1999. Instead of marching 2000 on the streets we saw the numbers swell to 10000 in the heat to surpass all expectations and create the largest such march in 50 years. SEIU’s Justice for Janitors campaign set 2000 as the year to move the numbers up on the wage rates of the contracts. Coordinating expirations of the contracts, Los Angeles was the first to hit the bricks. Janitors – of all people! – became popular heroes. The red t-shirts became collector’s items and were sold as knockoffs to wannabes! We had our own groupies! People were ready!

That’s all good news. The small lesson still seems to be that when we think and act big, and develop and trust our instincts about public support, have confidence in our turnout methodology, then we can still hit the occasional home run. The big lesson is that we do not do it often enough!

As constituency organizers we are bound in principle and practice to membership accountability. In devising organizational tactics such issues are at the forefront. In moving our members we face the challenges of working hours, home life, multiple obligations, as well as sometimes direct opposition in the workplace and community. The hierarchy of our tactics traditionally begins on the highest possible ground in order to create legitimacy for our organizations and campaigns. An ACORN may not hesitate to block a bulldozer or an expressway, but at the same time has a National Neighborhood Clean-up scheduled this summer. Labor unions strike and picket, they also organize picnics, blood drives, and new charities, like the Union Community Fund. Stated simply, when the road is easy, we travel it smoothly whether the backroom or the backdoor. The problem we meet here though is what happens to our tactics when the road is hard and winning is not easy?

For mass-based organizations like unions and membership based community organizations, there are experiential and democratic limits to tactical expression. For example we can not knowingly expose members to physical harm and danger. To do so would erode our moral high ground and undermine our popular support. On the tactical edge there is a steep ledge for organizers as we maintain credibility with our own leadership and members. I can remember crashing the doors into the Boston Statler Hilton as 250 welfare recipients in 1969 streamed in on a particular MWRO demonstration at a gubernatorial fundraiser. We made our point. There were no arrests. But, some members were scared, because it was rough stuff. There were long nights of leadership discussion (i.e. conflict) on whether or not the tactical plan I had implemented had only by luck not been a “suicide action” to quote one of the leaders.

Direct action does have perils on the balancing wire of pushing conflict at the target, channeling rage into voice, and creating tactics that express maximum power with a minimum of risk. Despite the excitement of the anti-globalization actions in Seattle the sequence of convention chasing subsequently has almost left this movement criminalized as it has moved to Los Angeles, Washington, Philadelphia, and most recently Quebec. ACORN leaders used to joke about which actions were “tennis shoe” actions, where they made preparations for when a march might move from simple protest to takeover of a building, a stage, a microphone, or whatever. The anti-globalization forces now seem to come equipped with a uniform of the day that includes gas masks, bandanas and other accouterments of direct and often physical confrontations with police. This is not a revolution that one really wants televised too often. The picture of the progressive forces swaddled in poor man’s versions of riot equipment does not mobilize the base of mass constituencies to join in. At best the message this sends might be that this is a young person’s game, at the worst the message doesn’t differentiate enough between the cops and the robbers, the good guys and the bad.

The dialectic between cause and confrontation, protest and street fighting, popular support versus marginality is important. Reportedly the neighborhood support in Quebec for the progressive forces was exceptionally strong, but that reality is invisible and lost in the constant footage on CNN. On the other hand watching a tape of the SEIU 1877 march in downtown Los Angeles with the director of the Ruckus Society, he could not restrain commenting on the contribution their “manufacturing” department could make in props, signage, and symbols for the same march. And, I don’t doubt it!

As constituency organizers, we are also bound by legal constraints – that are real and punishing – and by institutional risks – which can be catastrophic and potentially fatal. We are in fact bound so tight that there may be no natural way to shake loose. This may be the other big lesson is that we can, and do, hit concrete reinforced ceilings at the outer limits of our tactical range.

I am perplexed that we have not been able in most cases to inspire the creation of de facto allies that would offer alternative tactical expressions, including those that are extra-legal or directly illegal. The lack of such individual operatives and organizational formations perhaps speaks to the polarity and paucity of our struggles in class, race, and elite appeal. Despite some public commentaries to the contrary, our work and movements have become fundamentally isolated and increasingly alienated in the public forum. Nonetheless the scarcity of such alternative actors and actions also speaks to our own inability to communicate the power and depth of our issues and campaigns, and create deeper appeal and urgency. Without building bridges we can not expect to get to the other side.

By contrast one might examine environmental organizations and movements in this country. One would be very hard pressed to find many constituency organizations in the terms that we would understand, though there are some large, primarily direct mail or canvass fed membership organizations among their ranks. It is unquestionable though that broad based and widely stated environmental issues have won huge mass appeal and support. The support for “environmentalism” may only be inches deep, but it is miles wide ranging across the political and party spectrum. The organizational formations that have arisen to serve this undifferentiated popular support are diverse. There are a “big-7” grouping of mainline, heavily resourced, lawyered-up institutions with long lineages, ivy league pedigrees, and huge mailing lists, lobbying, and legal operations: Environmental Defense Fund, Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation, National Resources Defense Council, and so on. But there is also a wide ranging and more scruffy set of organizations with closer constituency ties that we would understand as organizers. These groups would include the scores of smaller, grassroots outfits that are campaign based or threat responsive formations linked to various networks like the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ) and the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes, or actual membership organizations such as those in the western states under the Western Organization of Resources Council (WORC) umbrella. If one charted this continuum of organizational activity, these groups would be on the left side of a pretty progressive line, but chockablock on this side of the margin one would also find a range of direct action forces from Greenpeace to Ruckus Society and beyond.

Simply put, why isn't there more “monkey wrenching” in our world? Where is our Earth First! Where are our tree squatters? Is it not somewhat surprising that we really do not have an Environmental Liberation Front (ELF) as part of the mix?

Let me quickly add the caveat and disclaimers! The excesses of some of these operations within the environmental movement are well known and reported. Some loggers – often good union brothers – were severely injured by nails embedded in trees. Some of the activity attributed to ELF can only be compared to terrorism. Doubtlessly, some of the tactics and actions were naïve and puerile and therefore elitist and flatly dangerous in their own right. Some communities were tragically and perhaps unnecessarily divided. Unquestionably these aberrations were tactically

harmful to the entire environmental movement and led to some deterioration of public support, distancing and posturing by other organizations, and generally probably caused everything and everybody to run for cover.

The streets of our communities and many, many workplaces are robust, vibrant, and not infrequently volatile places. Rage and anger are as common as the corner grocery and the punch clock. Frustration frequently leads to excess. Many are packing and fights are fast and furious. Going “postal” is more than a metaphor, and too many of our members live in neighborhoods where they are inured to the crime statistics, because violence is commonplace and casual. In all honesty there are few of us who do not know that that there is sometimes rough justice with some recalcitrant and patronizing targets where individual members have doubtlessly exercised their own physical or propriety revenge. There are also a lot of paid “security” jobs on various housing development projects in our cities, which we have either won or conceded, because of the inherent threats that exist for property and equipment. In these mean streets how have we succeeded in exercising such immense tactical constraint and why? And, is it working for us?

The knee-jerk answer is quick in coming, and is as true as it is also troubling. We have built mass organizations that tend to naturally – and forcefully – prohibit aberrant behavior which would dilute or destroy the objectives of the group. I’ve trained hundreds of organizers with the line that when we door knock we do so to “bring some people into the organization, and keep some people out.” The elaborate methodology, procedures, planning, leadership development, menus of alternatives and options, democracy, and legal agreements swaddle our organizations to create a buffer of padded protection against sudden outbreaks of either spontaneity or violence. Perhaps deliberately, and perhaps inadvertently, while creating social change, building power, and developing social capital, we have also created instruments of social control. Sometimes we end up inexplicably legitimizing institutions that trap us as muted voices in immobilized bodies. Many of our organizations have not created comfortable channels for the expression of rage, though we breathe it everywhere we work as heavy as humidity. Many of our organizations have ended up domesticating and creating tranquility zones in workplaces and communities without always collecting the necessary exchange rate of goods and services. Sometimes we are so mesmerized by the ends that we forget that the means are determinate as well. If we exclude enraged people and leach the anger out of our organizations, we can not win and we are not representative of our constituencies. Have we defanged the wolves at our enemies’ door, while leaving them still free to roam and prowl at our own doorsteps?

We are in danger of producing a message in our work that is diluting its strength and tension. We do not embrace violence, quite the contrary, but we need to create chemistry containing the elements of more explosive combinations in order to create more force and power through the equations of action and reaction that we push to the target.

In short we should not confuse the questions with the answers, the argument with advocacy. Nonetheless, I still can not help wondering why there is not a next stage response when labor and community organizations hit tactical and strategic walls in campaigns and struggles? Such formations would almost seem natural and normal along the continuum of labor and community organizations. It is surprising since the legacy of the civil rights and anti-war movements commonly found such “extensions” of tactical activity. The civil rights movement contains a

rich tradition of both individual heroism and action, particularly where political defiance was expressed through nonviolent witness against overwhelming odds and opposition, as well as important roles played by groups like the Black Panther Party within this same period. The anti-war movement created its own marginality from the Weather Underground to the naked terrorism. Where is the more “radical” left past our ranks? Is it marked by argument, rather than activism?

Furthermore, where are they when we need them? Because in my view we absolutely need some tactical response and formations past what we can normally deliver. We have to have the ability to hope, if not expect, that individuals – and groups -- ideologically related to our mass constituency organizations would learn to act when we are unable. At the point of our exit, there has to be a real threat!

Labor presents the starkest case. The impact of prohibitions and penalties which prevent sit-ins, mass picketing, direct disruptions, and through secondary boycott rules often move our unions and our members away from the dispute and the real decision makers that can resolve the matter are rendering unions almost tactically impotent. Unions can no longer prevent the handling of “hot cargo” when there is a strike or other dispute. In hot cargo a union could follow the struck goods and enlist other unionized facilities or vulnerable employers not to accept the struck goods while the dispute was in progress, thereby effectively removing the market. In effect the weight of these legal prohibitions has been to dilute if not destroy the solidarity among unionized workers who would normally have been only doing what is “natural” and organic in a tactical sense. What could be more normal to a worker desperately trying to protect her own job in a strike than to prevent physical access from scabs, clients, and others to the workplace? What could be more logical than to ask others to not purchase the services of companies where there is a dispute? Unfortunately, since the most organic tactics have been criminalized, members are left alienated from their natural instincts for job survival and protection. Members are then forced to try and learn to act symbolically when direct action was more normal, to rely on organizers and lawyers for advice since they are disempowered and disoriented from their own natural, tactical reactions to adverse circumstances. Worst, we are often pushed tactically into having to create power and pressure by organizing the public to support our cause as workers, even when demonstrably this very support is manipulated by elites, rendered inaccessible by the media, and increasingly polarized against us. The American communities that will react in unison to support a picket sign and its line can now virtually be counted on one hand.

We do what we know how to do with what we have, and there are many that have done it with great courage, resolve, skill, and success. Despite the solid support for representation one still finds in any public poll, union membership continues to decline.

One can hardly resist choking and stuttering as one says this, but we need more Harvard students. Not in the way most expect to need them to run the world, as they were trained by the college to do. We need more Harvard – and other -- students sitting in for living wages just as they did in May 2001. Both SEIU and HERE had collective bargaining contracts for service workers at Harvard. Both had good contracts as these things go, but they were as good as they could win within the world in which we work and in which reasonable success – and restraint – is understood in a collective bargaining regime in the context of power disparities as they exist.

The students redefined the terrain and advanced the tactical expression to a place where the workers themselves and their unions were not only unable to go, but legally could never go. They also defined more forcibly from that position what would define a living wage. When they took action, even in smallish numbers (40 or so), labor and community forces could support them, even when we couldn't be them! Maude Hurd, ACORN's President, John Sweeney, the AFL-CIO President, and many others spoke at huge rallies to support the student sit-in for living wages. And, they won!

Which really means that we all won! There are some unionists who believe that any win for a union that was not won directly at the bargaining table or in a classic manner actually weakens the union. This is simply the last vestige of gomperism. We have to get past this. We have to embrace whatever independent allies we can find – and encourage -- within the ranks of our struggle, and we need more than “harvard students” to get there.

In the exhilaration of this victory within the halls of institutional labor, there is also a profound discomfort. We – the collective “we” of the progressive forces of unionists and union members – could only have won with an independent ally. If all matter abhors a vacuum, the collective impulse of all concerted activity, which makes up unions, resists independence! Independence does not fit the definition of “rank and file,” fighting force, the work team, and the band of brothers and sisters formed as the line of defense against the enemies dedicated to our abomination. In the face of such opposition and attack we have built a culture which no longer understands clearly that solidarity includes support and requires action, even if not concerted.

The logical response when a union is barred from some space or activity would have been for the union to reach out to some other group to do what has been forbidden. Logic though does not help here. We can applaud, but we can not coordinate. To cooperate in such a way would have colored the action with the same prohibitions that are forced upon labor unions. We need to communicate a new brand and song of solidarity to build to the next stage and fight more successfully again as a true mutual alliance.

The courts, and legislators in league with them, foresaw this as well, and banned it equally. Simply put, we can not cry for help – that's conspiracy! We need an organizing and tactical concept to take the field in these days and times that is as old as any battle: we need another soldier to take the place of the fallen one. Without asking. Without question. Acting independently. But, acting powerfully where we have been enjoined and blocked.

In essence that is what happened recently at Harvard without the students even realizing the way that they were redefining the field of battle. Unquestionably, we won at Harvard what could not have been won any other way. We need to increase this kind of capacity.

Returning to the environmental movement and the recent spate of anti-globalization activities, one could find welcome tactical extensions to our work in the operations of self-contained, autonomous and independent affinity groups. The notion that such independent cells can operate as “spokes in the wheel” both in separation and in seeming concert within the larger framework of strategic actions and campaigns would add important tactical alternatives to our work.

Show me an organizer who has not walked the streets of a neighborhood and not danced on the dreamscape of the imagination and seen expressways crippled, belching smokestacks spewing soot over the neighborhood suddenly snuffed, new developments stymied, high-rises leveled, abandoned buildings razed, the broken healed, the parts made whole. It is that dream that often shapes the organizing vision, creating the movie we hope to view of building communities to strength and power. We have shared the apocalyptic vision where mass avengers leveled the field, where knights slew the dragons, where the community and castle were saved. Why is the flag never picked up when it hits the ground? Are these power differentials too immense? Are the causes of our constituencies without consequence? Are there no warriors ready to levitate the enemy in these days and times? Was “by any means necessary” really only a slogan, rather than a watchword?

In Mexico City several years ago I walked through one of the neighborhoods with a character from wrestling lore who called himself, “Super Barrio.” Children flocked around him. Adults greeted him with a grin as we marched through the streets and visited various projects and housing developments. Even callow youth peering down from the rooftops and around the edge of the black plastic cisterns were impressed and awed to see someone who stood for courage and fighting community issues in concert with the neighborhood barrio organization.

In Hawaii on the island of Molokai when the native people could no longer devise any strategy to prevent the Navy from bombing the neighboring island, Kahoolawe, which had great religious significance, some men, including my companero, Emmett Aluli paddled out to the bombing site even as the planes took off and prepared to stand where many could not and physically try to stop the bombing. Some died in these protests. The Navy eventually capitulated and a \$400M cleanup is underway on the island. The resort property is now having trouble with a form of monkey wrenching on the outer limit of community organization and action. Some are charged. Most are innocent. There was no symbolism in the blood of Kahoolawe, just as there is little now on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. The stout jail terms there are now part of the price paid for the potential of victory. All these barriers have to be broken.

Crazy, computer viruses are started by young kids around the world or hackers bored out of their skulls that live right down the street. As union organizers we are still doing 8 point difficulty dumpster dives for alpha lists of employees, when theoretically some good geeks could tap in, load up, and download the whole thing and throw it over our transom window. What a waste of talent when such a huge contribution could be made to the labor movement. Lists are an organizer’s lifeline to new organizing drives, yet somehow we have not built the hyperlinks to communicate an understanding of our needs sufficiently for others to take independent initiative. We are still trying to learn how to do electronic picketing, when the knowledge of how to overwhelm web sites seems almost trivial with a little organization and the right hardware brigade. When one finds a “group” like Rtmark on the web one has hope that our actions can make their menu. Take as one disconnected example the rash of publicity at the end of 2000 concerning a potential dot.com organizing drive at Amazon.com. The New York Times ran a story about Amazon.com running anti-union meetings and putting out union-free literature. There is no union organizer alive who does not know that this is simply par for that course, yet the Times ran it as news. And, that’s good, but why at such a sensitive time for the company, as

the Christmas orders came zipping in through the internet, was there no direct action to pull the plug on a union-buster? This is capacity we do not have and alliances that do not exist.

These are powerful and dramatic tactical expressions and they are delivering force to the target at the edge of our customary tactical selection. Why don't we see this more often? I am perplexed that we so seldom see our issues jump to other hosts the way similar viral strains make the leap in other movements.

No small amount of this problem resides in either our refusal or inability to move our organizational campaigns into the more sweeping drama of public debate and decision. No doubt there are some organizers and institutions that are still uncomfortable with the speed and excess of "movement," but there can not be any doubt that the pace of social change without this added dimension of movement is stultifying and suffocating. It is not a surprise that one can find this bridging happening around the living wage issue. More than 50 cities and other governmental jurisdictions have passed some form of living wage initiative. There are few large communities in America where this issue is not currently enjoined. Community organizations, like ACORN and others, as well as labor unions, certainly SEIU Local 100 and 880 among them, have seized the opportunity to move living wage coalitions forward that immeasurably increase our capacity to define and direct the debate about the value of jobs, economic development, and fair wages on a community by community level. Massachusetts, particularly Boston, has been at ground zero of this movement having passed one of the model living wage ordinances several years ago. There continues to be activity both statewide as well as the in the suburban cities around Boston. It comes as little surprise that one could create the leap here from the community to the campus and then back again to the workplace. This work may be the best we are now doing because we are building solid and deep organization and creating a movement that both defines the issue and allows independent action throughout the country. This may be one of our best opportunities to define common cause and create a symbiotic force that builds internally past the confines of our own limitations.

Ironically, the AFL-CIO initially was very ambivalent about this movement and about the locally based nature of these fights. Having invested generations in lobbying for minimum wages at the federal level, AFL-CIO top policy makers were initially resistant (even in the face of Congressional deadlock on minimum wage increases) to do much to support or encourage locally based coalitions. There are some unions and central bodies that still flail away at the notion of leveraging high wages for workers in collaboration with the community and political forces. Nonetheless, the last five years have increasingly made believers of everyone – and have helped shaped the success of federal efforts and even worker driven wage fights like the Los Angeles janitors. We need to see the debate as settled, and drive it all to high levels.

At the same time the tactical failure of our generation may have been in Florida in the wake of the Gore/Bush election controversy, when we failed to accommodate the popular will and sentiment to mass action. While the election was being stolen by our inability to force the democratic promise into practice on the simplest level of counting the votes, we should have been moving people into the streets. But, we did not, at least not for the most part. Talking to organizers who were on the ground, particularly from unions, the heat was clearly there. I have heard true stories of organizers literally pulled from the streets in Miami Beach by senior citizens

to take affidavits of voting abuses from scores of people at a time. Did we have capacity? Yes and no. Florida is not brimming with organizational activity and union density is not high. For many this stand in the south may have seemed foreign soil. Regardless there are organizations and unions. The AFL-CIO and other unions airlifted hundreds of organizers and hundreds of lawyers into the state to assure that we did not have an election stolen that we had clearly won, no matter how narrowly. Published reports and private conversations indicate that for the most part organizers became pool sitters and thumb twiddlers. Worse, we allowed conservatives to steal pages from our playbook and do actions on us in Dade County. Frat boys bused in from outside while we were immobilized. The labor movement in America allowed the Democratic Party to call the shots and take us out of the action, when victory was literally lying in the streets. There is no organizer there who did not believe that we could have moved thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, into the streets on the issue of a honest vote count on the Presidential election.

But, we didn't. We allowed institutional and personal relationships rather than an analysis of popular discontent make our determination, and we allowed our inaction to settle the issue adversely. If there is one thing that our generation of organizers knows clearly, it is that popular movements do intimidate and shape court decisions. We were rendered impotent and, not surprisingly, watched the Supreme Court wriggle around until they could steal the election. There was action, a little and too late, but the scene was Tallahassee, even further outside the potential wild and boundless anger of our base. Jesse Jackson is hardly an independent agent and these actions were bought and paid for by labor as a tragic dénouement to a fight we had already lost. There have to be lessons learned here. Where was the horror? Where was the rage? How did we collectively come to hear a message that said – “sit on your hands!”

Some may have forgotten what made us all soldiers in the peoples' army and water carriers on the peoples' march. What are all of our skills if they are allowed to rust and atrophy and can not be called into service in the great struggles of our times? Perhaps we should not be surprised at our failure in Florida, but we at least should not make lame excuses and rationalizations. We can not whimper and rationalize, saying, “Hey, it doesn't really matter who is in the White House in the neighborhoods where I work. They are all the same.” What naïve sophistry! How can we build peoples organizations that aspire to power and not understand that the ability of a federalized government to steal an election sends a message more powerfully to our constituencies that a million meetings, flyers, and home visits could ever convey? Are our organizations just drowning in process and procedure then, and losing any sight of power and vision, principle and purpose? What of values can be built of such cynicism? Somebody needs to demand a refund of the dues for those members!

One can not pretend we are winning. Most objective studies indicate that the conditions for people in the neighborhoods are certainly no better, and statistically are in many cases much worse than they were 20-30 years ago in our communities. On the labor side we have fallen below 10% membership among private sector workers and are losing membership against job growth on a daily basis. Like it or not, there are clear and demonstrable limits to our best methodology. We are polishing pearls. We have not been able to create the scale and capacity, singly or collectively, to push back the tide. I won't say that we haven't built some fine and strong organizations, but I can not pretend that they are enough to do the job. It's flood time,

high and rising, and we've built some nice levees down river, while the fields are knee deep in mud. As organizers we have our fingers in the dike, and but not necessarily our heads out of the sand.

We need an edge, some harder steel on the rim, some point at which we can stop negotiating with ourselves, some real help past the reach of our own grasp where the legs of our members can not travel safely. If people will fight for trees, then why is it too much to hope that people will fight for people? The targets of our actions, our strikes, our protests, need to believe that "after us the deluge!" We have almost become so reasonable that we can't win! Effective mass action has to be accompanied with the real and ever present sense of danger, a sense of people straining at the ropes, a palpable perception that the organization itself represents the thin, fine line between power and chaos.

This is not adventurism. These are tactics with tension. One can empower on the edge. Some of the hardest edged community organizing tactics have these elements. One can almost taste the adrenaline when people take a crowbar to a door and pop it open to begin squatting. One can feel the conviction and courage when members lock arms and sit down in the middle of a street where a child was killed by a speeding car. In one of the most powerful actions I have ever seen, neighbors in a 9th ward ACORN group in New Orleans after months of trying to get a ramshackle, unrestorable house that was a crime magnet and rape scene dealt with effectively, showed up one Saturday morning and physically with nothing but hand tools and ungloved fists and fingers, completely dismantled that house on Alabo Street. Took it down to the ground. There was no one who lived within 20 blocks of that house who could not today describe where they were and most would tell you of some brick or splinter they personally pulled to the street.

All of this is soundly against the law, but within the range of patient campaigns finding full and complete community and public support. In Texas and many other venues in the South it is not only against the law, but also virtually outside the will of God to strike, but should we resist the power of this tactic, despite the risk? In Alexandria, Louisiana last week Local 100's school support workers – joined by teachers – successfully struck for four days to force a avaricious school administration to finally create a study committee to devise a living wage program for school workers.

Such tactics contain great risks. That is part of their reward and power. Nonetheless, our inability to create a net under this tightrope or a principle of constant struggle should a soldier be left on the field, is a terrible weakness. We have to be able to weld organizational and allied capacity to collective, constituency courage. Too many years for too many organizers of symbolic actions has left a sense of unreality in too much of our work. The edge has been blunted by too much play-acting and hollow performance. We have helped create drama queens unable to aggressively handle the real stage of human struggle.

If some day we want to make more just laws, then today we may have to just learn to break more laws. As Thoreau said, "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right."

Let me restate my wish list briefly:

- • Tactics that vary with the target and the situation.
- • Tactics with tension that press the target not only in novel ways, but create real pressure on the edge of organizational control.
- • Tactics that return to a direct action and mass action regime that puts large numbers of people in motion.
- • Tactics that challenge and builds public support.
- • Tactics that include civil disobedience and political defiance.
- • Tactics that embrace mutual and independent alliances.
- • Tactics that accommodate the principal of independent action at the limits of collective action.
- • Tactics that include extra-legal activity and welcome individual activist contributions in the collective enterprise.
- • Tactics that stand for the principle that when community and/or labor forces are stopped legally, other actors and formations will move independently and aggressively.
- • Tactics that adopt the principle that when our flag falls, others will pick it up and move forward.
- • Tactics that are lively and fun, but are not about play and symbol, and instead take their exhilaration in victory.

You get the message....

We know how to do this work, so let's up the stakes, take our responsibilities and institutions seriously, and start fighting to win.

Ready or not. Here we come!