

The Need for Tactical Assistance: A Call for Help

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The oldest cliché of our vast peoples' movement over the last generation or more has got to be that there are so, so many tasks to be done, that there is a job for everyone – and that means, you, too, brothers and sisters! The problem with this particular cliché though is that in fact it speaks in the roar of a terrible truth. Believe it or not, mass membership organizations like labor unions and ACORN with tens of thousands and sometimes millions of members need help badly right now, and some of the help has to do with things that they can not do for legal, political and financial reasons, and some of the help they need has to do with things for which you may have particular and important skills.

So, you sit here reading this on the fly between one job and another, home and school, heaven and hell, and you say, “hey, bullshit, no way:” every ad for an “activist” is just looking for a canvasser; all of these groups are just gangs with their own cliques – another secret handshake high school behind a storefront window; and, so, you say, what does it matter what I have to say, what I think, or whatever – I'll just do my thing, my way, and live my life out of the mainstream, so to heck with 'em all – they're all the same anyway. And, hey, there you are living your life like it's a statement that someone can hear, and hooking up with folks who think the same way and hoping if we move together it will all matter someday.

Here's my plea – let's build a bridge in the sky that links our worlds together, while allowing us to stay autonomous and anonymous.

First, why, and then, how.

The power of the state is in fact fairly awesome. There is an entire litany of laws whose virtual purpose is to prevent the effectiveness of unions for example. One can assume as a rule of thumb in fact that many of the most effective tactics of labor over the last 50-years have been legislated out of existence: no secondary boycotts, no hot cargo agreements, no sit down strikes, and so on. Injunctions can restrict mass picketing. Back to work orders from courts and other fines can quickly add up to millions of dollars as many striking unions have found. Want to organize janitors? The building owner may call the tune for the cleaning contractor, but to picket the owner is a secondary boycott. Want to refuse to handle non-union auto parts, so you can organize the parts industry? No can do – that's hot cargo. Unions have assets and to break the law means that the assets can be eliminated in the flick of a court order.

Mass-based community organizations like ACORN face many of the same constraints. Right now ACORN is being enjoined by courts in San Diego because utility executives wanted to fight back at the constant actions. Right now landlords in New York City are suing ACORN for almost \$20M, because of tenant organizing and refusal to accept substandard conditions. A predatory lender sued ACORN in Baltimore because they felt bad publicity and actions were costing them money. Household Finance as part of a long ACORN campaign against predatory lending was quick to have their attorneys in ACORN offices in Connecticut threatening to sue for sit-ins in local Household offices. The beat goes on and on.

So, the “why” is easy to follow – the progressive forces need help when we run into concrete barriers and high walls that can not be scaled without endangering the very existence of mass-based progressive institutions.

Simply stated, we need to have allies – real allies – who have the independent capacity and ability to act autonomously against common enemies.

Such allies would seem to operate best on the individual or “cell” model that we hear about so frequently these days, and saw demonstrated so clearly in the now legendary WTO protests in Seattle several years ago. But, it hardly matters, because increasingly the examples of “how” are also numerous.

Look at the work being done on campuses like Northwestern, Harvard, and others on the issue of living wages for food service and janitorial workers. This is good work, and, importantly, it’s taking the fight for living wages to a place where unions have been stopped by the natural limitations of collective bargaining because of the inequitable imbalance of power at the bargaining table. These independent efforts are able to transcend the standard labor legalisms and confront head on the moral and political issues of oppressive wage scales.

Take another example in the world of cyberspace. It is endlessly fascinating to read about “hacker communities.” I find it totally and completely mystifying though that such elephantine energy produces such mouse-y results. This is a car driven over cliffs rather than down highways where travel could have real meaning. A “love” virus will do a zillion dollars worth of damages all over the world, yet we are constantly plagued increasingly by mega-corporations and their e-commerce, which thwart the popular and progressive, will. That seems to be a true virus for which there is a known antidote, yet our enemies grow unabated. Predatory lending companies exploiting poor and working families would seem to be excellent examples. Why don’t their websites have problems day in, day out, until these companies reform their behavior? It’s beyond me, but I can’t believe it’s beyond everyone?

Seems too rough? Then how about a softer and gentler side of this same question? For unions to organize firms the first precondition for success is having a list – a good list – with names, addresses, and phone numbers. Something like a payroll list. All payroll lists are on computer in these days and times. There is in fact a certain skill and art to “dumpster diving” by organizers to locate and find these lists. But, once again idle hands are the devil’s helper, so wouldn’t it be better for someone with these skills to pluck the lists from big hotels, hospitals, industrial plants, and other unorganized targets and send them physically or electronically “over the transom” to unions and their organizing staffs who will know how to take it from there?

Clearly I suffer from too active an imagination than is good for me, but it never hurts to dream of the power that might come in building alliances of allied forces, which could rewrite the terms of engagement for unions and community organizations dealing with major corporate interests. Hey, there are thousands of community groups and local unions that could use a simple hand in building a website, surfing for information, and bridging the technical divide that is growing alarmingly, which brings me back to my original point that in fact – cliché or not – there are in

fact, right now, an enormous number of tasks that need to be done to build progressive capacity, and we need YOU to get to work NOW!

It is fascinating to think of how much more powerful we could be if we could harness all of these disparate pieces, not necessarily together, but at least aimed in the same direction. There is an interesting outfit called @rtmark operating out of various web addresses, which adds another dimension to the humble call from mass organizations for more tactical assistance. These energetic elves fasten themselves to specific campaigns and create a menu of hassle and mayhem to be directed at these corporate targets. Subscribers can lend support – financially – to certain actions which may range from post-it notes being put on clothes in stores warning customers of the evil that lurks beyond all the way to more forceful demonstrations of outrage in a largely quiet, non-violent, but powerful and physical way.

Equally important given the consolidation of communication and the monopoly of media is the need to “spread the word” to all of the various tribes, so that people holding their own council will have the information allowing them to finally act. We need the notion of “each one, tell one” to spread to zines where simple notes can bring amplification to important people’s struggles. We need people to call into non-commercial and, yes, now I’ve said it, even commercial radio stations with something more than a song request, but in fact with information within the sound of the airwaves about union busters, about predatory lenders, about companies paying unfair wages, and on and on.

In returning to simple principles on which to launch dramatic enterprises, we need to re-learn the value of never letting our “flag hit the dirt” or never leaving the “wounded behind enemy lines.” These were not values just in the movies or TV. These values came from different traditions of struggle with their separate rules of engagement. Among the progressive forces we have become too used to criticism, rather than activism. When a campaign is failing against overwhelming odds or when a community organization is sued or a labor union is enjoined, we need a new tradition among our forces where people – each and every one – know then that it is time to step forward in their own way and pick up the fight. The professors can analyze it all later, but in the roar of battle against great odds, we need everyone to find a way to be warriors now in the people’s struggle.

These are some small ideas that could reverberate in a thousand rooms now silent, but we need all of you to answer the call and find a way to take up the cause, while we still have an opportunity to win. We can not all be organizers, but we can all carry weight, and it’s time to see each and everyone of us start to shoulder the load now.

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