

A Time To Organize

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I think this is a wonderful time to organize. I have heard people in the last few years say 'Oh this is a hard time to organize because you got Bush and you got repression and you got the Patriot Act, you have all these things. It's a wonderful time to organize! That's when you can organize! People are asking questions—I really believe and I feel it here in Louisville and I'm sure it's happening everywhere, that people really want some answers. There are a lot of people that I think are upset with the direction the country is going in. They don't have information—the news media is not going to give it to them and a lot of times people like us aren't giving it to them either.

So when you say it's a hard time to organize —you know you learn a few things over the years, you learn the mistakes you made. It's been about 54 years that I have been active in movements for a new world and in the South entirely, although I know people all over the country, but I'm very out of touch with people, except in Louisville now. I work with a regional organization which was the successor organization to the Southern Conference Education Fund—which we now know the government broke up. But the government can't break you up unless there are some weaknesses there in the first place, and we had them. The Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice is sort of the successor organization to that and it's a history that appeals to me.

Learning from History

I am teaching courses in social justice movement history at two universities—Northern Kentucky University up near Cincinnati and at the University of Louisville. It started out as a history of the civil rights movement but there are so many other movements that grew out of that movement, which a lot of people don't realize. I am not nostalgic but I think we can learn from the Sixties and I find people just don't know about the Sixties because they are not being told in high school. A lot of other people don't know either — the mass media has totally distorted the Sixties. I think it's the most important decade in the history of this country with the possible exception of the 1860's, by coincidence. Because those are the two times in the history of this country when the country has taken a few steps toward dealing with the issue of race. And that is so basic to everything else.

When we talk about all these other movements that grew out of the civil rights movement—the upsurge of the antiwar movement, the new labor movements in the South, the civil liberties movement, the new women's movements, white and African-American—separate and there's a whole history to that as we know— that developed in the Sixties—which you have to understand to understand things today, the gay and

lesbian movement, the environmental justice movement, the disability rights movement—they all came from this ferment when the country was on fire.

This country was built on white supremacy — I prefer the term ‘white supremacy’ to ‘racism’—because its more what we really mean—you don’t have to get into endless arguments about whether Blacks can be racist.

So, the country was built on white supremacy and if you understand it that way—it is not just a wart on the body politic—this is where the original wealth of this country came from—from slavery and the slave trade. It was built into the institutions—the courts and everything from the beginning—so when anytime in history the African Americans organize and move, it shakes everything.

In the Sixties it was really the young people—young Blacks in Mississippi—it wasn’t all Martin Luther King, although he played a very important role as a spokesperson and articulator of a vision, but it was Black kids—that were literally fifteen and sixteen years old who just took their lives in their hands and they were going to create a new world.

The result was this was like the foundation stone of a building—it moved and the whole structure shook, because everything was brought into question in that decade. That is why there was such repression at the end of the Sixties, which a lot of historians don’t seem to recognize.

Those movements didn’t just fade away because people accomplished their goals or because people got disillusioned—some movements were destroyed by the government at every level—local, state, and Federal, in the most massive attack. I lived through the repression of the Fifties, which is another history we need to understand now especially. But the repression of the late Sixties was much worse and a lot of white people don’t understand that because it was mainly aimed at Black activists and Native American activists.

I think the powers that be understood better than people on our side sometimes, that that is where this was coming from and if they could chop off the organizers, which is what they did, of the Black liberation movement—they wouldn’t have to worry about the rest of us. You can never really destroy a people’s movement—people live to fight another day—but it was certainly blunted at a very important moment, when it was really taking on in an aggressive way what everybody had long known was the issue—economic justice.

In the course I teach, I expanded it to be a history of social justice movements in the 20th century because I realized you couldn’t really understand the Fifties and Sixties in the South—which is what the course is mainly about—unless you know what happened in the Thirties in the South and the early Forties. There is a tremendous history which was before my day—this was a half a generation before me, and a lot of it had been crushed by the time I got active when the Cold War started. My first memories are in the resistance movement to the Cold War, which I am still a little nostalgic about in terms of the esprit de corps which existed. But I have met the

people who are still around—those that had been active in the thirties and I got fascinated with that history.

That continuum has been important to me. It gives me strength to know I am part of a long movement. For example, the Southern Organizing Committee that I work with now, descends from the Southern Conference Education Fund and it descended from something called the Southern Conference for Human Welfare that started in the Thirties.

Although the times have changed and the specifics have changed we are dealing with the same issues and I think the vision of some of the people who worked in the Thirties were about fifty years ahead of their time.

At the University of Louisville and Northern Kentucky University there are African American historians who really know that early history and I always have them come do a session on the early history of the country. You can't understand where we are now in the 21st century unless you understand that early history.

I always think when people say this is a hard time to organize—you had people organizing in the Thirties in the South in a literal police state. I don't use that term lightly—it was a literal police state. It was the Sixties movement that broke the police state in the South and that's probably its most important accomplishment. It tore down Jim Crow laws which most people said was impossible, it theoretically won the right to vote, although a lot of struggles came later and as you well know are still going on. But probably the most important thing it won was the right to organize in the South—it broke the police state.

We don't live in a police state right now—we can talk about how it could be one and there is a danger of it but nobody's going to shoot us for going to a meeting at this point. They might do some surveillance if we are doing something—I know some people who are worried about somebody following them—I don't think they are following those people because they aren't doing anything! They are not following people around who aren't doing anything! You can do these things now—so if you talk about a hard time to organize—we've got a history in our Movement—I've considered myself a part of this Movement for over fifty years—its not just civil rights, its what I call the 'Other America'. We descend from the very beginning of this country from the people who have fought for justice—who fought against slavery, who were part of the slave revolts or the abolitionist movement—it was Black and white, and of course a lot of us didn't know anything but Black and white for a long time—we didn't know about the Latino struggle which has gone on forever too and the Native American struggles, too. But we are the people who keep doing it, and that is what gives me the strength to keep going—to know that I am a part of a long chain that was here a long time before I was here and will be here for a long time after I'm gone. There is a strength in that.

The main thing is that right now is the time to organize because people are looking for answers. So how do we do it?

Real Organizing—Not Reshuffling the Organized

Those of us who want to create a new world—or just stop a police state or whatever is coming out of Washington— we have to organize the unorganized. We can't just be what I think passes for organizing among people on the left but other places too, which I call 'reshuffling the organized'. We tend to get together with people who already agree with us and we may talk about some plans but its comfortable to be with people we agree with. We have to do that to keep our own strength up—we give each other strength. But we have got to go out and talk to these people that are not in our Movement!

I have worked so much to try to bring white people into the struggle against white supremacy and I have always said we have to go talk to these white people who don't agree with us. You know the pattern—when white people have gotten involved at different times in the civil rights movement or the Black Liberation movement or supporting it and they go to a Black church and its such a wonderful and warm atmosphere that's where you want to stay. But you have to get off your ass and get out and talk to people you don't know!

I don't know any way to do that except the old fashioned way of knocking on their doors. I think the art of door to door work seems to have been lost in a lot of circles. People have become bewitched with computers—I know the computer is a great invention and I have been dragged kicking and screaming into the technological age—and I think email is a wonderful invention. But you can send out a notice of a meeting and tell people but you aren't going to get people who aren't used to coming to your meetings by sending out an email and a lot of the people you want to reach may not have a computer and it may not be in their lifestyle to check email everyday.

There is also something about the human voice and if I get a message on the email or even a form letter in the mail, saying there is going to be a meeting that I know is important, I will say 'Gee I should go to that', and I will lay it aside and the day will come and I say 'I can't go to that.' But if you call me up and say 'We really need you at that meeting.' I know that you're telling everybody that but on the other hand, I'm going to come. Unless we do that not only with people we know, but more importantly in terms of people who are not going to come to our meetings, we will not be doing effective organizing.

There is such a ferment going on, not only in Louisville, but everywhere, I could be going to some meeting every day and I have to pick and choose—this is what I'm going to concentrate on—there is so much to do that I have lost touch with people. The most tragic thing about getting as old as I am—I will be eighty this summer—is that for one thing, a lot of your friends have died, but the other thing is that I have lost touch with so many people that I really cared about. Politically, its not good. We don't know our own strength sometimes—we don't realize how strong the people like us are, because we're not in touch with what is happening everywhere.

On the other hand, I think there is a certain value in concentrating somewhere—I know here in the Kentucky Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression we say we exist to fight white supremacy, not to sit around and talk about it in theory but to take specific action against specific manifestations of racist policies and practices in

our community—in the police, the courts, the school, and in the workplace. And we exist to bring people of color and whites to do that together—to take visible stands.

When white people begin to realize what a huge problem this is, they tend to get overwhelmed—its so big you can't get a hold of it. I say 'You get a hold of it by doing something specific.' If the police is the issue right now or whatever is the issue right now—that's where you have to be. We can't take on the whole country and the whole world—we need to know what's happening but we can build a beachhead here in Louisville, that's what we tell ourselves. We will build a beachhead for justice here. We want to create an anti-racist majority in Louisville, and I think we have made some progress. Other people are doing that other places and probably the only thing that's ultimately going to change our national policies is if people are doing this everywhere.

There are three examples here in Louisville where I think people are really organizing the unorganized and not reshuffling the organized. One is one the police issue here—we have a whole new movement which has built up around that because we have had such atrocious shootings and killings of African American men. Seven African American men have been killed by white policemen in the last five years, not counting all the ones before in Louisville. A little over a year ago, the guy that was killed was in handcuffs when he was shot and that shocked a lot of people. The last one was just in January of this year—a seventeen year old young man, Michael Newby—who was running away from the police and was shot three times in the back.

We have raised enough hell that they have indicted somebody for this one, but that's just the beginning because we think all those other cases ought to be reopened—the guy who shot him is still drawing pay from the police department, although he has been indicted for murder. So there is an awful lot to do on that.

What we really need is an independent office of investigation, we have got to get to the point where the police are not investigating themselves. So we have been going door to door in what used to be the county (they merged the city and county governments recently, which disempowered Black people), which is mainly white, but there are some Blacks there too, but to reach out beyond people we have been working with before, because we have worked mainly in the city, which is about 33% African American, and the rest white, mostly poor or moderate income working class. So we have been going door to door to get these cards signed and talking to people about this and we have been getting a really good response. You would be surprised how many mothers who are white are concerned about their sons being harassed by the police.

Also, we have a good movement here now against toxic pollution in poor and working class neighborhoods – African American and white working class, but the base of it is building in the Black community. The west end of Louisville has an area called Rubbertown, all these chemical plants—we have been breathing this stuff for years. That's where I have lived all the time I have been in Louisville. We all knew it was bad but we didn't know what to do about it—people haven't thought they could do anything. In the last year there have been a number of reports that say we have the most polluted area in the Southeast, so we have an organization called REACT—

and what they are doing is also going door to door, talking to people and recruiting people whose relatives died of cancer—they didn't know why. They haven't come out before, they haven't been active in any movement before because they didn't think you could do anything. They have formed a whole steering committee of new people coming into the movement—a new layer of leadership that they have gotten by going out door to door.

Recently they won a really big victory—a company was emitting some terribly toxic chemical—the Mayor had worked out an agreement for the company to voluntarily reduce emissions but these people got out with postcards and went door to door to get postcards signed to say 'No—we want regulations they have to obey.' They got a huge response and the day before the end of the public comment period they took over a thousand postcards and dumped them on the desk of the Air Pollution Board and the people there were so shocked – they never had a response to a public comment period before.

We have a group called Fairness fighting for gay and lesbian rights for a little over ten years and has become a multi-issue organization and I don't know of any other place that has happened. It is predominantly white, although they have some Black leaders now, but I think because the people who did the basic organizing on this were active in the anti-racist movement before they ever started organizing around fairness and they took that commitment with them. They have seen these new young people coming into this movement because they are oppressed because of their sexual orientation as a whole new group of people to reach to show the connection of all these issues. Although there is some disagreement in Fairness as to whether it ought to be single issue or multi-issue, predominantly now they see the struggle against white supremacy as part of their struggle—also economic justice, they are leaders in the Living Wage struggle here. They have for several years been going door to door out in the county. They are doing voter identification—to find the people who are friendly to the issues we want support for—when you know that that's who you call to get them out to vote on Election Day. Now they have formed a coalition of all our groups to do that in a major way between now and November.

This is some of the work I think we should be doing.

How to Appeal to White Southerners

I want to mention the question of right wing populism. What George Wallace did with it in the South is very interesting. I think this is one of the things we have to take on with people—what Wallace did—he really wanted to be President before he got shot—he was building a base in the North—there was no doubt about it, in 1968. What he was talking about was 'Get the government off our backs.' That was the first time I ever heard that phrase was from Wallace. It was code language, because what he meant was that 'government is taking care of the Black people and ain't doing nothing for us'—that's what he was saying. It was a terribly phony phrase—it was the corporations that wanted the Federal government off their backs—they still do. They can control the state agencies better. For the people of Alabama, though—every hospital in Alabama was built with Hill- Burton Federal funds! This was a benefit for the people. But he got people really thinking that the Federal government was an

enemy. This is a reason why I was so negative about Clinton—he pulled the Democratic Party to the right. I don't think he is personally racist—but he catered to racism—that this was what was going to appeal to whites in the South, to get the image of the Democratic Party being a 'Black party' off of it. But Jesse Jackson in those years proved you didn't have to appeal to that instinct in Southern whites—whites came out and voted for Jesse Jackson in large numbers because he was talking about the issues that concerned them. They were coming out of textile plants in South Carolina stopping his motorcade to speak to him. Paper workers in Mobile, Alabama were standing up and saying, 'That's my President!'

But what Wallace did was he made a general negative feeling about any kind of government. Government itself is not bad—it's a question of who is the government working for the benefit of, in whose interest is it working? I think we have to fight this idea that government is bad. We have to say, 'Let's make this government spend our tax money for what we want it spent on!' A noted historian recently wrote an article, 'How George Wallace Really Won'—his theory is that the Wallace politics of 1968 have become the prevailing politics of the country.

Election 2004

As far as the bigger picture—what we do in November—what I do know is we just can't live through four more years of Bush, so I know I will pull the Democratic lever—I have been pulling levers for 'lesser evils' ever since I started voting. The only time I was able to vote for somebody was when I was able to vote for Jesse Jackson, and I hope I will live long enough to vote FOR somebody.

A new biography of Anne Braden has been published. Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and The Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South by Catherine Fosl, was published by Palgrave Macmillan.

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