

History, Organizing and Nonviolent Resistance

by Kathy Emery

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There has been a great deal of talk during this historic election about grassroots organizing – Republicans dismissed Obama as a community organizer; Obama succeeded with a brilliant “ground game;” and Republicans accused Acorn of posing a severe threat to the “fabric of American democracy.” This has led to some terrific public debate over the how’s and why’s of grassroots or community organizing. This is in stark contrast, however, to the lack of public debate and discussion over the how’s and why’s of nonviolent direct action, the kinds of events with which San Franciscans have become, perhaps, too familiar – it seems a day doesn’t go by without a march on Market street or demonstration at City Hall.

As I write, several groups, among them the “No on 8” and the Association of Raza Educators, are planning direct nonviolent actions in the next week. While I wish them well, I am not optimistic that their protests will lead to any progress towards building a sustained movement for greater freedom and equality. Community organizers need to better understand that nonviolent resistance is not a goal in and of itself but must play a role in the larger drama of a movement for social justice. History tells us that in order for a movement to succeed, we have to design nonviolent direct action so that it achieves at least one of the following purposes:

1. Expose the power structure for what it really is. This will undermine its legitimacy, leading more people to withdraw their consent to obeying an unjust authority.
2. Dramatize the specific injustice, thereby exposing it to a larger audience. This will inspire more people to get involved in organizing against it, increasing the capacity of the movement to sustain itself over time.
3. Give those working to change the power structure (or eliminate the injustice) more confidence that they can succeed, thereby sustaining the movement.

In September 1959, when James Lawson and students from four black colleges in Nashville, Tennessee began researching, planning and training for their sit-ins, they understood they were part of a larger drama playing out throughout the South. When the Greensboro Four jumped the gun (February 3, 1960), the Nashville students knew they had to go ahead with their planned sit-ins even though they were not ready (they were planning to start the sit-ins ten days later when they had raised enough bail money).

The Nashville organizers understood that the role of the sit-ins was to draw the majority of the black middle-class citizens into participating in a boycott of downtown businesses, and to get a majority of white liberals to become sympathetic to the goal of desegregation. They also understood that they needed to find ways for everyone to participate in the movement. Not everyone was prepared to get beaten up. Some, however, were willing to raise money, call ambulances or hold picket signs. The larger drama of the Southern Freedom Movement, the unique demographics of Nashville, and the goal of meeting #2 of the above criteria all played a part in the planning and execution of the Nashville sit-ins.

I hope grassroots organizers seize this historical moment as an opportunity to build and sustain a movement by taking advantage of the hard won lessons of past struggles. One of these lessons is that direct action must be a part of a larger strategy. Furthermore, nonviolent resistance should be designed to inspire people to leave the neutral sidelines while simultaneously providing a variety of roles for the new recruits to play.