

A March is not a Movement

by Kathy Emery

Two students from June Jordan High School were shot in the last few weeks. The school organized a march from the school to the steps of City Hall and held a rally there last Friday (September, 12). The students asked the politicians to do something to stop the murders in their neighborhoods and wore T-shirts that explained they wanted “investment” in supportive services and jobs, not just more police. Supervisor Sandoval came to the podium and explained that the only way he could do something was if the students kept up the pressure by demonstrating every day on the steps of City Hall. This did not go down well with the crowd. One of the students kept repeating, “What are you going to do in the last 3 months of your term [to stop the murders]?”

The rally was well done. Those assembled represented a coalition of grassroots groups working for violence prevention. They were disciplined. Singing, chanting and artwork were used to good effect—communicating to passersby what the issues were and keeping the energy, spirit and cohesiveness of the participants high. It was an exciting and empowering moment. But was it part of a larger game plan? Sandoval was correct in asserting that the supervisors cannot do much at all without constant pressure from organized groups focusing on concrete demands. There is a tremendous counter pressure on them from the downtown corporate business community. Politicians need the consistent political support of an organized community behind them if they are going to go up against big business and the wealthy “middle class.”

This is, of course, easier said than done. And it is better to have one rally than none at all. The question for community activists and organizers, however, is how to build a sustained movement? There is no direct answer to such a question, but there are clues left by the past that perhaps can lead to an answer. If one examines the most recent social movement in this country, the Civil Rights Movement, a few key variables seem to emerge as necessary to be in place for a sustained and organized movement to develop. Nonviolent resistance (NVR) attacks the power structure at its weakest point—the consent of the people. NVR, done properly, exposes the power structure for what it really is and encourages bystanders to become supporters. The choice of targets for direct action must be carefully chosen. This involves research and analysis.

Personal relationships among activists and the community are the glue that holds coalitions of grassroots groups together. Without many groups acting together in the service of a shared vision, there cannot be sustained direct action over time. Developing a shared vision of the change being sought involves acknowledging and dealing with the contradictions within and between the groups of a coalition. The discussion leading to a shared vision and the development of personal relationships require structural support, the kind of support that national organizations or national newspapers can provide. Artists and young people must be at the forefront of action, lending their energy and communication ability in service of encouraging the majority to jump on the bandwagon.

But none of these variables guarantee that people will actually jump on the bandwagon. Only the right combination of historical circumstances can do that. But without the above variables, the historical moment could pass us by. War, economic hardship, and enlightened leadership are potential historical circumstances. Perhaps the election of Obama, the meltdown of the financial system and continuing violence in the world will offer us the moment, if we build the bandwagon in time.