

Reflections on a history of pain and possibility

Organizing in the South

by Scot Douglas



1994 Rally against skin-head violence outside the 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL

Despite the New South/Sun Belt rhetoric of southern politicians, developers, and apologists, the South still retains its character as a largely poor, largely politically disaffected region in the nation's body politic. The South also remains a region of incompatible contradictions, such as the proximity of extreme wealth and extreme poverty, and the presence of a strong anti-federal government sentiment with a disproportionate number of national political leaders. It is also characterized by paranoid levels of homophobia, the use of fear and hatred to control populations, and the overarching issue of race. At the same time, it is a region of widely recognized struggles and resistance to oppression by people to whom the promises democracy, both social and economic, are long overdue.

Home to 34% of the nation's population, the South also contains 48% of the nation's poverty area (a census designation) — the largest contiguous belt of poverty in the nation. Some 30% of southerners live in poverty areas. At the same time 53% of the nation's African-American population lives here.

Nor is the organization of the South's economy (with the exception of the African-American community) democratic. Alabama leads the nation in "pork per capita" discretionary spending, and the state receives \$1.48 in federal funds for every \$1 sent to Washington in taxes.

Indeed, democracy of any sort is a historically new development in the region. By my

Editors Note: While our experiences in the West are in many senses unique to the region, we also have much to learn from the histories and struggles of organizers in other parts of the country. The South is one area that shares much in common with the West — especially in the challenges progressives face organizing in a region that is profoundly conservative. In this article, veteran organizer Scot Douglas reflects on his experience organizing in the South.

estimation, all citizens in the South have fully owned the right to vote for only thirty-three years. Until 1865 only white, propertied males could vote in the South. With the arrival of Reconstruction, non-propertied white males and African-American males were extended the ballot. By 1905, with removal of all remnants of Reconstruction, most southern states had returned to the slavery era policy of dis-enfranchising all but propertied white males, and taxing even their right to vote via the pole tax. Not until 1920, with Tennessee voting for the 18th Amendment, did southern white women get the right to vote. African-American males had suffered the loss of the franchise fifteen to twenty years earlier. Only with the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 were southern voters all present and accounted for: women, men, and people of color.

Organizing conditions

There is a reason that Alinsky-like models of organizing are fairly recent developments in the South: that model presupposes a threshold level of formal democracy which has not existed here. Southern movements and organizations often experienced swift and certain repression, existing in a semi-legal state until only very recently. Much of southern organizing has been an attempt to establish fundamental levels of justice, equity, and democracy. This repressive atmosphere has made the identification and training of new leaders difficult in the extreme. Southern activists must create new, locally generated

ways to solve this problem so that there will be no shortage of leaders in the future.

Curiously, many of the benefits gained by southern struggles accrued more rapidly to the rest of the country than in the South itself. The Civil Rights Movement not only achieved basic formal gains, but also taught a nation locked in the vise of the McCarthy era how to fight. Civil disobedience by Rosa Parks on a Montgomery bus demonstrated a new tactic for fighting oppression to the movements for peace, women's equality, and social justice. The cross-cultural appeal of Martin Luther King, Jr. helped build a movement for social change that united people of all colors. Black Lung and Brown Lung battles waged by mineworkers and textile workers helped launch OSHA and led to new victories for workers and communities around the nation.

Roots of organizing styles

Southern organizing rests on a foundation of civil rights and labor organizing that goes back some sixty years continuing to this day, and occasionally merging, as in the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike. Both movements have encountered a high degree of violence, and racism has been used against both to prevent burgeoning unity across lines of color and nationality.

Following the height of the Civil Rights Movement, an array of community service organizations emerged in the South to try to provide basic services such as health care, education, and job training in the midst of strong opposition by racist authorities. Critics have accused these organizations of "aiming low" and impeding a direct challenge to the status quo. To be certain, some organizations have been lured away from social change activity by the promise of foundation and government funding.

The threat of swift and arbitrary economic, physical, and psychic violence still shapes the goals, form and content of much southern organizing. When challenging the local balance of power, visible community leadership risks targeted repression. Organizers have to take fear into account when building community organizations, especially in rural

areas. Even today, the state and federal agencies in Alabama are suppressing voting rights by endless investigations of alleged absentee voting irregularities. In fact, so many charges have been brought against voting rights activists in the Black Belt of Alabama that voting participation has been significantly lowered.

Several organizations, from the Mississippi Delta to Appalachia, are working to overcome the fear brought on by this kind of oppression as part of empowering communities to take on strategic struggles that challenge the balance of power. Fear that is acknowledged can be dealt with.

With so much happening, is anything going on?

Organizing on a regional basis has always been a hallmark of southern organizing since the Underground Railroad. Significantly, a wide range of organizations from Appalachia through to the Deep South are now placing an increased emphasis on networking together. Among the newer developments are the Southern Organizing Cooperative and Democracy South. These join the Southern Organizing Committee, Regional Economic Justice Network, Southerners for Economic Justice, Grassroots Leadership, and Project South.

The new synergy is fueled by the recognition that the South does have a shared destiny, and that organizing to deepen democracy is necessary to lift up all our communities. A new boldness challenges the status quo by refusing to produce "pearls in the mud," successful little organizations in a failed society. If we are to clean up the muck around us, we have to take on the infrastructure of society in ways that lift up the aspirations of communities for social and economic justice. If we are to achieve those aspirations, we must think and act proactively in order to gain and hold new democratic ground



Martin Luther King, Jr.