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*toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .*

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## Let's Not Get Organized By Barack Obama – Tom Kertes

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**One thing that Barack Obama does well is associate his partisan organizing with community organizing, closely knitting the narratives of great social movements like civil rights, the Underground Railroad and labor movements to the narrative of the Democratic Party. That's smart, since the story of Harriet Tubman is far more compelling than that of a bunch of fat cats smoking cigars in the back rooms of the halls of power.**

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Barack Obama and I share one thing in common. I am a community organizer. And so was Barack Obama. From this, I imagine, we've witnessed many of the same injustices, heard similar stories of people being beaten down and being taken advantage of, and have studied the same strategies and tactics for how to build power for the powerless.

Given this, why did Barack Obama stop community organizing? Does he believe that in the past eight years power has dramatically shifted to the once powerless in order to bring about the radical changes required to put the stories he'd heard of poverty and hunger to rest? Did he think it was finally time for the community to take over, ready to exercise its power gained through decades of effective organizing, leadership development, and development of community-based institutions focused on human rights, social justice, and economic fairness? Or, is it that Barack Obama never was a community organizer, but rather an organizer of the Democratic Party, building a base for himself within his party by going out to the community in order build a winning narrative that starts with "when I was with the common folk" and ends with "and now that I am President."?

I can't know Barack Obama's motives, but I can watch what he does. First, I can see that he is a Democrat. He is now the leader of the same coalition that "ended welfare as we know it" in 1996, that largely supported the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and that recently bailed out Wall Street bankers. Barack Obama and the party he now leads supports the expansion of government surveillance and of American forces in Central Asia, and is without a plan or even a promise to de-privatize health care by creating a single payer system that's universally available to all.

Like any organization, political parties exist to organize people, power, and resources to carry out an agenda. Barack Obama may be the best thing to happen to the Democratic Party in at least seventy years, because he presents a new face for the coalition, and his face gets people to abundantly give their time, money, and attention to the party's agenda.

Barack Obama is brilliant at politics. As a community organizer myself it is a wonder to see such a skillfully executed political organization as is his. But I also watch and wonder if his skills might result in the end of real community organizing. Will people committed to actually ending the stories of powerless people, beaten down people, people taken advantage of, and of people hurting from so much poverty and oppression get co-opted into Barack Obama's Democratic coalition?

One thing that Barack Obama does well is associate his partisan organizing with community organizing, closely knitting the narratives of great social movements like civil rights, the Underground Railroad and labor movements to the narrative of the Democratic Party. That's smart, since the story of Harriet Tubman is far more compelling than that of a bunch of fat cats smoking cigars in the back rooms of the halls of power.

He also tells his story through the stories of ordinary people, borrowing from something that real community organizers call testimonials - that is, giving voice to the voiceless. But instead of really giving voice to the voiceless, when partisan organizations ruled by the rich and privileged do these kinds of testimonials, they are actually stealing people's voices. Additionally, Barack Obama knows how to use emotional branding, which includes the use of compelling logos, fonts, colors, and iconic images to create the illusion of shared values. Coca Cola and Apple do this as well, associating feelings to products so that we confuse soda pop and music devices with the values of love, joy, togetherness, and being special or unique.

And Barack Obama understands the power of cognitive dissonance. He and his image makers know that once someone buys into something, by voting or giving money, then that person will "want" to believe in it even more. That's because people don't want to believe that they have made a mistake, or did something that they would actually not do on second thought. When we take a stand on an idea or issue, even a small stand, we often put on a lens that makes that choice seem right. With three million donors, many who are extremely progressive and therefore not likely aligned with the agenda of the Democratic Party, Barack Obama knows that he must keep his base together. Through association with social movements, by weaving his narrative with that of ordinary people, through emotional branding, and because of our tendency to want to believe in what we've supported in the past, Barack Obama is well on his way to organizing progressives and perhaps even radicals into the Democratic Party.

It would be great if this were the other way around, if we, progressives and radicals, had organized the Democrats, but there is no evidence to suggest that this has happened. Progressives and radicals lack the power for such a shift. In fact, we are barely getting started in most places and are still largely unorganized. But here's the rub: Getting started we are. This is especially true in Baltimore with groups like the United Workers, Algebra Project, SMEAC, Red Emma's, Students for Worker Justice, the Campaign for a Better Baltimore, and many other grassroots organizations fighting for human rights values. We are just now starting to have effective organizations working across the city and in solidarity with each other, carrying out the first steps that one day could bring about the political and economic conditions required to end poverty and oppression. Unlike the Democratic Party, these grassroots groups are committed to building, from the ground up, a new political order that would provide socialized, universal health care, end militarism, provide good schools for all, and ultimately end poverty.

Each dollar of our money, each minute of our time, each story we share, and each action we attend matters if we are to build a movement to end poverty and oppression. Spend a dollar on

Barack Obama's campaign and you have just increased the power of the Democratic Party. When we canvass for Democrats, we have less time to canvass for causes like health care, living wages, and schools for all. Lose ourselves in the branding experience of Barack Obama and we risk losing our voice when it comes time to demand better from him. Keeping in mind that this is about balance, I should note that I have given money to Barack Obama, and my friends and political allies have canvassed for his campaign. I gave money to increase the power of the Democrats relative to that of the Republicans in this one election. But I did not give the balance of my money or time to his agenda and I will not keep giving, because in the long-term we need to do more than only choose between the lesser of two wrongs. My time is better spent on organizing for social and economic justice.

I followed the election closely and I felt a great deal of relief and pride when Barack Obama was elected president. I was moved watching civil rights organizers, who had fought hard for civil rights in the years leading up to the 1960s with tears in their eyes, witnessing an election that would have been entirely impossible without their community organizing and the shift of power that their actions had created. I was relieved that war mongering neo-conservatives had lost this time. I felt the pride of the millions of African Americans who knew that everything said by white supremacists is wrong. It is wrong to say that White Americans, Latinos and African Americans are as deeply divided by race as supremacists would have it, or to say that an African American could not run for president and win. I was even a little more proud to be an American, because at least now I am a citizen of a country whose head of state will be the son of a Muslim man from Kenya and a Christian mother who had lived all over the world.

Now that the election is over, it's time for us to go back to making history ourselves. The stakes are high. Had community organizers in the 1960s allowed themselves to be co-opted by John Kennedy, Barack Obama might not have been allowed even to vote, let alone to lead the Democratic Party as President of the United States. Let's not get organized by Barack Obama because if we don't organize ourselves now, then poverty will not be ended, human rights will not be secured, and oppression will not be beaten down.

*Tom Kertes is a leadership organizer with the United Workers. He writes this column speaking for himself and not on behalf of the United Workers.*

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