

The Midwest Academy Organizing Model - Several Criticisms

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January 20, 2005

The Chicago-based Midwest Academy has created one of the better known models for organizing. They train organizers and publish an organizing manual called "Organizing for Social Change". Their ideas on organizing seem to dominate activism in general, and in specific the student movement including Grassroots Organizing Weekend (GROW) trainings that have been organized by United States Student Association, United Students Against Sweatshops, the Student Labor Action Project, and earlier weekend trainings (1994-1996) by the Student Environmental Action Coalition. In particular the Midwest's "Strategy Chart" which attempts to boil down much of the model into a single page, is very common.

Having a model for organizing is extremely important, and the Midwest Academy model is a *huge improvement* for many people who are new to activism and find themselves organizing speakers, showing films, writing letters, but not actually engaging in a campaign. However there are several problems with this model, and it may subtly influence a group's practices in ways that a group might not like.

The Midwest Academy model, which is based on Alinsky's ideas on organizing, is not ideologically neutral.

Midwest Academy Principles

1. Win concrete improvements in people's lives.
2. Make people aware of their own power (by winning victories).
3. Alter the relations of power between people, the government, and other institutions by building strong permanent local, state and national organizations.

The most blatant problem with the model is that it focuses too much on the ends, compared to the means. The goal is to win. It fails to detail how critically important anti-oppression work is for social movements. By not adequately addressing race, gender, class, and sexual orientation – the model is a long-term disaster for building movements that are going to achieve substantial progressive change. Your organizations and coalitions will fall apart, and social change that doesn't address anti-oppression issues means that you are only creating new, slightly more progressive, power structures that other people will have to overthrow.

The model puts more emphasis on empowering people by winning, than on empowering people through democratic organizing. All activist organizations are hierarchical. They are often controlled by a small number of staff, the organizer(s), or a coordinating committee. If you don't struggle to democratize your organization by challenging the existing hierarchies within it, and empowering (and training) people who haven't been leaders into positions of leadership, then you are only training people to be the mindless masses who would fit well into a soviet-era communist state.

In this model there is more focus on winning than on empowering people or altering the relations of power. Within the goal of altering relations of power the emphasis is placed on building organizations. These organizations are hierarchical, bureaucratic, and disempower their membership. This model lacks an analysis of corporate power (aka capitalism), sexism, racism, heterosexism, war, environmental destruction, and how institutional forces are combining to ruin everyone's lives. We should be training people to analyze their lives using radical methodology that gets at the roots.

This model prepares you to work for reform. It doesn't prepare you to overthrow an unjust government, which may sound like a silly unnecessary thing to most people, until you look at history and notice that

people have often found the need to do so. People have recently mobilized in Eastern Europe, the USSR, Philippines (Marcos), Indonesia (Suharto), and going further back even industrialized France almost had a revolution in May of 1968. Revolution makes more sense if you analyze the depth of injustice in the US. Anarchists, socialists, and communists do a better job of preparing for revolution. Though they have very low popular support.

As part of its ends-oriented mentality, this model prefers majority decision-making to consensus and representative democracy to participatory. This is interesting because there is strong support (at least a very substantial minority) in the student movement (or at least in the predominantly white part of the student movement) for consensus and participatory democracy.

Steve Max who edited the Midwest Organizing Guide was a member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) during the Sixties. At two National Council meetings he urged that SDS should focus on electoral activism – getting the Democrats to realign and become the party of the working class. He was voted down once, and the second time they passed a motion but didn't do much about it. This Midwest model that he helped create promotes electoral activism more than it should.

The model is tied to the dominant theory used by sociologists to analyze social movements – Resource Mobilization theory that could be classified as slightly on the political “right” of social movement theory (for its preference for quantitative methods instead of qualitative ones). In fact, one should draw upon both social-psychological and resource mobilization factors to best understand activism.

The Midwest Academy is good, but imperfect. It leans one direction on several important tactical choices where I think activists should be trying to build bridges. For instance, we need to achieve meaningful reforms while working for revolution and developing the ability in everyone to analyze society and its institutions. We need to use majority decision-making some times (or a modified-majority) and consensus in other times. There are times to work with political parties (ex. where democratic left parties exist – perhaps like the New Democratic Party in Canada) and other times where it doesn't make sense. Anti-oppression is critical work, but shouldn't cause your group to not have a campaign. Any group that uses this model should take these critiques to heart, as well as adding your own.

Someone should create an alternative model.