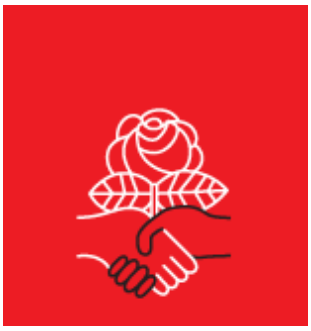
Training: Neither Politics nor Education

written by Benjamin Y. Fong | February 3, 2018



As an employee at a large state university, I have to attend a myriad of trainings, on everything from fire safety to preventing workplace discrimination. The mood at these trainings is typically sour, the participation minimal and perfunctory, and the information provided mostly inadequate to the topics discussed. I know what P.A.S.S. stands for, but that knowledge is not going to make me any less terrified if I ever have to use a fire extinguisher. That being said, at least I *know* what the purposes of these trainings are: to give a false sense of security, to prevent lawsuits, to feed the bureaucratic apparatus, etc. They're excruciating to sit through, but their existence makes enough sense.

The same cannot be said of the trainings I encounter in my other life as a political actor, where I am always hearing about trainings on subjects like "how to organize," "how to use social media to mobilize," or "how to tell our story in a powerful way." These trainings, put on by unions, non-profits, and other community organizations, are often pervaded with a compulsory excitement, though they bear all the trappings of bureaucratic self-maintenance. I was recently fortunate enough to be a delegate at the 2017 convention of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), where we were split up regionally for the first "Workshop Block" and subjected to one such training entitled "Values, Strategy, and Structure." It was later revealed that this training was only one of a host of other non-issue-based and remarkably abstract trainings like "Building through Relationships" and "Community and Culture" that comprised a proposed "National Training Strategy" for the DSA. I left the convention generally hopeful about the possibilities for the organization but very concerned that a significant portion of our membership wanted to devote our growing but still relatively small resources to "training."

Now no doubt training has its uses: if I am going to phonebank for a candidate or go knock on doors to talk about a particular bill or issue, I am very appreciative of a rap training and some practice time. But the kind of training I have in mind here is more abstract and purportedly educational. The implied promise is that sufficient training prepares you to hit the ground running, as if the often painful trial and error of actually *doing* political work were simply an application of training knowledge rather than the education itself. The very real danger here is that people are set up with an overly simple model of organizing and activism, and then disappointed, defeated, and bewildered when political reality doesn't meet their expectations. Especially in the era of social media, when leftists can happily exist in their self-righteous echo chambers, we desperately need to break out of any cloistered spaces that are safely sequestered from this reality.

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I was first introduced to the pushy demand to be trained at my first job at an immigrant rights organization in Chicago, where most of the organizers had been trained at the Industrial Areas

Foundation, an organization founded by Saul Alinsky. The problems with "Alinskyanism" – the philosophy centered on "apolitical 'single-issue' campaigns that focus on 'winnable demands' run by a well-oiled, staff-heavy organization" – have been well-charted elsewhere. Under the auspices of "realism" and "pragmatism," Alinsky encouraged organizers to be anti-ideological, to focus on very small victories, and to avoid dealing with larger systemic problems – all points that are more or less inimical to socialist politics. Jane McAlevey sees the failures of New Labor after 1995, including its corporate campaigns and top-down decision-making, as a result of their adoption of "Alinsky's extreme pragmatism and his embrace of 'ends justify the means' tactics, [which] enabled New Labor's leaders to rationalize accords with big business that stripped workers and their communities of the ability to defend themselves against their employers."

Less emphasized in the literature on Alinsky is his maniacal focus on training, a concern that animated the writing of his well-known *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* in 1971 and which became the central focus of the Industrial Areas Foundation around that same time. In *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky describes the "major problem of [his] years of organizational experience" to be "the finding of potential organizers and their training," and proudly holds up his "special training school for organizers" (one that is still in existence today) as a crowning achievement. Alinsky was always adamant that a good organizer is "suspicious of, and antagonistic to, any idea of plans that work from the top down. Democracy to him is working from the bottom up." But there is an important paradox in his position: the organizer always works from the bottom up, but it is only the organizer who is properly qualified to recognize what is at the bottom from their position at the top. Proper training endows the organizer with a special expertise – Jeffrey Stout tellingly compares organizers to soccer coaches – that establishes an implicit hierarchy, and it is only within this schema that "bottom-up" issues are identified.

In a comprehensive and exacting critique of Alinskyanism, Aaron Petcoff argues that professional organizers bear a "relatively constrained field of vision in which the rank and file appears hopelessly disorganized and conservative." This is a very subtle point: if one is a psychiatrist, one will walk into a consulting room ready to fit patients into certain diagnostic categories. (The history of psychiatry bears some amusing anecdotes where this process has gone awry: for instance, when Emil Kraepelin interpreted a patient's mocking retorts to be non-sensical gestures of "catatonic excitement.") The same basic problem goes for trainers, and this was in abundant evidence at the DSA's "Values, Strategy, & Structure" training, where many "trainees" objected to the infantilizing nature of the trainings and refused to participate. Armed with the notion that their job was to bring order to disorder, the trainers – no doubt well-intentioned, but some of whose qualifications entailed only recently having gone through the training themselves – chided the disobedient and pushed on with the training, as if the participants were acting like children rather than lodging reasonable complaints.

One might pass this off as a specific problem of tin-eared trainers, but it is the very structure of training that encourages this kind of behavior. A hierarchy is established wherein workers, organizational members, and community leaders are the raw material to be shaped by organizers and trainers, rather than political agents in their own right. Of the many damaging things Alinsky introduced into left discourse, this paternalism, veiled by claims about "working from the bottom up," is one of the most insidious, and it is part of the fabric of the whole training model of politics.

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This is not, of course, to say that we all don't have a great deal to learn, merely that you learn political work by doing political work. Canvassing, for instance, isn't just for the experienced: properly organized, canvasses can be used to onboard newcomers, and in such a way that exposes them to the reality of people's everyday issues, struggles, and hopes, rather than the make-believe

world created in trainings.

One might nonetheless think that training offers a good model of political *education*, but here again it offers only a simulacrum of the thing itself. Any socialist model of education must transcend what Frances Reade has identified as the "sit and get" or "drive-by" model of learning and create spaces wherein people are really encouraged to communicate, out of a respect for the autonomous capacities of ordinary people. It should not encourage the selling, pitching, or packaging of the basics of socialism because the possibility of a better society is only truly internalized through slow reflection on and discussion of everyday experiences in the harsh world of late capitalism.

The training model, by contrast, is profoundly disrespectful of the capacities of the people who are supposedly "served" by it. Training material is typically Powerpointed into slides that offer the most cursory of power analyses or concept explanations, any audience participation is highly structured in such a way as to prevent real conversation, and the time where dialogue *is* allowed is often devoted to activities like practicing political sales pitches. Capitalist society, especially in its neoliberal phase, encourages us to think about other people as unintelligent and at best to be manipulated for our own ends. Training, in assuming that we "meet people where they are" by obsessively directing and limiting conversation, participates in this deep disrespect for human autonomy that is inherent in contemporary society.

To be clear, to reject the training model of political education is not to affirm the quasi-Talmudic Marxist reading group as the standard we should all strive for. Full immersion in political economy, great in itself, is certainly not a precondition for being a socialist, but a good socialist education model will discourage oversimplification and encourage reading, reflection, and discussion amongst peers. On both counts, training fails miserably, and if we follow the logic of Doug Henwood, Liza Featherstone, and Christian Parenti's classic article, "Action Will Be Taken," this should come as no surprise. Undergirded by the kind of non-profit culture that pursues "specific politely meliorative schemes" while avoiding any systemic focus, training "fosters an array of mind-killing practices," and in so doing participates in the general anti-intellectualism that so dominates American life.

A more recent Parenti article, "If We Fail," does a spectacular job of illustrating what an incomprehensibly important political moment we live in. The reconstitution of the left in the wake of Bernie and in the face of Trump is tremendously exciting, but the intensifying climate crisis, the worrying reemergence of regressive ideologies, the threats of new wars, etc. means that we must think and act with clarity. The process of being trained – somewhat like exercising on a stationary bike while watching the news on television, in that two perfectly good activities are debased in being combined – dulls both thought and action. Forgive the extended metaphor, but the topic elicits the facile: we cannot afford to spin our wheels at such a critical juncture.