Ten Ideas for Social Justice Organizing After September 11 (blueprint edition)

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“You are all traitors and should be put in jail!”

That is what a well-dressed woman in her 40s shouted at us, as she walked out of church, while we walked by in a candlelight peace vigil. Wow! Is it that threatening to hold an interfaith candlelight march for peace? Apparently it is. For columnists or writers that might make a good story. For those of us who are trying to work with people to change hearts and minds by organizing for social justice, this woman is an indicator that things have changed. In this article I share ten ideas for social justice organizing after the changes of September 11.

Before September 11, many of us were already working on social justice issues. For example, in New Orleans I was working with groups organizing around issues of living wages, low-wage worker union organizing in the hotel industry, voting rights in our state redistricting process, the destruction of public housing, welfare reform, civil liberties, immigration, national and international human rights, prison reform, peace issues, public education, and criminal justice. All of those issues, and many more, are still challenging us.

Since September 11, many of us are working with people organizing a just and peaceful response to the terrorism which has so wounded our country.

Our world is a different place since September 11. This is true for everyone but it is particularly true for the world of people working for peace and justice. Those of us who are working for justice and peace face many new issues, and some old ones, in the days ahead.

Psychologically, the tragic events of September 11 reverberate in all our minds on both a conscious and an unconscious level. People are still having a difficult time concentrating. Teachers say students have lost their focus. Those we work with in peace and justice organizing are as overwhelmed and as in shock as everyone else in our country. People have less energy to go to meetings and to volunteer for social justice issues. One person said these events are present like deep bass sounds that you can feel more than hear. However you describe them, the experiences of September 11 are in the forefront of many and in the background of all of our social justice issues.

Economically, the damage which was already beginning before September 11 has accelerated. Tens of thousands of people have lost their jobs, many others are having their work schedule reduced. As in all economic distress, the working poor are being hurt the most. For peace and justice organizations, fund-raising is much more difficult because people are addressing the hardships caused by the attacks.

Politically, social justice issues have been submerged as elected officials and the media spend less time on any issues other than those directly related to terrorism and war. Conservatives call us traitors and America-haters if we dare to go beyond condemnation of the injustices of the terrorists. People who condemn the terrorists but also suggest we examine the
justice and peace issues in our own country and in our own international behavior, and people that say we should seriously consider responses other than military responses, are un-American, evil, unpatriotic, or even, as Rush Limbaugh said, communists! (I wonder what exactly does it take to be a communist today, when it seems even the communists are not communists? I will leave that for another discussion.)

The most vulnerable direct victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks are single parent families, those without insurance and pension plans and union support. The first victims of the economic reverberations after September 11 have also been the working poor: the last hired, the least skilled, the least educated, the least organized. The first political victims in our country have been the Arab and Islamic Americans, who have been subjected to racial profiling, threats, assaults and even death.

But there is good news as well. Americans have responded with tremendous generosity to the victims of the terrorists. Firefighters and police and rescue workers, mostly union members, have given all of us inspiration as they courageously and selflessly worked to help all our people in distress. It is a tribute to the progress of those who have labored so hard for civil rights that our president and most of our public officials have called for religious, racial and ethnic tolerance. It is a tribute to those who have labored for peace, that the initial calls for horrific and indiscriminate retaliation of anyone even in the vicinity of terrorists have been declining.

Because our world is both quite different and yet in some ways the same, what are we to do as social justice organizers?

I write to share ten ideas about social justice organizing after September 11. I do not pretend to have the answers. I am sure there is no single blueprint for our challenges ahead. However, I do want to share with you my reflections and the reflections of some organizers I have spoken with about some ideas on how we should proceed.

But first, a note of caution. Each of these principles must be implemented in ways that reflect our commitment to justice and peace. If we do not organize intelligently and in an anti-racist way, as organizer Ron Chisom says, “we will not be organizing, but disorganizing.” Simply put, there is no shortcut. We cannot organize for peace and justice if we do not model peace and justice in our organizing.

Here are my thoughts.

#1 Be Humble

We must start by being humble. There is no more important place to start than by recognizing that we do not know exactly what is going on. We can say “I don’t know.” In fact, it might be the smartest thing to say. Nobody has been here before. That said, we cannot allow ourselves to be paralyzed into inaction.

A woman organizer who lives in New York told me, a few weeks after September 11,
"The idea of humility and listening and forgiveness as qualities to seek in organizing these days particularly resonates with me - as does the idea that we have to recognize that things have changed even as we figure out how to keep moving."

#2 Be Quiet and Listen

Don't talk, listen. This doesn't work for television or columnists, but if you believe in real organizing, you should believe that people possess an innate wisdom. We must listen to the people for insight and wisdom. The people help us discover the way for all of us to go forward.

There are times when we must resist the quick response. There are times, as peace activist Daniel Berrigan said, when we should say, “Don't just do something, stand there!” As a long-time Quaker reminded me recently, “When voices are loud and the threats of violence are high, it is more important than ever to create time to be quiet and to reflect."

As an example, when you find yourself in a suddenly darkened room, what do you do? While some might rush blindly to where they think the door is, others stand still, gather themselves, let your eyes get adjusted to the different environment, orient themselves, then cautiously and sensitively, move forward.

Listening is part of our orientation. We listen to pick up clues from our fellow seekers about what is the best path, the best next step.

#3 Be Not Afraid

Courage is critical. There is a concerted effort to try to intimidate and silence people interested in justice and peace. Conservatives challenge the patriotism of all who dare to examine and question the root causes of why all that America does is not universally admired. Conservatives are setting up cardboard liberals who excuse the terrorists, hate America, do not support democracy, and are just as intolerant as Jerry Falwell. Columnists equate pacifism with treason and evil. Those who call for nonviolence or even an international police action are not supporting the Commander in Chief, the troops, and the families of the victims of September 11. Workers who have struck for economic justice since September 11 have been attacked and called selfish and not patriotic.

If working for peace and justice does not meet some conservative's narrow definition of patriotism, then they have created too weak a form of patriotism. By that definition, Sojourner Truth was not a patriot, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt are not patriots, and Martin Luther King was not a patriot. I want to be what they are. If they do not meet someone's definition of patriot, then I am not interested. True patriotism should allow an appreciation for both what is great about our country and what we need to work to improve. We cannot allow anyone to silence the voices of peace and justice, even if they try to silence them with flag-waving.

We would do well to remember the patient agonizing efforts of those who fought against slavery, who fought for women's suffrage, who fought for civil rights, who fought for the right to
organize, and who fought for the rights of freedom of speech. Those were tough and scary fights, but there were successes even in the face of fear.

Peace and justice organizers have to maintain courage despite the ongoing attempts to intimidate and silence.

#4 Rediscover the Community of Social Justice and, by all means, Welcome New Seekers

Prior to September 11, our peace and justice communities were separate efforts. The people organizing around welfare reform worked apart from those organizing against the death penalty. People working on living wages were isolated from those working on voting rights and redistricting.

When times get tough, they are tougher when you are alone. It is time to re-connect our justice and peace organizing. As members of a community we are much stronger and wiser than when we are alone.

One literacy worker I know reports “I have been overwhelmed not only by the events of September 11, but also by feelings of animosity, even hatred, being directed at me from fellow Americans (some of them friends) because I cannot believe this war is justified nor the way to peace in our world.”

When the peace community organized a vigil in New Orleans four days after September 11, over 200 people showed up. After the vigil, almost everyone there said, “It was so good to be among people who were interested in peace, because I have been feeling so alone and isolated.”

There are also new members in the peace and social justice community: many new people, many young people. We must welcome them and learn from them.

Not all the new arrivals have been welcomed with open arms by the existing peace and justice community. Some new people say the wrong things. Others do things that are hurtful or disruptive. But, even then, the last thing veteran organizers need to tolerate are efforts to marginalize or attack new folks for their newness and lack of sophistication. There are criticisms that the new people are innocents or naive or ill-informed or un-analytical. They are criticized for proceeding in a way that does not take into account...take your pick: racism, feminism, homophobia, they are too interested in religion, or not interested enough in nonviolence, etc.

Welcome the new people. Learn from them. Be infected by their enthusiasm. Join with them. Share with them. Don't preach at them. Work with them. Help them discover the knowledge that others have learned the hard way. Certainly people have much to learn from people already in social justice work. But, we must clearly understand that these new people have much to teach us as well. To go forward in these new times, we need to link up with each other in respectful ways that model the just and peaceful community we seek to organize.
#5 Faith-based Social Justice

There has been an upsurge in people seeking consolation and leadership and direction from their churches. The religious community has a big opportunity as people search for new meaning: linkages between faith and justice and peace. Some churches have spoken eloquently about peace and justice issues. Connecting with faith-based social justice people and organizations represents an opportunity at this time.

For social justice organizing, there is an important distinction to be made between faith traditions and churches. In my experience, all faiths place justice and peace and sacrifice and respect and the common good at the very center of their beliefs. The problem is that many churches preach and practice a very weak form of their faith. They de-emphasize the justice and peace demands of their faith traditions. Work for social justice is replaced by church tithing. Working for peace is replaced by supporting the church school or church suppers. The faith which is meant to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted, weakly ends up comforting the comfortable.

We need to work with people whose interests in justice and peace are faith-based. We also need to challenge our church leaders, who tend to mute the justice issues in order to accommodate their congregations. We also, of course, need to respect all varieties of faiths and we need to make sure that the faith-based folks respect those whose dedication to peace and justice is not faith-based.

#6 Prepare for, and Forgive Mistakes

Any time we try anything new we are going to make mistakes. That is the essence of living a challenging life. Since this is a new environment in which we are organizing, we will make mistakes. We would be smart to be prepared for our mistakes and also be prepared to forgive well-intentioned people who make them.

One young woman peace organizer from the Northwest told me how much it hurt that such harsh criticism has been leveled at young people trying to organize just responses after September 11. She knows we all need ideas on how to improve but also thinks that kindness and forgiveness of each other are desperately needed in the social justice community.

A professor in Florida reminds me that we are going to have mistakes and conflict within the peace and social justice community on how to proceed, “I think we must assume that we won't have one shared “peace movement” but a complex and possibly conflicted movement and set of views.”

A woman in Washington DC who organizes for international human rights wrote “I know the left, I know our ideas, our righteousness, our cries for nonviolence and our condemnation of Bush. I am well versed on peace and justice issues. The challenge for me these days is to build bridges to those who see things differently. Good and bad are not as clear cut as they used to
Some of the most venomous and counter-productive criticism of social justice organizing comes from others of us in the same field. We savage each other in ways that Robert Novak and the Wall Street Journal could only dream of.

We need not overlook mistakes and conflicts. We need to be prepared to learn from them. But we also need to be prepared to support those of us who make them. This is part of the social justice obligation that we owe each other.

#7 Study History

We need to study and understand history, real history, not the myths spun out by the talking heads on tv.

Those who say that in time of crisis, Americans always gather around our leaders do not know the richness of our history. Those who say we historically suspend all questioning of injustice in our country during time of crisis, do not know our history.

A real look at our history will show that while many have exclusively rallied round the flag in times of crisis, many others have maintained their commitments to peace and justice, even in times of crisis. There were demonstrations and draft resistance and even riots among poor and working class men in connection with every war ever fought. In every war some people said “Not in my name.”

As the Los Angeles Times said recently, “Political dissent in wartime is an American tradition.”

As part of our understanding of history, we must see the legacy of the civil rights and peace movements already at work in our midst. While some official crazies like our Louisiana Congressman (diaper and fan belt comment) and Jerry Falwell (gays and lesbians and abortionists and the ACLU and people for the American way) have been hatefully shameful, it is remarkable that numerous officials and leaders have tried to deter hate crimes against Arab or Islamic Americans. Also, the widespread support for saturation-type bombing, even nuclear responses, has seemed to diminish considerably.

We need the historians in our communities to help us re-discover the justice and peace realities of our history, particularly in times of crisis.

#8 Speak to Shared Values

Part of our challenge as organizers is to communicate. In this time, when there is so much official communication about “either you are for our war or you are for terrorism” we need new ways to talk.
One progressive public relations advisor said “I would love to see us claim some central patriotic symbols and reshape them. Perhaps the American flag with another flag or emblem sewn in at the bottom? We need to redefine patriotism in some profound and simple ways in the coming months.”

I strongly suggest every person interested in social justice organizing look at the web site of the group, We Interrupt This Message. That organization assists progressives in dealing with the media. This discussion of the principle of speaking to shared values is taken largely from materials from their website. www.interrupt.org

In order to communicate, our organizing and media messages should respond to questions that speak to values central to both the peace and social justice movement and the majority of the general public:

Thus, “How can we hunt down the terrorists” can be recast as "How can we be safe?"
“How do we protect America” can instead be "How can we be strong?"
Instead of “How can we wipe these fanatics out?” we can discuss "How can we arrive at justice?"

Safety, Strength, Respect for Human Life, and Justice are all values shared by the peace and social justice movement and the majority of the North American public. And our communication and media messages should be framed as answers to these questions.

As a woman attorney who works against the School of Americas told me, “I find myself drawn to the woman who called the peace people “traitors.” I want to listen to this and find out why she says this. What is her truth? I would like to explain to her what is in my heart, what is my truth. I would like us each to learn and be moved by the other.”

One example for initiating dialogue is our shared appreciation of the courage and sacrifice and discipline of the rescue workers. They have shown us a wonderful model for discussing the importance of courage and sacrifice in working for justice and peace.

#9 Make the Social Justice Issue Connections

The current crisis allows us an opportunity to show that all justice is one.
Racial profiling of Middle Eastern and Muslims has to be fought as part of the ongoing struggle against racism, even in the peace movement itself. Racism is like being in the Mississippi river, if you are not actively struggling against the current, you are drifting along with it. The first anti-war rally in DC was called ANSWER, Act Now to Stop War and End Racism. War and racism were linked in their minds for a reason. Martin Luther King spoke about the three evils of racism, militarism, and materialism, for a reason.
Attempts to blame these tragedies on Islam, Muslims, Arabs, Jews, liberals, and gays and lesbians show us the need to stand up for the civil and human rights of all people.

Generous and fair compensation for victims of terrorism is absolutely the right national response to the tragedies. This can lead to further discussion of the national struggle for just and fair reparations for African-Americans and local calls for assistance to residents of public housing who have been displaced by the demolition of their homes.

Congressional assistance of $15 billion for the airline industry that left out assistance for the tens of thousands of airline workers who lost their jobs shows the need to support the
struggle of workers for union organizing, the right to a job and the search for a living wage.

Those who call for revenge and eye for an eye blind retaliation remind us of the need to struggle against the human rights violations of the death penalty in our own country.

All of sudden the USA is interested in international coalitions. This is a startlingly new focus. We even paid our UN dues! Now, we are all in this world struggle against terrorism together. We are for human rights everywhere. Wonderful. What can we learn from the struggles of our international sisters and brothers? What does the international dimension say to our issues like the death penalty? Environmental justice? Worker justice? Civil rights and civil liberties?

Current developments give us the opportunity to connect the justice issues that are so visible and popular with the ones that are less visible but no less important.

#10 Reconsider Strategies & Go Steadily Forward

I don't know how many of you have had your car stuck in the mud or the snow. Having lived in both the South and the North, I have been stuck in both. When your car is stuck in the mud or snow, often the best response is not to just mash down harder on the accelerator. But I am afraid that many of us are trying to do just that at this point.

Many on the right and left are saying, “Now more than ever....(whatever they said before September 11).” Well, why? Really ask the question, why? Why must we do what we were doing before but do it harder? We must challenge ourselves to not just knee jerk say what we said before, but to thoughtfully respond to the question, why?

If our only response to the events of September 11 is to do what we did before that, but only harder, I think we will waste a lot of energy. We have to thoughtfully and humbly reconsider our strategies and develop some new ones. Otherwise we will just remain stuck.

Conclusion

We have to begin reflecting, thinking, acting, and organizing in new ways to make social justice a reality.

We may never persuade the woman who called us traitors, but if we can work effectively on social justice issues, we can do our part to make this world a better place for her and for us.