Grass roots can nourish Obama’s goals, nation’s needs

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At this summer’s Republican National Convention, Sarah Palin and Rudy Giuliani mocked Barack Obama: “Community organizer – What?”

They didn’t get it then, but maybe they get it now. We have seen a beautiful model of organizing by the Obama campaign.

As an organizer in the downtrodden, gang-infested streets of the black and Latino communities of South Side Chicago in the 1980s, Obama saw plant closings and disinvestment destroy lives and communities.

Back then, he couldn’t explain exactly what organizing meant. Instead, “I’d pronounce on the need for change. … Change won’t come from the top, I would say. Change will come from a mobilized grass roots” (“Dreams From My Father”).

Obama went on to law and politics to find greater leverage. He also tapped into the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s politics of hope. That combination has opened up the country to the possibility of new politics and new goals.

So today, as King asked in 1968, we might ask, “Where do we go from here?” King sought big goals: redistribution of wealth and power, an end to racism and war, a ‘moral revolution.’ He wrote, “we must rapidly begin the shift from a ‘thing-oriented’ society to a ‘person-oriented’ society.”

Obama doesn’t promise as big a leap. He is a reformer, interested in finding pragmatic solutions to pressing problems. But, like King, he promises an alternative to war. And, like King, he envisions a program to deal with racial inequality by reaching beyond race to address problems facing all working people.

“What would help minority workers are the same things that would help white workers: the opportunity to earn a living wage, the education and training that can lead to such jobs, labor laws and tax laws that restore some balance to the distribution of the nation’s wealth and health-care, child care and retirement systems that working people can count on. (“The Audacity of Hope”).

Many Americans think that sounds pretty good. John McCain, in response, called Obama a socialist who wants to turn the tax system into a welfare program.

People throughout the world strive to put a human face on capitalism, while we have become what King warned against: a country where “machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people.” It is indeed time for a change.

Democrats will be hard-pressed to address the economic disaster. We did it under worse times in the 1930s, and we can do it again today. Some of us will be pressing for a new law restoring the right of workers, without fear of being fired, to organize unions, which King said remain the best “anti-poverty program.”

Bringing about significant change won’t be easy, but Obama’s campaign proved that ordinary people do extraordinary things when working together. His dramatic and joyful election victory affirmed the power of organizing.

In my hometown of Tacoma, I witnessed the unique vibrancy of the Obama campaign. I have never seen more involved, energized people, working so hard in an election campaign. And it happened almost everywhere.

Now it’s time for phase two: for churches, unions, community groups and other organizations to demand action from government. President Obama will need us to both support him and to push to fulfill our hopes and his promises.

We need to take the next steps to make real the promise of a revitalized democracy. That won’t happen without mass citizen involvement. As King would tell us, we still need to organize.

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