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Recommended Reading: Saul Alinsky, The American Organizer

A Resource for Every Organizer & Anyone Contemplating Action in Their Community

NEA recommends the following Saul Alinsky books to those members of our Association who are involved in grassroots organizing, especially Association Representatives (ARs) — also known as building reps or shop stewards — and leaders at local affiliates.

Saul Alinsky is widely recognized as the father of, and pre-imminent expert in, grassroots organizing, which is why we recommend that ARs and local leaders become familiar with his theories & materials.

Alinsky's writings have been called the "mother's milk of the left," however in an ironic homage, the conservative right has borrowed a page or two from the Alinsky playbook. Tea Party leader and self-described "conservative radical" Michael Patrick Leahy, for example, has authored a book based on Alinsky's teachings: "Rules for Conservative Radicals."

We hope that ARs and local leaders of all political stripes will discern from Alinsky's books grassroots organizing strategies that will best help us bring our members together around the common goal of improving public education.

Reveille for Radicals

by Saul Alinsky
Vintage; Reissue edition (October 23, 1989)
[Buy It](#)

Rules for Radicals

by Saul Alinsky
Vintage; Reissue edition (October 23, 1989)
[Buy It](#)

Saul Alinsky wrote the book on American radicalism - two books, in fact: a 1945 best-seller, "Reveille for Radicals" and "Rules for Radicals" in 1971. The "Reveille" title page quotes Thomas Paine... "Let them call me rebel and welcome, I feel no concern from it; but I should suffer the misery of devils, were I to make a whore of my soul."

Saul Alinsky, who was a labor and civil-rights activist from the 1910's until he died in 1972, has written here a guidebook for those who are out to change things. He sets down what the goal is: a society where people are free to live, and also aren't starving in the streets. A society where there is legal and economic justice. Then he sets out to say how to get there.

Alinsky spends a lot of time critiquing the idea that "The end does not justify the means." What end? What means? He feels that there are circumstances where one can and should use means that in other circumstances would be unethical. I am not sure I agree, but Alinsky certainly speaks with the voice of experience.

Alinsky's goal seems to be to encourage positive social change by equipping activists with a realistic view of the world, a kind of preemptive disillusionment. If a person already knows what evil the world is capable of, then perhaps the surprise factor can be eliminated, making the person a more effective activist. Alinsky further seems to be encouraging the budding activist not to worry too much about getting his or her hands dirty. It's all a part of the job, he seems to say.

Alinsky, the master political agitator, tactical planner and social organizer didn't mince words...

"Liberals in their meetings utter bold works; they strut, grimace belligerently, and then issue a weasel-worded statement 'which has tremendous implications, if read between the lines.' They sit calmly, dispassionately, studying the issue; judging both sides; they sit and still sit.

"The Radical does not sit frozen by cold objectivity. He sees injustice and strikes at it with hot passion. He is a man of decision and action. There is a saying that the Liberal is one who walks out of the room when the argument turns into a fight.

"Society has good reason to fear the Radical. Every shaking advance of mankind toward equality and justice has come from the Radical. He hits, he hurts, he is dangerous. Conservative interests know that while Liberals are most adept at breaking their own necks with their tongues, Radicals are most adept at breaking the necks of Conservatives.

"Radicals precipitate the social crisis by action - by using power. Liberals may then timidly follow along or else, as in most cases, be swept forward along the course set by Radicals, but all because of forces unloosed by Radical action. They are forced to positive action only in spite of their desires ...

- "The American Radical will fight privilege and power whether it be inherited or acquired by any small group, whether it be political or financial or organized creed.
- "He curses a caste system which he recognizes despite all patriotic denials.
- "He will fight conservatives whether they are business or labor leaders.
- "He will fight any concentration of power hostile to a broad, popular democracy, whether he finds it in financial circles or in politics.
- "The Radical recognizes that constant dissension and conflict is and has been the fire under the boiler of democracy. He firmly believes in that brave saying of a brave people, "Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees!"
- "The Radical may resort to the sword but when he does he is not filled with hatred against those individuals whom he attacks. He hates these individuals not as persons but as symbols representing ideas or interests which he believes to be inimical to the welfare of the people.
- "That is the reason why Radicals, although frequently embarking upon revolutions, have rarely resorted to personal terrorism."

Alinsky practiced what he preached. He said, "Tactics means doing what you can with what you have ... tactics is the art of how to

take and how to give."

He uses eyes, ears and nose for examples...

Eyes

"If you have a vast organization, parade it before the enemy, openly show your power."

Ears

"If your organization is small, do what Gideon did: conceal the members in the dark but raise a clamor that will make the listener believe that your organization numbers many more that it does."

Nose

"If your organization is too tiny even for noise, stink up the place."

Alinsky devised and proved thirteen tactical rules for use against opponents vastly superior in power and wealth.

1. "Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.
2. "Never go outside the experience of your people.
3. "Wherever possible go outside of the experience of the enemy.
4. "Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.
5. "Ridicule is man's most potent weapon.
6. "A good tactic is one that your people enjoy.
7. "A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag.
8. "Keep the pressure on.
9. "The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself.
10. "Major premise for tactics is development of operations that will maintain constant pressure upon the opposition.
11. "If you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through into its counterside.
12. "The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative.
13. "Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.

"The real action is in the enemy's reaction. The enemy properly goaded and guided in his reaction will be your major strength. Tactics, like life, require that you move with the action."

Alinsky was hated and defamed by powerful enemies, proof that his tactics worked. His simple formula for success...

"Agitate + Aggravate + Educate + Organize"

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