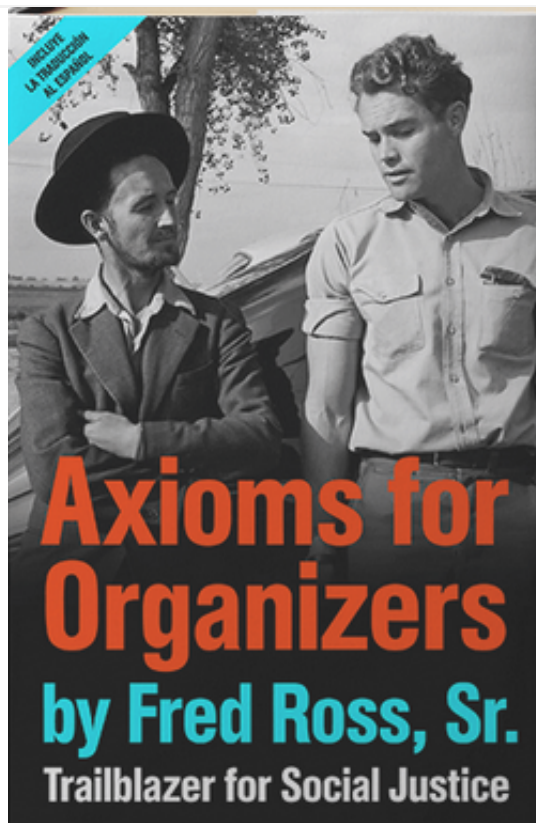


THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

A Book for the People of Ferguson -- And Oppressed People Everywhere

PETER DREIER SEPTEMBER 14, 2014

Fred Ross's change-making *Axioms for Organizers* is updated for the Internet age, and for a new generation battling discrimination and police brutality.



M

ost residents of Ferguson, Missouri, have probably never heard of Fred Ross, Sr., but they could use his help now. Ferguson's population is two-thirds African American, but the mayor, almost all members of the city

council and school board, and 95 percent of the police department is white, and in last year's municipal election only 7 percent of blacks came to the polls.

Ross—perhaps the most influential (but little-known) community organizer in American history—had a successful career mobilizing people to challenge police brutality, fight segregation, and organize voter registration and voter turnout campaigns. Ross taught people how to channel their anger and frustrations into building powerful grassroots organizations that can win concrete victories that change institutions and improve people's lives. He understood that while sporadic protests can draw attentions to long-neglected problems, it requires the hard day-to-day intentional work of organizing to build power and give people a real voice in the key decisions that shape their living and working conditions

Although Ross died twenty-two years ago, his influence continues in the thousands of people whom he taught the tools of organizing and in the ideas found in his powerful book, *Axioms for Organizers*, which has just been republished as an e-book in English and Spanish.

Those who've heard of Ross typically associate him with Cesar Chavez, the legendary founder of the United Farm Workers union. It was Ross who first identified, recruited and trained Chavez to become a leader and an activist. "Fred became sort of my hero," Chavez recalled. "I saw him organize, and I wanted to learn." But that was only one episode in Ross's long career as a professional troublemaker.

Ross dedicated his life to fighting racism, discrimination, and other injustices by organizing working men and women to help themselves by building powerful grassroots organizations. Over five decades he helped build the labor movement, organized voter registration drives among Latinos, trained people to mobilize issue campaigns around police brutality and segregated schools, and built bridges between labor, religious, civic, and neighborhood organizations. He was a pioneer in opening doors to women and people of color, encouraging their full

Ross dedicated his life to fighting racism, discrimination, and other injustices by organizing working men and women to help themselves by building powerful grassroots organizations.

participation in leadership roles.

In 1989, Ross pulled together his ideas about building successful movements in a short book (or long pamphlet), *Axioms for Organizers*. The forty-eight axioms encapsulate Ross's thoughts on a range of subjects, organized into six chapters called "Characteristics of an Organizer," "Fundamentals: Winning People to the Cause," "Hope, Motivation, Action," "The Long Haul—Perseverance," "Ask and Listen," and "Pitfalls."

Ross' son, Fred Ross, Jr.—also a seasoned and successful organizer—added a chapter to the e-book called "Organizing in the Internet Age," and included a short biography of his father, as well as a thoughtful introduction by former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, who is now a professor at University of California-Berkeley. The **book** is available for \$2.50 through all major e-book sellers.

The bilingual book captures a lifetime of Ross's work with disenfranchised and oppressed people and their struggle to win respect and dignity.

The book is chock full of Ross' pithy tips for troublemakers. A sampling:

- "A good organizer is a social arsonist who goes around setting people on fire."
- "The duty of the organizer is to provide people with the opportunity to work for what they believe in."
- "To win the hearts and minds of people, forget the dry facts and statistics; tell them the stories that won you to the cause."
- "90 percent of organizing is follow-up."
- "If you think you can do it for people, you've stopped understanding what it means to be an organizer."
- "If you are able to achieve anything big in life it's because you paid attention to the 'little' things."

- "When you find 'live wires' put them to work immediately. Find something they can do—any little thing—get them started and ready to do more, or you'll lose them for the cause."
- "When you are tempted to make a statement, ask a question."
- "Good organizers never give up. They get the opposition to do that."

Ross was born in San Francisco, grew up in Los Angeles, and graduated from the University of Southern California in 1937, intending to become a schoolteacher. But the social and economic upheavals of the Depression led him to seek more direct ways to challenge injustice.

He organized Dust Bowlers and migrant farm workers in California's oppressive agricultural labor camps. In 1939, he became the manager of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Arvin Migratory Labor Camp near Bakersfield, the same camp John Steinbeck visited and drew on to write *The Grapes of Wrath*. (It was at the Arvin camp that Ross met Woody Guthrie, who was touring the camps to support union drives.) Ross was the only camp manager of 29 camps in California who challenged the accepted practice of racial segregation and agitated for the workers to run the camps themselves.

During the Second World War, when the federal government imprisoned Japanese Americans in concentration camps amid the anti-Japanese hysteria of the war period, Ross worked with the War Relocation Authority, helping thousands of residents get jobs and housing so they could get out of the camps. He helped challenge the discriminatory practices of employers against Japanese workers.

After the war, Ross spearheaded eight Civic Unity Leagues in California's conservative Citrus Belt, bringing Mexican Americans and African Americans together to battle segregation in schools, skating rinks and movie theatres. Through voter registration drives and community organizing, Ross organized parents to fight the practice of segregation in local schools. In 1946, the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that the segregation of Mexican and Mexican American students into separate "Mexican schools" was unconstitutional, leading to the landmark legal victory,

Mendez, et al v. Westminster School District. It set the precedent that foreshadowed the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling, overturning legal segregation in American schools.

In 1947, Saul Alinsky hired Ross to help build a community organization in the Latino barrio of East Los Angeles. Ross eventually helped form chapters of the Community Service Organization (CSO), a civil rights and civic improvement group, in a number of cities in California and Arizona. The founding leaders of the CSO included members of the steelworkers, clothing workers, meat cutters, and other unions. They formed the core of CSO's early leadership who built a powerful coalition that included the NAACP, the Japanese American Citizens League, the Catholic Church, and the Jewish community. Together they fought for fair housing, employment and working conditions.

One of CSO's biggest victories came in the wake of a severe beating of seven men (five of them Latinos) by Los Angeles police on December 25, 1951, known as "Bloody Christmas," leaving the victims with broken bones and ruptured organs. Pressure from CSO forced the LA Police Department—which routinely harassed and abused blacks and Latinos—to investigate the incident. The CSO helped build the case against the abusive cops by documenting complaints and keeping up public pressure in the media. This eventually resulted in the unprecedented indictment of eight police officers—the first grand jury indictments of LAPD officers and the first criminal convictions for use of excessive force in the department's history. In addition, the LAPD suspended thirty-nine cops and transferred another fifty-four officers.

It was through his work with CSO that Ross encountered and trained many of the individuals who went on to play important roles in American political and civic life. In 1949, after building a powerful voter registration effort among Latinos and whites—adding 14,000 new voters—the CSO helped elect one of its leaders, Ed Roybal, to the L.A. City Council, the first Hispanic elected to that body. In 1962, Roybal was the first Latino from California elected to Congress, where he served with distinction for 30 years.

In 1952, while Ross was building the CSO chapter in San Jose, a public health nurse

told him about Cesar Chavez, a young Navy veteran who lived with his wife in a barrio known as Sal Si Puedes ("Get Out If You Can"). Chavez at first avoided Ross, thinking he was just another white social worker or sociologist curious about barrio residents' exotic habits. But he finally agreed to meet with Ross, who trained Chavez (who eventually become CSO's statewide director) as well as a young teacher named Dolores Huerta, and Gilbert Padilla, a spotter in a dry cleaning establishment. In the 1960s, this trio joined forces to build the United Farm Workers (UFW) union.

"Fred Ross, Sr. changed my life," Huerta recalled. "He inspired and taught me how to organize. He had so much faith in the power of ordinary people to make history."

During his fifteen-year tenure with the UFW, Ross trained 2,000 organizers who led worker strikes and consumer boycotts in every major U.S. and Canadian city, leading to major gains for farm workers and to the 1975 California Agricultural Labor Relations Act, which remains the strongest labor law in the nation today.

In the 1980s, Ross joined his son, Fred Jr., at Neighbor to Neighbor to train yet another generation of organizers to challenge U.S. aid to Nicaragua's right-wing contras, and to stop aid to the brutal Salvadoran military.

Ross's behind-the-scenes activism influenced Eleanor Roosevelt, Woody Guthrie, Bobby Kennedy, Jerry Brown, and many other notable public figures and every-day activists, including current labor leaders Eliseo Medina (former SEIU secretary-treasurer) and Maria Elena Durazo (head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor).

One reason that most Americans haven't heard about Ross is that he followed one of his most important axioms: "An organizer is a leader who does not lead but gets behind the people and pushes." Ross generally avoided the limelight and the headlines. He viewed his job as teaching others to take leadership and engage in public campaigns. In most of his jobs, he remained behind the scenes.

Carey McWilliams, author of *Factories in the Fields* and *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land*, and longtime editor of *The Nation*, described Ross as an "unsung hero" and called him "a man of exasperating modesty, the kind that never

steps forward to claim his fair share of credit for any enterprise in which he is involved."

Ross' role as a mentor to the UFW founder was depicted in the recent Hollywood film, *Cesar Chavez*, with Ross played by Mark Moses. Writer and organizer Gabriel Thompson is working on a biography of Ross that will be published next year. Earlier this summer, Governor Jerry Brown—who had worked closely with Chavez during his first stint as governor in the 1970s—inducted Ross into the California Hall of Fame. For the past year, a diverse coalition of activists, clergy, and public officials has waged a campaign to encourage President Barack Obama (a one-time community organizer) to award Ross posthumously the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian award.

"We need to celebrate the unsung heroes and every day activists who've made America a better society," said Maria Elena Durazo, who grew up in a farmworker family and now heads the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor. "Fred Ross Sr. dedicated his life to helping ordinary people help themselves and give them the confidence to challenge injustice. He and the legions of organizers he inspired continue to have a profound impact on the labor movement, the Latino community, and all efforts to change society for the better."

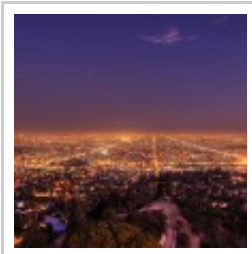
Many people who recognize Ross' remarkable legacy are now part of the Presidential Medal of Freedom crusade on his behalf. These include House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, former Secretaries of Labor Hilda Solis and Robert Reich, governors Jerry Brown of California, Deval Patrick of Massachusetts, and John Hickenlooper of Colorado, the mayors of New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, Houston, Portland, Sacramento, Denver, Boston, Berkeley, and Oakland.

Although Ross was invisible to the general public, he was well-known to the FBI, who followed him closely for much of his career. In 1946, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover sent a memo to the agency's San Diego office asking for details about Ross' activities. An index card uncovered in FBI files, from 1952, reported on Ross' work with CSO, the National Mexican American Association, the American Council of Spanish-Speaking People, and "Attorney Carey McWilliams and other radicals." The FBI agent or informant noted that Ross "[a]ttended meetings recently to protest police brutality

and persecution of minority groups."

Hoover correctly viewed Ross as a threat to the establishment and the status quo. But the radical ideas of one generation are often the common sense of subsequent generations, so now Ross is finally getting the attention he deserves.

You may also like:



L.A. Story



Queering
Congress



Citizen Bopp



If Labor Dies,
What's Next?



The Once and
Future Gov

© 2014 by The American Prospect