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ORGANIZING TRANSFORMATION

Best Practices in the Transformative Organizing Model

By Steve Williams

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Stories of Change

At the beginning of 2015, many feel as though we in the United States are at the cusp of a new movement for social transformation. In September 2014, more than 400,000 people—led by poor and working class communities of color on the front-lines of climate change—took to the streets of New York to demand real solutions to the climate crisis. From Oakland to Ferguson to Brooklyn, many thousands have come together to demand police accountability and confront the racist violence of the criminal justice system. Low-wage workers have begun to organize, and in states and localities across the United States, people have consistently and overwhelmingly voted to increase the minimum wage. Times seem dark—as they often do this time of year—but the sparks of hope seem to be coalescing into something brighter.

While these protests and campaigns may seem spontaneous and temporary, especially when seen through the lens of the mainstream media, each of them is the product of years—if not decades—of patient organizing. How can the oftentimes local and necessarily concrete work of organizing in our workplaces and communities add up to the movement of movements we need if we're going to build a sustainable society based on solidarity, equality, freedom, and justice? In his previous RLS-NYC study, "Demand Everything," Steve Williams introduces a powerful model, "transformative organizing," which insists that effective organizing for social change cannot simply be based on an apolitical and highly specific analysis of what is possible in the short term. We need a vision of a better tomorrow that can structure our organizations, alliances, and campaigns today.

In this study, Williams returns to the topic of transformative organizing, examining what this model looks like in actual practice. Based on case studies of four organizations that have applied and developed this model, Williams distills a set of best practices that can in turn serve as guidance for organizers seeking to build up a movement capable of effectively challenging capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy.

Williams is a coordinator of LeftRoots, an emerging "national formation of social movement organizers and activists who want to connect grassroots struggles to a strategy to win liberation for all people and the planet." A long-time organizer in the Bay Area, Williams is the co-founder and former executive director of POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights), a community-based organization of low-income and working class tenants, transit riders, and workers. Together with NTanya Lee, he co-authored the "Ear to the Ground Project," a national in-depth survey of left organizing in the U.S.

In "Demand Everything," Williams points out that societal transformation cannot be accomplished by adhering to the same old authoritarian, undemocratic, white male, middle-class dominated politics. In this paper, he considers several organizations that are working on the ground to move us forward in a truly progressive manner. Each of them has something critical to teach us about how we can better come together to challenge an unjust, undemocratic, and unsustainable status quo.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg
Co-Directors of New York Office, May 2015*

Organizing Transformation

Best Practices in the Transformative Organizing Model

By Steve Williams

With corporate profits rising along with the number of children living in poverty, the state-sanctioned killings of Black civilians, the record-number of deportations of undocumented immigrants, and the irrefutable evidence for the coming crisis caused by capitalism's addiction to fossil fuels, the need for systemic change is more and more urgent every day. But as the great Guinea-Bissauan revolutionary Amílcar Cabral once cautioned, "We are not going to eliminate imperialism by shouting insults against it."¹ Toppling the old order requires building broad, radical, and confident social movements that grow out of the social sectors whose interests lie in a future based on justice and solidarity.

To talk of movement building rightly leads one to the challenge of workplace and community organizing. In the United States (and some other parts of the Western world), this often leads to the books of Saul Alinsky. While celebrating collective action, the model described in Alinsky's books discourages organizers and organizations from taking up the ideological tasks necessary to analyze and undermine long-lasting systems of exploitation and oppression. In recent years, a model of organizing has been emerging in communities and workplaces across the United

States with efforts to build power amongst domestic workers, residents facing eviction, queer young people, and people fighting climate change. This model attempts to build collective power through democratic efforts while also challenging the deeply rooted systems of white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism. Many have referred to this emerging model as transformative organizing.

While the model of transformative organizing is new and still in development, it is also rooted in a rich historical tradition. Many of the organizers who use the term "transformative organizing" acknowledge that their approach draws from past efforts in the United States and around the globe to build popular power to challenge and change the systems of oppression and exploitation that degrade the quality of life for people, communities, and the planet. Drawing from the experiences of organizations like the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, the Wobblies, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), and the women-of-color feminism of the 1970s, many of these efforts are trying to weave together the work of individual organizations with the goal of building a broad and united social movement capable of confronting and ending the systems of oppression and exploitation.

What is Transformative Organizing?

There is also something innovative about transformative organizing practices. When asked to

define transformative organizing, Hashim Benford of Power U Center for Social Change in Miami offered this: "These systems of oppression

¹ Amílcar Cabral, "The Weapon of Theory," 1966, p. 1.

that we interface with on a daily basis—white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy—they’re not just abstract concepts, and they don’t just shape unequal material conditions, but they also impact us as human beings... Transformative organizing seeks to transform people and society. It unpacks the interpersonal and individual effects of oppression and trauma in our lives as part of the process of doing societal, social, community-level change work. When I think of transformative that’s the ultimate vision.”² His definition brings together two strands that are central to all the organizations’ approaches to the emerging model—commitment to changing social systems while supporting people’s individual and collective ability to learn and put into practice different ways of relating to the world, to their communities, to their families (however those are defined), and to themselves.

This study aims to explore the components of this transformative organizing model through a study of four different organizations’ work. My earlier article, “Demand Everything,” offered an examination of the transformative organizing model that drew on more than twenty years’ experience as a community organizer in San Francisco with the Coalition on Homelessness and POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights).³ That article identified nine components of the transformative organizing model:

1. Walk with Vision;
2. Reach Out to Listen and Learn;
3. Revolutionary Edge of Reform;
4. Democracy Is Power;
5. Cultivate Leaders;
6. Build Strategic Alliances;
7. Commit to Movement;
8. Extract Every Lesson; and
9. Personal Is Political.

Recognizing that the power of the transformative organizing model comes from its application of certain over-arching principles in a very specific context with a particular set of social forces, this article examines how distinct organizations are applying aspects of the transformative organizing model. It examines the work of four organizations whose work is breaking new ground and helping to shape the definition of the term. Those organizations include Causa Justa :: Just Cause in the San Francisco Bay Area; Power U Center for Social Change in Miami, Florida; National People’s Action, a network of almost thirty affiliated grassroots organizations; and the Vermont Workers Center, a statewide grassroots organization. Whether these organizations use the term “transformative organizing” or not, their practices offer compelling examples of organizations attempting to embody a commitment to transforming systems and transforming ourselves.

Causa Justa :: Just Cause: Organizing for Black and Brown Unity

Causa Justa :: Just Cause (CJJC) is a grassroots organization that organizes working-class tenants to fight for housing rights in the real estate-dominated context of the San Francisco

Bay Area. In a region where tenants’ rights laws protect long-term tenants from market-rate rent increases, landlords have taken to bullying and harassing their tenants in hopes that those tenants will move out, thereby making room for tenants willing to pay higher rent. Today, the Oakland rent board receives as many as two hundred calls per

2 Hashim Benford, Interview with the author, November 20, 2014.

3 Steve Williams, “Demand Everything: Lessons of the Transformative Organizing Model.” March 2013, www.rosalux-nyc.org.

month from tenants complaining of landlord harassment.⁴

In the fall of 2014, CJC led a coalition calling on the Oakland City Council to pass legislation to stop landlords from bullying and harassing their tenants. As one woman testified to Council members, “[My landlord] has failed to provide basic services. He did not pay (the gas and electricity bill) so we were without heat and hot water for a week in the winter.”⁵ In October, CJC won some relief for the city’s tenants when the City Council passed the Tenant Protection Ordinance, making it easier for renters to stand up against landlord harassment. The story of CJC and its path to building a united base of African-American and Latino tenants is a study of transformative organizing.

All transformative organizing begins with a collective intention—the intention to struggle against a cultural, economic, and political hegemony that perpetrates and reproduces capitalism, white supremacy, and hetero-patriarchy. There is no singular path to this intention. Different organizations take different routes to get there. The clarity of the intention, as well as the integrity of the organization, can guide the organization’s practice and compel the group to experiment with approaches that might otherwise seem uncommon and superfluous.

In the case of CJC, their practice has been driven by an intention to forge working class unity. However, building working-class unity is no small under-taking in twenty-first century United States, where the Marxist concept of class has been so bastardized as to be seen as synonymous with level of income. In this neoliberal empire where class consciousness among working people is extremely low, the leader-

ship of CJC knew that it would need to find a round-about route to the concept of class. They looked to the incisive vision of Stuart Hall, who famously wrote that “Race is, in short, the modality in which class is lived, the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and fought through.”⁶ The insights of this maxim unlocked the potential of CJC’s organizational intention.

CJC looked upon racial identities as the critical entry point toward building class consciousness and working-class unity, and this led to CJC’s decision to take up an intentional focus on building Black-and-Brown unity. CJC is the product of a 2010 merger between a Black organization based in Oakland, Just Cause Oakland, and a Latino immigrant organization based in San Francisco called St. Peter’s Housing Committee.⁷ The decision to merge was significant. Both organizations recognized that such a consolidation would require substantial shifts in each organization’s culture, practice, and structures. Nevertheless, the leadership of each organization decided to move forward with the merger based on a shared analysis of the larger conditions in which they operated. Today, the organization has twenty-six staff and more than 3,000 members in San Francisco, Oakland, and the surrounding region.

At the national level, Black and Latino families have been hit hard by the economic crisis. In 2011, the Pew Research Center reported that median wealth in white households is 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Latino households. Their report continued to note that from 2005 to 2009, wealth fell by 66% among Latino households, and by 53% among

4 Will Kane, “Oakland tenants say bully landlords taking advantage of market,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 21, 2014.

5 Chris Fillippi, “Oakland City Council Approves Tenant Protection Ordinance After Increasing Complaints About Landlord Harassment,” KCBS, October 22, 2014.

6 Stuart Hall, “Race Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, Paris: UNESCO, 1980, p. 342.

7 Causa Justa :: Just Cause is currently undergoing a merger with POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights), another San Francisco organization that has focused on building unity between working class African-American and Latino tenants and workers. In 1997, I was one of the co-founders of POWER.

Black households, compared to 16% among white households.⁸ The similarity of conditions holds true in the Bay Area for low-income and working-class African-American and Latino households. Although the communities face similar issues of unsafe, inadequate, and excessively expensive housing, alliances are rare between these communities. As the organization's leadership observed:

Living in the same neighborhood, having the same landlord, or going to the same polls does not itself create solidarity. Even when people have the same material interests, there is no guarantee that they will identify those interests, or see themselves as tied to others with the same interests. And, while Black and Latino communities have the same interests in the long term, in the short term our interests do sometimes come into conflict. In fact, we often come into contact with each other most significantly only once when we have been pitted against each other, in a competition for employment opportunities, affordable housing, or basic services.⁹

Talking about difference did not heighten conflict; rather, it forged a basis of solidarity.

The starting point for CJJC's work, as it should be for any grassroots organization, is *building strong and organic connections to the constituency*. As María Poblet, one of the organization's co-founders and its current executive director has said, "The grassroots foundation of our work is something that we must constantly be building. There are millions of people who should be involved in the project of Black and brown unity. We must constantly be bringing working-class people into community organizing fights for reforms that affect their lives and give them the opportunity to develop themselves as fighters and as thinkers. Building and sustaining community-based organizations is the core of this

work."¹⁰ In addition to traditional door-to-door organizing, CJJC staff provide counseling and advocacy services every month to hundreds of low-income tenants in San Francisco and Oakland. CJJC also anchors coalitional efforts to build national and international movement infrastructure and to mobilize working-class people in the Bay Area to vote in local and national elections. CJJC is in position to build, listen, and work in and with the community.

Four Core Practices

CJJC has instituted a number of practices that have facilitated their intention of building class unity through Black-and-Brown unity. The first has been *creating multiple spaces for organizers and member-leaders to integrate the principle of Black-and-Brown unity into the organization's ongoing work*. One example of this is that every three months CJJC runs an internal think tank, which is a one- or two-day long meeting in which staff and member leaders explore the relationship between different aspects of the group's work for Black-and-Brown unity. One past think tank connected the group's participation in a national anti-gentrification network in a session entitled Black-and-Brown Unity and the Right to the City. A different space, the Assata Shakur University, a three-month series of weekly two-hour sessions, allows members to engage with the organization's goals, work, and structure. In addition, the organization publishes a quarterly newsletter. Each newsletter features at least one article written by a rotating pair of staff and members. All these spaces serve to further strengthen the leadership of staff and member leaders as well as to allow the leadership to refine the organization's understanding and application of the concept of Black-and-Brown unity.

By creating a broad base of staff and members who are familiar and actively engaging with

8 Rakesh Kochhar, Richard Fry, and Paul Taylor, "Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Heights Between Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics," PEW Research Center Publications, 2011.

9 Causa Justa :: Just Cause, "Towards Black and Brown Unity: A Grassroots Perspective—Reflections on the experience of Causa Justa :: Just Cause," p. 3.

10 Ibid, p. 7.

the implications of the organization's focus on Black-and-Brown unity, CJC is better able to carry out its second best practice—*introducing the organizational intention in multiple ways*. All new members, upon joining CJC, are required to participate in a new member orientation session. Along with introducing new members to the group's history, current work, and structures, this session introduces all members to the concept of Black-and-Brown unity. This is especially important since most members are recruited from spaces that are not multi-racial. The new member orientation helps to facilitate new members' entry into a space of racial and linguistic diversity that is unfamiliar to most working-class people of color in the Bay Area. CJC provides simultaneous interpretation at all of its meetings. At these meetings, members hear unfamiliar names and historical references. The orientation ensures the focus on Black-and-Brown unity is nothing that will come as a surprise to new members. In addition to the new member orientation, CJC uses its quarterly newsletter and website to shine a consistent light on this aspect of the organization's work.

A fourth aspect of building Black-and-Brown unity within CJC has been *waging organizing campaigns that address the unique issues impacting the African-American and Latino communities*. As stated earlier, CJC's approach to building working-class unity has stressed the importance of acknowledging and confronting the differences between communities, rather than turning a blind eye toward those differences to focus only on the similarities. In this vein, CJC has been an active participant in the national campaign fighting for the rights of immigrants in the United States. CJC's organizational objective in this work was to create a space for its Latino members to strengthen the unity in the Latino community. As María Poblet said, "The goal was not to get Black members to support a path to legalization for undocumented immigrants... The goal was to create a space where Latino members could organize

in their own interests. Our work is premised on the idea that you also need to understand your own experience, and that will make it possible to make alliances."¹¹ A positive by-product has been that many of CJC's African-American members have become strong and active supporters of just immigration reform, and that unity has been built on the basis of the demands that the Latino members themselves identified. Along with the staff and members of POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights), CJC is currently developing a similar organizing project to create a space for African-American members to identify for themselves the demands that will advance their community's interests. CJC's practice operates from the understanding that unity which ignores difference is fragile. Only by acknowledging differences can unity take the qualitative leap to becoming solidarity. Creating these organizing efforts that focus on the interests identified by each community makes multi-racial unity more concrete. As one of CJC's organizational reflections asserts, "Unity can't be built in the abstract."¹²

Finally, CJC has invested in *connecting organizational work to the objective of building a transformative movement that is rooted in grassroots, working-class struggles*. CJC has been one of the anchor organizations within a number of national networks of grassroots organizations including Grassroots Global Justice and the Right to the City. Participation in these spaces pulls scarce resources away from the immediate work of local and regional campaigns, but the organization's leadership has seen the benefits of allowing staff and member leaders to engage in spaces that transcend the local and organizational contexts in which CJC operates. As María Poblet wrote about her experience at the 2013 World Social Forum (WSF) in Tunisia,

11 María Poblet, Interview with the author, November 4, 2014.

12 Causa Justa :: Just Cause, "Towards Black and Brown Unity," p. 1.

"My experience at the WSF gave me a deeper understanding of the challenges looming for the progressive movement, and for feminists in particular, in Tunisia and in the whole region... Our movements need to reach towards international scale and impact, so these connections and solidarity can take organizational form. The world's 1% have their World Trade Organization, their World Bank, their agreements and coordinated plans. We, the global 99%, need that scale of functioning too. It's the only way we can win the internationalist feminist change we need."¹³ This commitment to exposing staff and member leaders to movement spaces—such as national networks, international gatherings, and political training opportunities—has contributed to the organization's willingness to experiment with unique and non-traditional tactics and has helped it become a strong and vibrant force in the social justice movement in the Bay Area and beyond.

All of these structures and practices are informed by the organization's approach to building Black-and-Brown unity, which is shaped by three key conditions which CJJC believes either need to be in place or which need

to be cultivated. These three conditions are Black unity, Latino unity, and an internationalist vision. The success of CJJC's efforts to build multi-racial working class unity was evident at the culmination of the campaign to pass the Tenant Protection Ordinance. As Oakland's City Council voted to pass the new legislation, dozens of CJJC members stood proudly by African Americans and Latinos who had built a new bridge of solidarity together.

Poblet acknowledges the difficulty of building Black-and-Brown unity. "Uniting these two sectors of society could re-invigorate the Left because uniting these two communities brings you to a conversation about class in a way that has truly transformative potential... We can see the transformative potential when Black and Latino people start to see themselves on the same team. It changes everything for the movement. That's not where we're at right now in the United States, or even in the Bay Area; but when we do it, so much more becomes possible."¹⁴ There is no road map, but building multi-racial unity among the working class is an essential task for activists hoping to revitalize the movement in the United States.

Power U Center for Social Change: Developing Leaders from the Inside-Out

The Power U Center for Social Change was founded in 1998 to build an organizing base around issues in low-income communities in Miami, Florida. Much of the organization's work has centered around a comprehensive approach towards education justice issues, and they have developed a strong base of members and leaders in that time. In 2001, these members and leaders forced local officials to invest more than \$1 million to improve

inner-city schools. The organization has also conducted campaigns on housing and development issues as well as a call for birth justice to combat the growing disparity in infant mortality rates between Black and white communities. This intersectional analysis has driven Power U's recent campaign to end the School to Jailhouse Pipeline.¹⁵

¹³ María Poblet, "Reflections on the World Social Forum," www.cjjc.org.

¹⁴ María Poblet, Interview with the author, November 4, 2014.

¹⁵ Power U Center for Social Change, www.poweru.org.

Each of the organizations highlighted in this study are structured as a non-profit organization, which allows them to subsidize their operations with state-sanctioned, tax-deductible donations. All the organizational representatives interviewed made mention of the challenges that come from trying to conduct transformative organizing work while relying on donations from institutions that distribute funds from various sections of the bourgeoisie.¹⁶ One specific aspect of these challenges is the geographic disparity in funding. In particular, the few charitable foundations in the United States that fund organizing efforts rarely give money to organizations in the southern part of the country, despite the inspiring work taking place throughout this region by organizations like Southern Echo, Cooperation Jackson, Project South, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Black Workers for Justice, and the Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights among many, many others. As a result, most organizations in the South, especially those that attempt to employ the transformative organizing model, struggle with a chronic lack of financial resources. This has pushed many organizations to make important adaptations. Power U's example highlights an important aspect of transformative organizing.

Recognizing that they would never have the financial resources to employ a vast team of paid organizers, Power U has placed a strong emphasis on developing the leadership capacity of rank-and-file community members. In particular, Power U has placed a central focus on developing the leadership of young people in their community because, "We're reproducing leaders for the movement," observed Power U Executive Director Hashim Benford. "We're not just developing leaders for Power U. Our goal is to produce leaders that are going to be social justice movement leaders for the rest of their

lives."¹⁷ He then went on to cite the example of a young person who joined the organization while in middle school. This person joined Power U's staff after completing her studies at an Ivy League university and recently joined the Board of Directors of a southern social justice network. The potential power of developing young people as leaders was a point echoed by CJJC's Executive Director María Poblet, who herself joined the movement as a young person. "Transformative organizing allows us to contend with the reality that human beings are always in the process of development. Youth organizing is especially strong in recognizing this. Somebody who is 16 years old; you don't know who they'll be when they're twenty five. What you do know is that this experience (of joining an organizing campaign) is something that could shape who they become. That's also true when you're forty or sixty five years old too. Certainly if you're facing a crisis like a deportation or an incarceration of a family member or losing your home, those are moments when people transform themselves. In the context of collective action, they can transform others."¹⁸

Too often, movement institutions regard leadership as an inevitable outcome of organizing, or it's seen as something that is not worth the investment. In either case, the result is that the people from affected communities are not given the opportunity to take agency and shape the direction of a group's efforts. As Power U member leader Keno Walker observed, "Organizing is not simple. You have to know the terrain. You have to know who's the target. You have to know your people..." Power U has organized its work around the intention to help members and staff develop these capacities, and this intention shapes the organization's transformative approach.

¹⁶ Many of these challenges can be situated in a broader historical context within the development of the capitalist political economy. INCITE!, *The Revolution Will Not be Funded*, Boston: South End Press, 2007.

¹⁷ Hashim Benford, Interview with the author, November 20, 2014.

¹⁸ María Poblet, Interview with the author, November 4, 2014.

The Leadership Development Process

First, leadership development begins at Power U by *seeing recruitment and retention of members as the irreplaceable first step towards cultivating new leaders*. As Walker noted, “People are in the process of becoming leaders as soon as they join.”¹⁹ If someone does not get involved in Power U, all of the organization’s leadership development work would be in vain. Like many other base-building organizations, Power U puts a premium on first getting potential members through the organization’s door. Staff organizers conduct door-to-door outreach and organizing at key locations in the community. They also do outreach at schools and host open-mic cultural events, but Benford observed that most of Power U’s members first got involved because they were recruited by someone they knew. “The most effective outreach comes from people tapping into their own social networks... You’re leveraging existing bases of trust. Many organizations have underestimated this approach to recruitment.”²⁰ Recruitment can take many forms, but it is always the first step to developing leadership.

Power U has committed to *systematizing the ongoing development of leadership capacities among its members*. The process cannot end once someone joins an organization. Deciding to get involved is just the first step. There must be “a deliberate and intentional process. It doesn’t just happen by being part of an organization or being part of a movement. You can be part of an organization for many, many years without developing your leadership,” said Benford.²¹ Addressing this, Power U developed a framework which they refer to as the Leadership Circles to facilitate members’ development from general members to core members to organizational members and fi-

nally to movement leaders. Each of these circles has a defined set of responsibilities and characteristics of what leadership looks like at each stage. Developing such a framework has helped Power U to make transparent the organization’s emphasis on developing the leadership capacity of members and staff. In these descriptions, Power U is intentional about avoiding a one-dimensional perspective of leadership. While very aware of the pitfalls of only acknowledging the leadership of charismatic orators, Power U operates from the perspective that having “different kinds of leadership is a good thing and makes for a strong organization and a strong movement.”²²

Inside the organization, Power U takes an effective approach toward creating leadership development plans by *engaging members in discussions with the organizing staff to identify the areas that they would like to develop their leadership capacities*. Organizers meet with leaders to develop individualized leadership development plans and objectives. As a result, members are more invested in the work necessary to develop in these areas, and the organization then commits to supporting that member in her process. This approach is rooted in the perspective that leadership is a collective project, not a solitary quest. “Developing leadership often means people working with you to identify where you want to develop, what are the benchmarks for that development, and what needs to happen in order for you to get to where you’re trying to go.”²³ Power U’s collective approach toward developing leadership involves tactics like ongoing political training sessions as well as workshops that address current issues. For example, Power U quickly organized a workshop on gender justice after President Barack Obama announced the My Brother’s Keeper initiative. Exploring the need to address patriarchy, Power U’s series, entitled My Sister’s Keeper Too, created a space within the organization to promote the leader-

19 Keno Walker, Interview with the author, November 20, 2014.

20 Hashim Benford, Interview with the author, November 20, 2014.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

ship of young women in the organization. These sessions are often interactive and grow from the members' lived experiences. But workshops are not the end.

These political training sessions represent a core aspect of the organization's approach to developing leadership capacities, but as member leader Keno Walker pointed out, workshops are not the only part of the approach. They are only one part of a larger effort. Another piece is *devoting time and energy to draw out the lessons from the experience of joining together with others to take collective action*. All organizing efforts look to mobilize people to take collective action, but without taking the time to analyze the context and events of those actions, organizations lose a valuable opportunity to draw out meaningful lessons that can deepen a member's commitment and leadership. Reflecting on his own experience with Power U, Walker remembered that he got involved with Power U in 2008 as the organization was preparing to testify before the Miami School Board calling for an overhaul of the district's disciplinary policies and practices. Walker said he wasn't especially political and he didn't know a lot about Power U, but his best friend recruited him so Walker started coming to the planning meetings. He said, "I didn't think that what we were calling for was such a big deal. I didn't think it would be controversial. What shocked me was how disrespectful (the members of the School Board) were to us. They were on their phones. They were eating and sleeping. When the group de-briefed the hearing, I saw even more clearly how this is how the system treats us. It wasn't just the School Board. It was the whole system, and I saw that we had a group so I decided that I was going to stick with it."²⁴ After that action, Walker met with Power U organizers who helped him draw the lessons from that experience which, in turn, deepened his commitment to the organization.

From a certain perspective, Power U's focus on developing leadership seems innocuous and almost obvious, but in recent years the very question of leadership has become controversial in movement discussions. Some movement activists have gone so far as to explain the effectiveness of recent popular mobilizations around the world as being a result of being "leaderless." Power U takes issue with such claims. To say that there is a "Leaderless movement is inauthentic because there are always leadership dynamics. It is possible to have movements that are more horizontal, where leadership is shared, but leadership happens. If it's not named, then it can't be held accountable. At Power U, we don't have a single leader. We want to develop everyone's leadership."²⁵ POWER U provides an important example of the transformative potential of *leaderful* movements.

Nevertheless, Power U's leadership acknowledges the trade-offs. While their approach has demonstrated the ability to develop a new rank of movement leaders, especially among women, young people, and people of color, this labor-intensive approach means that it is unlikely that Power U will ever be an organization of hundreds of thousands, much less millions, of members. "Power U has gone through a series of organizational visioning processes, and we have doubled down on the mission of developing leadership as a central component of who we are. This means that with our limited resources and capacity, the time and energy that we're spending with individuals means that we're not out there trying to reach thousands of people at any given time. The strategic question for us becomes, then: How is our work of leadership development and developing a community cadre connected to the institutions that have a broader reach?"²⁶ As the Power U's leadership noted, this decision assumes the existence of other organizations

²⁴ Keno Walker, Interview with the author, November 20, 2014.

²⁵ Hashim Benford, Interview with the author, November 20, 2014.

playing different, albeit coordinated, roles. Developing leadership, especially among constituencies that have been under-valued and un-

der-represented as leaders, is an investment in building the type of broader movement that we want and need.

National People's Action: Transformative Goes Cross-Country

All the organizations profiled so far have focused their work at a local level. There are strengths that this form of organization is able to leverage. The organizations are able to focus their resources and attention on a very specific community or workplace over a prolonged period of time, which can foster a higher level of trust with the constituency. Locally-based organizing also facilitates grassroots members having more direct engagement with the organization's decision-making apparatus. But transformative organizing is not the exclusive domain of local-based organizations. Regional and national organizations and networks are experimenting with the transformative organizing model too. The scope of these organizations' work provides their own advantages, including allowing organizations to engage and confront political and economic actors who shape national and regional policy, but who often do not operate within a local organization's jurisdiction.

National People's Action (NPA) offers an interesting perspective on the emerging model of transformative organization because they are a national network of grassroots organizations in 14 different states across the United States. Today, NPA has over 200 organizers working to build the collective power of working-class people in cities, towns, and rural communities across the country, from family farmers in rural Iowa to young people in New York's South Bronx. Organizations affiliated with NPA do community organizing, hold house meetings, and engage in direct action. NPA coordinates three local, state, and national campaigns to advance economic and racial justice: Bank Ac-

countability, Housing Justice, and Immigrant and Worker's Rights.²⁷

National People's Action is also interesting because it was not founded in the transformative organizing tradition. NPA was founded in 1972 by organizers in Chicago as a network of grassroots organizations across the country fighting to reclaim democracy and advance racial and economic justice. During its early years, much of NPA's work was aimed toward holding banks and corporations accountable to the communities they claimed to serve. Their organizing efforts helped pass the Federal Home Mortgage Disclosure Act in 1975, which exposed banks' red-lining and denying of loans to people based on their race and where they lived, regardless of their credit worthiness or the Community Reinvestment Act in 1977.

As NPA Executive Director George Goehl said,

Most of us have spent most of our political lives in oppositional struggle. It was never with the vision to be in power or to have power but to have enough power to contest with somebody bigger than us. That's how so many of us were developed and all that we had ever experienced. Operating from what's the best thing possible in the current ideological and political landscape was where most of us sat versus being powerful and thoughtful actors shifting the landscape to our benefit.²⁸

All of this changed with the financial crisis of 2007-08. Although NPA was not born out of transformative organizing, their practice has

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ National People's Action, www.npa-us.org.

²⁸ Ibid.

drawn heavily from this emerging model, especially during the last seven years, and has made important contributions that deepen and expand the transformative organizing model.

When the world's financial titans crashed the economy and caused the Great Recession of 2007-08, NPA, like many other organizations across the United States, found itself struggling with existential questions about how best to move forward—questions like: “What are the kinds of structural reforms NPA wants to be part of bringing about? What campaigns should we be building in the next five years that take advantage of current opportunities but also allow us to move in the direction of realizing a long-term agenda? What kinds of alliances do we need and with whom?”²⁹ Despite having staged several actions that directly challenged the CEOs of some of the nation's largest predatory financial institutions, NPA's leadership recognized that the organization was ill-prepared to confront the scale of the challenges facing working-class people throughout the country. Simply doing more of the same would not be sufficient. Inspired by the scale and audacity of what had happened with the Occupy encampments, NPA made a bold decision to go back to the drawing board. The process that the organization undertook has many lessons for transformative organizing efforts.

Transformation Starts from Within

Conducting ongoing and sober assessments of the shifting terrain is the first of the best practices demonstrated in the strategic inquiry process which NPA undertook after the crash. Ultimately, NPA staff, members, and affiliates went through an extensive process to assess the strategy of corporate forces, to envision the political and economic system that would produce justice,

and to identify the fights that would enable the organization to move towards its vision. Each affiliate organization that participated in the process was required to involve at least twenty-five staff and member leaders in a year-long process of study, discussion, and visioning. This was a significant re-allocation of resources at a time when it must have been tempting to continue relying on tried and true attempts to turn up street heat. The participants in this reflective process included family farmers, trailer park residents, clergy, unemployed workers, and public housing residents from across the country. Allocating the resources necessary to conduct such a process, especially as it represented a departure from the organization's previous practice, was only possible because there was a shared assessment that the severity of the crisis demanded that NPA adopt new practices.

Given the novelty of the strategic inquiry process, NPA recognized that it would be strengthened by *drawing on the support of allies outside the organization*. Early on, NPA sought the assistance of the Grassroots Policy Project (GPP), an initiative which provides consulting and training assistance to social movement organizations. NPA's training staff, most notably Bree Carlson, led the process with ongoing support from GPP staff, who brought a wide range of skills and experiences to the process that grew from their own diverse experiences in different social movements, electoral initiatives and Left party-building efforts. This process ultimately produced an eight-page agenda, “National People's Action: Long-Term Agenda to the New Economy,” which calls for transforming economic and political systems.³⁰ This agenda is more comprehensive and far-reaching because of the allies' support throughout the process. Points in the agenda include: democratic control of capital, racial justice, corporations serve the common good, real democracy, and ecological sustainability.

29 National People's Action, “Guiding Questions for NPA Strategic Inquiry,” 2012.

30 “National People's Action: Long-Term Agenda to the New Economy,” www.npa-us.org.

All national organizations must find an appropriate balance between the need for unified direction and local autonomy. This is especially true for national networks of grassroots organizations like NPA. The group is choosing to navigate this contradiction by *providing space for local experimentation while ensuring organizational coherence and strategic direction for those experiments through the collective ownership of the long-term agenda that emerged from this process*. This allows the affiliates to exert tactical independence based on the local conditions while allowing those local actions to add up to more than the sum of their parts. Clearly, this approach is only feasible because the process engaged members at all levels of the network and encouraged the participants to take genuine ownership over its development. As NPA Executive Director George Goehl recounted, “This was the most democratic process that NPA has ever gone through. This was not a matter of the staff merely bringing proposals to the members for ratification. Members grappled with big questions. I was getting calls from members asking: ‘What do we mean by democratic control of capital?’ or ‘What will be the role of the state?’ That’s when I knew this was something different.”³¹ With the content having been debated and the agenda drafted, the document has become a consistent reference point for the affiliates. Most use the agenda to begin their process of developing campaign plans and demands. In addition, the agenda’s content was translated into various multimedia presentations.³² It has helped to foster a situation in which the affiliates see one another as partners in a common struggle.

The final practice that NPA’s process of strategic inquiry offers is perhaps the most important for any organization attempting to do transformative work from within the constraints of

the non-profit industrial complex. It is a practice exemplified by each of the organizations included in this case study, and this is *being willing to undertake work deemed to be important—even if it’s not funded*. As Goehl said, “No foundation gave us money to do this work. We just did it because we were committed to how important it was.”³³ One of the central dangers of operating a project whose aim it is to build the power of working and popular classes to challenge the systems of capitalism, white supremacy, and hetero-patriarchy is that few institutions within the capitalist economy are eager to fund such projects. If the leadership of a transformative organizing project is unwilling to venture outside of what is fundable, the revolutionary potential of that project will inevitably wither and poison the ground for future efforts. As all of the representatives noted, transformative organizing must in the long run develop new sources of funding that are not tied to the logic of capitalist hegemony if it hopes to expand, but in the short-run this model insists that organizations be willing to carry out strategically important work even if there is no funding. There are now foundations that are interested in funding the campaigns that emerge from this process, but none seem interested in the process that gave birth to these campaigns. According to Goehl, “In the end, NPA’s strategic inquiry process has provided the clarity that the organization was looking for when the financial crisis first broke. It has transformed the organization. It’s one of the main reasons that people are in NPA and one of the main reasons that groups affiliate with NPA. It’s not for any particular transaction. It’s for being a part of that—being part of a group that wants to do that and think like that! It’s a loving place to be but it’s not a comfortable place to be because we’re all challenging each other to think differently and bigger. We’re acting like we want the movement to become.”³⁴

31 George Goehl, Interview with the author, November 3, 2014.

32 Among the various presentations of the agenda is a Prezi presentation: www.prezi.com.

33 George Goehl, Interview with the author, November 3, 2014.

Vermont Workers' Center: Healthcare is a Human Right

The Vermont Workers' Center (VWC) was founded in 1998 as a workers' rights organization. In its first years, the organization's work centered on maintaining a workers' rights hotline that received phone calls from thousands of workers throughout the state whose rights had been violated. The sheer number of calls convinced the organization's leadership that "the only real way for working people to improve workplace conditions was to get together to form unions to bargain a contract with their employer or demand elected officials change the laws."³⁵ As a result, the organization began partnering with different trade union locals and community organizations to support different worker struggles. In 1999, the VWC joined the Vermonters for a Living Wage Campaign, which successfully raised the state's minimum wage. Coming out of these campaigns and a separate effort to build a downtown workers union in Montpelier with the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America (UE), the VWC staff and leadership increasingly realized that the problems workers face are not limited to the workplace. One issue that came up frequently and forcibly from members was the failure of the employer- and market-based healthcare system. VWC's leadership saw that the healthcare crisis was the primary issue driving workers in factories and staff in schools to decide to go on strike.

Recognizing their still-limited capacity (at the time, the VWC had only one staff person and a small membership centered around Burlington), the VWC decided to partner with other organizations and unions and to enter into a series of statewide coalitions fighting for a universal healthcare system. In deciding to enter into these coalitions, the VWC members identified three principles that they wanted to see

reflected in the coalition's demands: 1. Healthcare must be framed as a human right; 2. The provision of healthcare must be de-coupled from whether or not a person has employment; and 3. The healthcare system must be publicly funded. These principles continue to frame the VWC's engagement on healthcare issues. The other coalition partners at least tentatively agreed to these three points, although some of the larger partner organizations attempted to water them down. With this agreement in hand, the VWC staff and members participated in various healthcare coalitions from 2003 to 2006.³⁶

The decision to focus on the healthcare crisis was pivotal for the VWC. They came to see that this was an issue that a wide range of people across the state cared about, and it was an issue around which people were prepared to take action with others. Quickly, the organization's work was gaining momentum, and they were able to expand the number of organizers on staff from one to twelve in just a few years. This campaign had a lot of potential, but it was also clear that waging the campaign through coalitions was not unleashing this issue's full potential. Although several coalition partners had larger membership bases and staffs, it was the VWC who was the prime mover of much of the work. As the VWC Executive Director recalled, "That's when we re-envisioned VWC as a grassroots base-building organization that includes everyone in every region of the state." VWC decided to use this campaign to build a state-wide organization. "It was hard to imagine any issue would do that better."³⁷

For the next five years, the members and staff of the VWC waged an important struggle to address the healthcare crisis in a way that ac-

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Vermont Workers' Center, www.workerscenter.org.

³⁶ James Haslam, Interview with the author, November 21, 2014.

³⁷ Ibid.

knowledges healthcare as a basic human right. They were eventually successful in pushing the state legislature to pass ground-breaking legislation in 2011, “which commits Vermont to creating a healthcare system providing healthcare as a public good and ensuring everyone can get the healthcare they need, when they need it.”³⁸ It is important to note that although this campaign was well underway by the time the federal government launched its national healthcare reform, the VWC had to display incredible tactical flexibility and tenacity in order to avoid being trapped by the worst aspects of the federal market-based framework. The approach and tactical decisions that the VWC made throughout the Healthcare Is a Human Right Campaign provide important glimpses at some of the best practices emerging from the transformative organizing model.

Best Practices for a Successful Campaign

The first best practice that the VWC’s Healthcare Is a Human Right Campaign demonstrates is the commitment to *incorporating the insights and experiences of the constituency and membership when developing the organization’s campaign and demands*. The founding purpose of the VWC was to address bosses’ mistreatment of workers in the workplace. Some might have disregarded workers’ frequent complaints about the dysfunctional healthcare system as peripheral, and others might have rationalized that once the workers organized and won contracts that provided higher wages, that those workers would be able to navigate the healthcare bureaucracy on their own. Both of these responses would have undermined the organi-

zation’s potential to embolden people to take collective action, but it also required an important level of humility for the organization’s membership and leadership to be willing to shift its organizing focus. It was also important that the VWC was not listening only to its membership. They also took into account the voices and perspectives of the larger working class, including people who had not yet joined the VWC or the larger movement. Although the VWC did not give them decision-making authority within the organization’s structures, by accounting for the perspectives of their constituency the organization positioned itself to wage a campaign on terms that synthesized what they’d heard into a campaign and demands that both reflected popular sentiments and pointed towards an alternative to the dominant system.

Opportunities to hear the perspectives of members and constituents rarely present themselves, so the VWC has been intentional in creating spaces for members to participate in developing major initiatives. To strengthen member involvement in the next phase of the healthcare campaign, the organization launched an extensive internal campaign from December 2012 to December 2013 to clarify the expectations of VWC members. The process began with discussion at the annual statewide membership assembly at the end of 2012. A team of staff and member leaders then took the main points from that discussion and drafted a survey that was used by organizing committees throughout the state. This survey also served as the basis for more than 100 one-on-one meetings with members that took place in the spring and summer of 2013. The committee re-convened in late summer to collect the input from all of these meetings, and they developed a proposal to clarify the definition of membership and dues. In September and October of 2013, this proposal was brought back out to the statewide organizing committees for feedback. In November, the committee revised its initial proposal, and that proposal was ultimately adopted at the mem-

³⁸ Vermont Workers’ Center, www.workerscenter.org. This achievement has been threatened by Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin’s December 2014 decision to withdraw his support for a single-payer healthcare system. The Vermont Workers’ Center continues to campaign for the state’s elected officials to meet their obligations under the 2011 legislation.

bership assembly in December 2013, a full year after this process had begun. At several points throughout this process, the organization held leadership retreats where organizational staff and leaders came together to study how organizations like the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil make large decisions. Haslam pointed out that the VWC does not use this model for every decision the organization makes, but for major initiatives they find that extensive processes like these ultimately ensure that the organization makes better decisions in ways that strengthen the members' connection to one another and to the organization; "other times we do the best that we can to make good and sound decisions."³⁹

A second best practice exemplified by the VWC's healthcare campaign is *using political education to insulate against the possible attacks of the opposition*. As noted earlier, one of the principles guiding the organization's campaign was that healthcare must be universal—that "everyone can get the healthcare they need, when they need it."⁴⁰ The organization recognized that their opponents might attempt to attack this component of their proposal, in particular the calls to cover undocumented immigrants and women's reproductive services. Taking into account the fact the VWC's membership is predominantly white, the organization decided to conduct a series of workshops throughout the campaign about racism and racial justice for leaders as well as interested supporters. Allies from the Bay Area-based Catalyst Project came in to help with seven workshops, which eventually involved more than 170 VWC members. The workshops covered, among other themes, why the proposal's call for universal coverage was so critical to the program and to building a larger movement. This move proved to be prescient, because just as the proposed legislation was going before the State Senate

for its final vote, the body passed an amendment 22 to 8 to exclude undocumented immigrants from coverage. Pundits told the VWC that there was nothing that could be done. The VWC responded by helping to organize two massive rallies on the steps of the state building that in the end forced the legislature to withdraw the amendment. As Haslam reflected, this victory "would not have been possible if we had not done a lot of that work with the members from the get-go preparing people to take on that issue."⁴¹

A third practice that is important to understand from the VWC's campaign for healthcare is their *speaking to the needs and interests of a broad section of the community without sacrificing their constituencies' interests*. Many transformative organizations have rooted themselves among constituencies that have historically been some of the most exploited, oppressed, and marginalized social sectors. One danger that can stem from this decision is voicing the interests of *only* a small section of society and discounting the possibility to make alliances with other social actors who might be impacted by the same issues. Doing so squanders the opportunity to show how the interests of the organization's constituency are in fact in line with the interests of society at large. Another error on the other end is watering down the demands, which would provide relief to those social sectors that are most politically vulnerable, in an effort to broaden the base of support. Doing so trades public relations spin for concrete campaigns that can embolden a movement—win or lose. The VWC was able to navigate this contradiction by organizing public forums around the state that allowed a wide array of people to share their healthcare stories, and conducting deliberate political training to underscore the strategic importance of their principle of universality among key staff, leaders, and supporters. Our ability to navigate

³⁹ James Haslam, Interview with the author, November 21, 2014.

⁴⁰ Vermont Workers' Center, www.workerscenter.org.

⁴¹ James Haslam, Interview with the author, November 21, 2014.

this contradiction more effectively could spark the emergence of an unstoppable movement.

The VWC's success in passing the Healthcare Is a Human Right legislation is important not only because it represents a popular movement's victory during a period when wins have been hard to come by. It is certainly important for this reason, but it is also important because it features locally-based organizers intentionally seeking out openings for social movements to push the largely disappointing federal healthcare overhaul in a more progressive direction. This is the fourth best practice exemplified by the VWC's campaign. From the beginning, the organization was clear about *seeking out political openings in the local context*

that might serve as precedents which open space for social movement organizers in other parts of the country. Before 2008, a number of elected officials in Vermont had stated publicly that they supported a single-payer healthcare system, but that such a program was impossible given the political climate in Washington, DC. The VWC launched their Healthcare Is a Human Right Campaign to take advantage of this somewhat favorable context and "to build a strong enough statewide grassroots people's movement to change what is politically possible."⁴² Their success can be judged by the fact that social movement organizations in Maine, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and other states are all now organizing their own Healthcare Is a Human Right campaigns.

Conclusion: Organizing Transformation

As these profiles reveal, there are a lot of commonalities—as well as differences—between the approaches and practices of these four organizations. The differences grow from two important points. First, each of these transformative organizing efforts are taking place in different conditions with distinct constituencies, and the organizing is shaped by these conditions. As a result, transformative organizing in different contexts will inevitably and appropriately look distinct from one place to another.

Another important reason for the differences in approach and practice of the organizations profiled is because transformative organizing is still emerging as a model. All of these organizations are experimenting according to their differing realities. It is only recently that many of these organizations have begun to articulate and share with one another their own experiences in trying to forge new approach-

es toward transformative change. Organizers are developing the model as they try to resolve particular challenges in their work and contradictions in society. It is an unfolding process, but it is one that is increasingly becoming a process that organizers are taking up.

Sadly, there are few resources that comprehensively document the transformative organizing model. Such documentation is sorely needed in order to provide a space for organizers to reflect and refine their own practices and to provide guidance for up-and-coming organizers. This article does not offer such a comprehensive description of the transformative organizing model, but hopefully it can be a small step towards bringing together such a resource.⁴³

⁴² Vermont Workers' Center, www.workerscenter.org.

⁴³ For more information on the transformative organizing model, see Steve Williams, *Demand Everything: Lessons of the Transformative Organizing Model*, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—New York Office, rosalux-nyc.org, 2013.

All the experiments profiled are ongoing, and important commonalities can be seen emerging through the differences. As “Demand Everything” and this case study demonstrate, transformative organizations often incorporate a firm commitment to developing the capacity of members to take on genuine and authentic leadership in their organizations and the larger movement while struggling to make fundamental transformations in the social, economic, and political systems that perpetuate exploitation, oppression, and ecological degradation. This connection grows from an acknowledgement that in addition to creating conditions of war, poverty, and climate catastrophe, the dominant systems stunt the full development of all people. The attention paid to leadership development is a part of what Amílcar Cabral referred to as the “struggle against our own weakness.”⁴⁴ It must be a central part of any attempt to realize dreams of liberation, justice, and dignity. As Cuban philosophy professor Georgina Alfonso explained at the 2013 World Social Forum, “Personal development can’t occur without the opportunity for collective development... Our task, then, is to build relationships that break the logic reproducing discrimination and patriarchy within the struggle for a better world.”⁴⁵

Possibly the most telling statement that a number of the interviewed organizers offer is that their organization’s approach to transformative organizing is an integrated model. It’s not a mix-and-match approach in which an organizer can take one piece and disregard the others. Organizations eager to develop the type of leaders from the profiled organizations must understand that those leaders do not simply emerge because of workshops. Leadership is cultivated in all aspects of these organizations’ work—in developing counter-hegemonic

demands, in taking responsibility for crafting campaign plans, and in forging relationships with potential allies. Transformative organizing demands a comprehensive and integrated approach that aims to transform society’s structures as well as how communities relate to one another and how we see ourselves.

However, the transformative organizing approach is not without its own challenges. Each of the organizers interviewed made a point of acknowledging the challenges of building organization and struggling for justice for people and the planet during an era of neoliberal austerity. As María Poblet observed,⁴⁶ “It’s challenging work. Even when you have the people power to do it, it’s challenging work. There are breakthrough moments that make you think that all change is possible, and there are a lot of moments that are not that. There are countless instances of trying to convince someone to come to the meeting, cajoling somebody to talk more in a meeting or to listen a little more.... The story of organizing often glosses over those early moments of trying to build trust, failing, and trying again.”

There are indeed many challenges to the transformative organizing model, just as there is promise. This case study continues what should be a more prolonged and extensive examination of the implementation of this old and emergent approach to building organizations designed to confront and change the world. During an era that is seeing people taking to the streets in resistance to war, austerity, and the tyranny of the 1%, the transformative organizing model stands as an important contribution to the construction of popular movements able to confront old systems and establish the building blocks for a more liberatory, equitable, and just future.

44 Amílcar Cabral, “The Weapon of Theory” op.cit., p. 1.

45 María Poblet, “Until Every One of Us is Free,” <http://www.organizingupgrade.com>.

46 María Poblet, Interview with the author, November 4, 2014.