



**ROSA  
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NEW YORK OFFICE

# DEMAND EVERYTHING

Lessons of the Transformative Organizing Model

By Steve Williams

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Published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office, March 2013

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The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is an internationally operating, progressive non-profit institution for civic education. In cooperation with many organizations around the globe, it works on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic, and social development, and peaceful conflict resolution.

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## Organize!

Capitalism seems to have an endless capacity for transformation. It has survived economic collapse, world wars, social upheaval, and environmental degradation (so far, anyway). It has thrived in liberal democracies and authoritarian dictatorships. Time and again, critics of capitalism have predicted its imminent demise, and every time they have been wrong. Like a river flowing inexorably downhill, over and around all obstacles it encounters, capitalism keeps finding new ways to reproduce itself.

Despite its resilience, there is nothing inevitable about the continuing domination of capital. Yet capital's opponents have not always risen to this challenge. In contrast to capitalism's dynamism and adaptability, its opposition has grown more fragmented and stagnant. While it is true that decades of neoliberal assault are largely to blame for this state of affairs, the Left's responses to this offensive have often proven to be underwhelming. Some Leftists yearn for a return to the days when the industrial working class was a world historical actor, but at least in the so-called developed world, this class has shrunk dramatically in the face of deindustrialization and automation. Others have concluded that the concept of an organized labor movement is itself outdated, ignoring the many workplace struggles that still take place. Still others fancy themselves to be a self-styled "vanguard," pretending to have all the answers to questions they may not even understand. And so the list goes on.

How then can the opponents of a society built on alienation, domination, and exploitation of human and natural resources adapt and effectively act to repair a broken world? We can't simply respond to new questions with old concepts. If the Left does not want to end up in a museum, we need to constantly challenge our assumptions and continually reorganize ourselves and our organizations.

Each *re-organization*, however, starts with *organization*. It is through the patient, attentive work of organizing in our workplaces and communities that we can create organizations and, eventually, a movement capable of building a sustainable society based on solidarity, equality, freedom, and justice. For such organizing to be effective, it cannot simply be based on an apolitical and highly specific analysis of what is possible in the short run. Of course, organizers should always strive to win, but they must also dare to dream of a brighter future. Indeed, it is this vision of a better tomorrow that should structure our organizations, alliances, and campaigns today.

Steve Williams, author of the following study, has worked as an organizer in the Bay Area for the last fifteen years. As executive director of "People Organized to Win Employment Rights," or POWER, he has participated in a growing movement that subscribes to the model of "transformative organizing." This study draws on Williams' experience employing this model, which aims not only to achieve certain demands but also to change society. As Williams points out, this transformation cannot be accomplished by adhering to the same old authoritarian, undemocratic, white male, middle-class dominated politics. Only by organizing ourselves in a progressive way will we be able to truly move forward.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg  
Co-Directors of New York Office, March 2013*

# Demand Everything

## Lessons of the Transformative Organizing Model

By Steve Williams

When protesters around the world took to the squares and streets beginning in late 2010 from Tunisia to Chile, from Egypt to Spain, from Greece to the United States, Leftists around the world strapped on their marching shoes and took hope that this might be the dawning of a new era in the fight against capitalist austerity and imperial savagery. Taken aback by these protests, corporate news outlets cast a blind eye to the years of community organizing, worker strikes, and student take-overs that laid the foundation for the actions that were to come. The only explanation they could offer was that Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube made these revolutions. While social media played a role, they were tools that organizers employed to do their work more effectively. In the end, these explanations obscured the critical role of organizing. It was the often invisible work of organizing—in workplaces, communities, and classrooms—that combined with the ripeness of the times and the hunger of the people to break the façade of neoliberal triumphalism.

Two years later, many of these movements have lost their initial momentum, but the hope has not been extinguished. The need for fundamental social change is still there, if not more urgent. Today, radical and left forces need to commit to organizing more than ever. In recent decades, much of what would be called the U.S. Left has not taken on the work of building organization among the popular forces—working people; people of color; low-income people; homeless people; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender folks; and students. There is a long and rich history of communists, socialists, nationalists, and

anarchists in the United States rooting themselves in local communities, workplaces, and classrooms to build the capacity and consciousness of the people. This tradition must be resurrected. The Left must take on the challenge of building organization amongst the forces that are most likely to spearhead a movement to challenge capitalism, imperialism, and climate catastrophe. But even if there is to be a resurgence of organizing, there remains the question of *how* to organize since not all models of organizing are created equal. One thing is clear: the old models will not do. The collapse of political, economic, and ecological structures means that purely transactional concessions will not address the acute needs of people around the world. New models of organizing are needed, models that combine the audacity of the people who took to the streets with the ripeness for change that this moment demands.<sup>1</sup>

The most obvious choice for an organizing model might be the teachings of the man whose name has become synonymous with organiz-

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<sup>1</sup> These are my reflections on my tenure as organizer, Executive Director and Co-Executive Director at POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights). While the reflections are mine, the victories, successes, and innovations that POWER has accumulated over the years are the shared products of hundreds of people who have served on POWER's staff, membership, leadership bodies, and Board of Directors. They are too many to mention by name, but I do want to extend special appreciations to Alicia Garza, Jaron Browne, Jason Negrón-González, Marisa Franco, Aspen Dominguez, Cindy Wiesner, Ilana Berger, Nora Calderon, Larry Lattimore, Emma Harris, Gloria Esteve, Manuela Esteve, Donaji Lona, Juana Tello, Ernest Stokes, Beatriz Herrera, Karen Gibson, Lorren Dangerfield, Jesse Tello, Regina Douglass, Garth Ferguson, Brian Russell, Patty Snitzler, Thabiti Hayes, Khalil Abdul Samad, and Jane Martin.

ing. Saul Alinsky began organizing in low-income neighborhoods like the Back of the Yards neighborhood of Chicago in the 1930s, and then went on to found the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940. Through the IAF and his book, *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky trained thousands of skilled organizers, and hundreds of organizations cite him as a direct or indirect influence more than forty years after his death. Today, many of those organizations and organizations continue to do important and truly radical work. Like all other theories, Alinsky's model of organizing was developed in a particular time in an effort to respond to other—in this case competing—theories of organizing. Alinsky began organizing low-income communities during a period where Leftists of various trends were actively engaged in dozens of active and vibrant community action projects—from anti-lynching campaigns to eviction defense work to food relief. After the McCarthy witch-hunts of the 1950s, most Leftists had been killed, jailed, deported, or scared off so that most of those community action projects withered away. Contrasting his model with that of the 1930s Left and with that of the emerging movements in the 1960s, Alinsky framed his as a pragmatic and anti-ideological model of organizing “rooted in the whys and wherefores of life as it is lived,” and not in “our wished for fantasy of the world as it should be.”<sup>2</sup> He posed his approach as a way of neutralizing more explicitly left social movements:

*[I]n order to involve the Catholic priests in Back of the Yards, I didn't give them any stuff about Christian ethics, I just appealed to their self-interest. I'd say, "Look, you're telling your people to stay out of the Communist-dominated unions and action groups, right?" He'd nod. So I'd go on: "And what do they do? They say, 'Yes, Father,' and walk out of the church and join the C.I.O. Why? Because it's their bread and butter, because the C.I.O. is doing something about their problems while you're sitting here on your tail in the sacristy." That stirred 'em up, which is just what I wanted to do, and then I'd say, "Look, if you go on like that you're gonna alienate*

*your parishioners, turn them from the Church, maybe drive them into the arms of the Reds. Your only hope is to move first, to beat the Communists at their own game, to show the people you're more interested in their living conditions than the contents of your collection plate. And not only will you get them back again by supporting their struggle, but when they win they'll be more prosperous and your donations will go up and the welfare of the Church will be enhanced." Now I'm talking their language and we can sit down and hammer out a deal.*<sup>3</sup>

Alinsky's attempt to strip the organizing model of ideology manifests in various concrete practices. For example, the Alinsky model of organizing insists that organizations should only wage winnable fights and that the organizer should refrain from bringing her political views into the organization's discourse. Though this decision is understandable given the state-sponsored repression brought down on left and radical movements in the United States throughout history, the ramifications of this decision render the Alinsky model of organizing impotent relative to contemporary challenges, because ideology is a central front on which left and progressive forces must struggle.

The ideological assault mounted by the neoliberal camp for the past four decades means that success depends on the Left's ability to articulate an alternative vision of the economy and society. The absence of ideological struggle and the current balance of forces have produced conditions where structural change is deemed politically unwinnable. As a result, progressive forces exert most of our energy simply trying to make bad policy and practices less bad, never addressing the systems and structures causing this inequity. Alinsky's insistence that the organizer silence her ideas lest they weaken the organization is both unrealistic and counter-productive. We need all hands on deck, and organizers have a unique opportunity to bring out the best of our dreams and aspirations to inspire a movement. Radical and progressive

2 Saul Alinsky. 1989. *Rules for Radicals*. Vintage Books: New York, p. 26.

3 Eric Norden. 1972. "Interview with Saul Alinsky." In: *Playboy Magazine*.

forces must find and develop approaches to social change that allow us to unite ideology with day-to-day campaigns.

The building blocks of these new organizing models do exist. Without discarding the contributions of Alinsky's model of organizing, radical and progressive forces must seek inspiration and guidance from a wide array of expertise. Combining the tactical audacity of the Alinsky model with the grassroots democracy of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the participatory structures of the *Piquetero* movement, and the analysis of the South African Anti-Privatization Forum, we have the basic ingredients of an organizing model that will allow us to confront the scale of the challenges facing the planet and humanity. In recent years, there has been a growing effort to codify and articulate a model of organizing that can build the power necessary to confront and counter the problems we face today while building for tomorrow. This new model, which is the accumulation of practices past and present, has come to be called transformative organizing.

If organizing is the attempt to bring people together to take collective action to resolve a commonly identified problem, then transformative organizing is a particular approach to organizing that situates individual campaigns within a conscious analysis of the underlying systems of exploitation and oppression. Transformative organizing is defined by its explicit intention to transform both those systems and the individuals engaged in those campaigns in an effort to win genuine liberation for all. The model is

still in development, but the practice that it is based on is strong and growing in the United States and around the globe. Of course, transformative organizing looks very different based on the place and conditions in which that work is happening. Transformative organizing looks different in Grahamstown, South Africa than it does in San Francisco, United States, but there are core principles that are shared by transformative organizations. The core principles of the transformative organizing model include: Walk with Vision; Reach Out to Listen and Learn; Revolutionary Edge of Reform; Democracy is Power; Cultivate Leaders; Build Strategic Alliances; Commit to Movement; Extract Every Lesson; Personal is Political.

What follows is a brief description of each of the components of the transformative organizing model. In these descriptions, I draw on the experiences that I had founding and working at POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights), a community-based organization in San Francisco. It's not that POWER's approach was always the correct approach. The organizations that are attempting to shape the transformative organizing model all deal with similar challenges and often take different approaches to addressing those challenges. While I could have drawn examples from the practice of a variety of transformative organizations, I use POWER as an example, not because this work was without shortcomings, but because that's where my practice and my lessons have been rooted for the last decade and a half. I offer these lessons in a spirit of openness with the intention of helping to advance our struggles.

## **1. Walk with Vision**

Virtually all organizing begins with a problem. People, agitated by a particular problem in their community or workplace, make the bold deci-

sion to come together with others to try to fix that problem. It's tempting to believe that the elimination of that problem is a sufficiently

clear vision. During a period of neoliberal austerity, state-sanctioned violence, and social hostility, winning even the most modest reform can require an illusive combination of skill, timing, and luck. At their best, these victories produce concessions from ruling elites, but they do not alter the fundamental balance of power. For some organizing models, this has been enough.

However, the transformative organizing model takes the long view of success. This model begins with the assessment that social problems all have structural, global, and historical roots, so even if we are successful in our campaign to address one particular problem, the transformative organizer must recognize that the structural inequities that prompted this problem will continue to create other problems—unless the root cause of those problems is eradicated for good. That's why the transformative organizing model aims at nothing less than to eradicate the root causes of the problems that we experience. This means that the transformative organization must walk on two legs. Because we do not yet have the power necessary to shift the balance of power, the transformative organization must wage campaigns with the larger objective in mind. The transformative organization must fight and walk with vision.

This means that the transformative organization must devote resources to identifying and clarifying its shared vision of the social transformations it is trying to achieve. This is obviously no small task, and it requires taking time to discuss that which is not obviously connected to day-to-day struggles. Ultimately, the responsibility of articulating such a vision goes beyond individual organizations. The larger movement must take up the task of articulating a broader vision. The absence of such a clearly articulated vision is one of the central weaknesses that have plagued the Left in the United States and in many parts of the world, especially since the collapse of the 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist experiments. But until such time that the movement crafts such a vision, it

is up to individual organizations to shape their visions. Clarity of vision can sharpen much of an organization's work, from identifying core constituencies, potential allies, and targets to shaping campaign demands and coalitions.

POWER did this beginning in 2010. After a series of stinging defeats and hard-fought stalemates and in the midst of ongoing outreach and campaign work, POWER's staff and members engaged in a series of conversations where we tried to answer the question: "What might victory look like?" From those conversations, we identified rising costs for lower levels of public service as a general problem confronting various sectors of society in San Francisco. In the realm of public transportation, this meant higher fares for rides on overcrowded buses that came less frequently. This trend flew in the face of what we identified as a core part of our vision: that public transportation is a vital common good which should be free for everyone. That is true not only because it allows people to travel to various parts of the city for work, education, and recreation, but because it also provides a vital intervention in the effort to reduce carbon emissions and fight climate change.

Our development of an even rudimentary vision, along with the city's recent decision to eliminate school bus service, led POWER to launch a campaign calling for the city to provide free public transportation for all young people. This demand was a departure from how the organization would have framed this campaign in previous years. Before refining our vision, we would have called for the provision of free public transportation only for low-income young people. This new demand helped to position POWER not as an organization seeking to win charitable concessions for only low-income people but as a force aiming to expand the commons of San Francisco. This framing of the demand allowed POWER to build relationships with a new set of organizations and social forces, and it pushed us to explain why using public funds to provide

free public transportation to wealthy young people was a prudent use of those funds.

In December 2012, POWER members and our coalition partners successfully forced the city to provide free transit only to low-income young people, but the organization is now positioned to engage in other debates and has a broader grouping of allies that will allow us to up the ante on our future campaigns.

## 2. Reach Out to Listen and Learn

One of the most fundamental aspects of all organizing models is the commitment to reaching out and talking to members of the target constituency. After all, organizing—at its core—is simply the process of bringing people together to take collective action. For every constituency or community, this outreach might look different. Organizing residents of public housing might involve going door-to-door. Organizing workers might involve going to their workplace or to a popular bar. For us, at the beginning of POWER's history, outreach meant sneaking into the local welfare office to talk to workfare workers.

Outreach is seldom easy, especially at the beginning. Do it long enough, and you'll meet someone who doesn't want to talk. You might be harassed (This can be especially challenging for women organizers or for organizers reaching out to constituencies different from themselves). You'll get commitments from people, only to have them not show up at the meeting or action to which you'd invited them. In contemporary Western societies that have become extremely individualized and where some corporations attempt to hide workers out of view, the organizer is breaking through social and political barriers which discourage going up and talking to someone that you don't know.

For the transformative organization, vision is an integral component of the organizing work; it's more than a slogan used on organizational communications. It must be a dynamic presence, informing all the organization's decisions in the same way that the North Star provided constant inspiration and guidance to those people of African descent escaping slavery in the treacherous terrain of the antebellum United States. Vision is the foundation of an organization's effectiveness.

This was certainly my experience with POWER. In 1996, I began doing outreach in San Francisco welfare offices in an attempt to form a community-based union of workfare workers, whom the City then required to do work in exchange for a monthly welfare grant. The work that workfare workers were required to do had previously been performed by unionized, civil service employees who earned \$2,409–\$4,644 per month plus benefits. This was fair compensation at the time. Workfare workers though earned only \$345 per month with no benefits and no opportunity to apply for the permanent positions were they to open up. Not knowing that there was a policy against it, I walked into the welfare office and began passing out flyers and having conversations with people about the idea of forming an organization of workfare workers. I had a decent first week. I'd had some good conversations. I'd only been ignored a couple of times, but in the second week, the building security came up to ask what I was doing. When I told them, they told me that I had to leave, that the office was only for people applying for assistance. I left, but I would not be deterred. Over the next few weeks, I re-entered the welfare office with various disguises. I'd cut my hair, grow my facial hair, wear a hat—anything to get in twenty to thirty minutes of out-

reach. In time, these guerrilla outreach efforts produced a core group of members who shared the responsibility of reaching out to the people. A good organizer will always find a way to overcome the obstacles to reaching out to the targeted constituency, even if it means doing something that she'll have to ask forgiveness for later on.

It's critical that the organizer remember that outreach is the most fundamental ingredient of organizing. Outreach is the lifeblood of any organization. Rarely will people seek out an organization to join. The organizer's first task is to give people permission to join with others in an effort to change the world. Outreach can be intimidating, but it can also be magical. All it takes is having one animated conversation with someone who has been yearning for a constructive outlet for their hope and rage. Those moments are the constant reminder of the transformative capacity of person-to-person interactions.

The issue of *how* the outreach is done is of central importance to the transformative organization. Many people's experience with being approached by a stranger is not pleasant—whether it's being accosted by someone trying to sell something or someone making unwanted sexual advances. Too many people in the United States have had the experience of being approached by a young militant trying to sell a newspaper from their revolutionary organization. The newspaper is merely a prop in those instances. The purpose of the interaction seems to be for the newspaper vendor to rave about the newspaper's positions and to ridicule any dissenting views. This is not an example of transformative organizing's approach to outreach. Transformative organizing's commitment is to reaching out for the purpose of listening and learning.

Transformative organizing views its constituency as a strategic source of information and insight.

For this reason, transformative organizations do not do outreach just to give information. Transformative organizing is not about proselytizing. Transformative organizing understands that effective outreach is an exchange. The transformative organizer offers an invitation to participate in the work of the organization and updates on this work; meanwhile, the organizer receives vital information about the conditions in the community or workplace, reflections on the organization's campaign, and suggestions about what might strengthen the struggle.

The organizer reaches out as much, if not more, in order to learn as she does to inform. In fact, in all POWER's training, new—and senior—organizers are pushed to speak no more than 30% of an interaction. The skill of asking provocative and engaging questions not only invites new and revealing information from the people, it also engages them so that they see themselves as a part of the organization and, as a result, are more likely to attend actions and meetings. This can take many different forms, from the posing of engaging questions to soliciting feedback on what different members of the community see as the most pressing issues. Based on this input, the members and leaders of the transformative organization might synthesize these ideas with their own research in order to develop radical and progressive initiatives that grow organically from the community's aspirations and experiences. Those synthesized proposals might, then, be brought back to the community for feedback or ratification. This is not outreach as a perfunctory task. It is a part of the transformative organization's process of developing genuine and lasting relationships to ensure that the transformative organization is rooted in and accountable to a constituency which is seen as a political force.

Clearly, this model of the organizer as a skilled interviewer and listener is very different than the macho image of the organizer as the charismatic savior of a community able to inspire

the masses and strike fear into the hearts of the wicked. Too often people come into organizing work thinking that they will either be good or will not be good depending on their interest in public speaking. Depending on the situation, an organizer might be called upon to deliver a compelling oration, but transformative organiz-

ing is not about speechifying; transformative organizing is about developing the capacity of people to raise their own voices. Especially since the first interactions can be so formative, it is critical that transformative organizations develop organizers' orientation and capacity to reach out for the purpose of listening.

### 3. Revolutionary Edge of Reform

In San Francisco, the unemployment rate among African Americans and Latinos is roughly 25%—more than double the national average. The incarceration rate is skyrocketing, and the housing crisis has stolen more than 40% of the African American community's pre-2008 wealth. Funding for public education, public transit, and public health systems—which overwhelmingly serve African American, Latino, Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities—has been slashed dramatically over the past ten years. Meanwhile, corporations like Twitter, Genentech, and large developers receive tens of millions of dollars in public subsidies. San Francisco is in no way unique in this respect. Communities all over the globe are experiencing similar levels of cutbacks and crackdowns while the one percent are living the gated lives of robber barons. In this context, there's no shortage of meaningful campaigns that an organization might take up.

Certainly, resistance is critical. It is important to fight back against bad policies and practices; in an era of never-ending neoliberal assault, any and all resistance is noble. While resistance is necessary, it is not sufficient if we aim to achieve true liberation and the elimination of overlapping systems of exploitation and oppression. Our resistance must move us towards achieving our larger objectives, and some campaigns are simply more strategic to helping us reach our

goals than others. The task of the transformative organization is to seek out those campaigns and activities that have the greatest potential to improve the lives of the constituency and of the working class *and* also to unleash new opportunities to engage and win future fights that move us towards our long-term vision.

The transformative organization must not fall into the trap of reformism, but at the same time it must not cling to extreme demands that offer no opportunity for social struggle. The question is how to find the revolutionary edge of reform fights.

In attempting to balance these concerns, transformative organizing is guided by the ideas of hegemony and counter-hegemony developed by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. The ruling class, Gramsci observed, has not only the coercive power of the state apparatus but is also able to exert moral and intellectual leadership. This moral and intellectual leadership allows the ruling class to win the consent of dominated classes to their continued domination by convincing those classes that the interests of the ruling class are the interests of all. Gramsci poses that the task for revolutionaries in these contexts is not vainly calling for the most radical demands; rather, he advocates political struggle in which the popular and exploited classes struggle for hegemony. Those classes do that

by engaging in campaigns and advancing demands that bring various sectors of society together in fights which begin to shift the terrain of struggle, thereby making struggles for more radical demands possible. This orientation, of course, requires clarity around vision, assessment of forces, and strategy.

The process of identifying new campaigns for POWER always begins by surveying members and constituents. That information is combined with a revised assessment of the organization's vision. All this is then placed in the particular context of San Francisco's economic, social, and political conditions. Using the power analysis tools developed by Anthony Thigpen, POWER attempts to assess which constituencies and organizations might be aligned with our objectives and which we might be able to win over. This information begins to give shape to the organization's campaign work. To assist us in finding the revolutionary edge of reform struggles, POWER members and staff assess the degree to which a campaign provides opportunities to:

- ⇒ Improve the living and working conditions for POWER's membership and constituency and for the broader working class.
- ⇒ Establish building blocks of the organization's long-term vision.
- ⇒ Build the power of and deepen the solidarity among various sectors of the working class, of low-income people, and of people of color.

## 4. Democracy is Power

Democracy is in crisis in the United States. There are notable attempts to disenfranchise working-class people and communities of color—from voter suppression campaigns to the institutional prohibition against those who have been convicted of a felony and those who live

- ⇒ Undermine the power of the ruling class and its institutions.
- ⇒ Shift public discourse to make larger victories possible by undermining the logic of oppression (i.e., capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, etc.).
- ⇒ Develop the leadership of the organization's members and staff.
- ⇒ Expand and deepen strategic and tactical alliances with key forces.
- ⇒ Grow the membership and strengthen the organization.

Perhaps the greatest danger to the transformative organization attempting to find the revolutionary edge of reform fights is dressing a reformist fight in revolutionary rhetoric. These criteria, along with regular reflection and evaluation of the organization's work, help our assessment be as sober and grounded as possible.

While the criteria are not a mathematical formula, they do provide a set of parameters for the transformative organization to evaluate potential campaign work. A campaign may not score well on all the criteria, but we can use these factors to evaluate which campaigns offer the most potential. They also help determine how the organization shapes the campaign strategy. Transformative organizing, at its best, seeks the revolutionary potential of campaign struggles and then wages those campaigns with tenacity and finesse.

in this country without legal residency papers. But the practice of democratic participation is also eroding for residents who have the right to cast a ballot. Democratic participation is more fairy tale than a lot of people would care to admit.

Democracy must be a defining practice of transformative organizing. This is not a matter of moralism. Democratic engagement can build the skills and consciousness necessary to building a strong organization, movement, or society. In POWER's early days, we were engaged in a campaign that targeted a public sector union that refused to allow workfare workers to speak for themselves. That union had included a provision in its new contract with the city that called for the formation of a committee to discuss any future changes that were proposed to the workfare program. The committee, as stipulated by the contract, would have been made up of six representatives of the union and six representatives from the city—and zero workfare workers. When we heard about this workfare committee, the members of POWER were initially pleased since we had been trying unsuccessfully to get the issue of workfare on the union's agenda for months. It seemed like we had finally made a breakthrough. As for the exclusion of workfare workers from the committee, we thought that was merely an oversight. That is until our repeated calls to union officials went unanswered. As days passed and the contract moved to the City Council for ratification, POWER members decided to stage a protest. Since the contract called for a committee made up of twelve people who were not workfare workers, we demanded that the committee be expanded to include workfare workers and that until then, the council members should reject the contract.

POWER mobilized 100 workfare workers and allies for that first demonstration, and we convinced the City Council to table the matter for further investigation. Satisfied with our initial stand, we returned to a mountain of phone messages from several of the most powerful labor leaders in San Francisco. All the messages urged me to call them immediately. Everyone I spoke to expressed the same message: if POWER did not stop these protests, then the labor movement would cast us as anti-union and they would never work with us

again. I was shaken. After all, I saw POWER as a progressive voice in a re-invigorating labor movement. The organization's founding strategy revolved around organizing workers in the informal sectors so that we could ally with organized workers in the formal sectors in order to mount a counter-offensive against the tyranny of capital. A part of me that thought we should stop the protests. But POWER had developed democratic structures of decision-making, so I knew that the decision was not mine alone to make; that decision fell under the purview of the Steering Committee, an elected body of leaders charged with making the strategic and tactical decisions about all aspects of the organization's work.

When I reported back on the labor leaders' threats, POWER's members seemed unimpressed, so I stressed how serious the threats seemed. Garth Ferguson, one of the members of the Steering Committee, raised his hand and said that he had a couple of clarifying questions, "So you're telling us that they're going to call us names?" - "They'll label us anti-union," I responded. "Well, I've been called lots of names before, and as a gay man who's worked blue collar jobs my whole life, I don't think 'anti-union' would be the worst name I've ever been called," Garth answered. The rest of the Steering Committee laughed in agreement. He then continued, "You also said that they told you that if we continue that they'd never work with us again. My question is when have they ever stood by us in one of our campaigns?" The second round of laughter made the position of the Steering Committee members obvious. We voted unanimously to continue our protests to win a seat for workfare workers at the table.

After two more protests, each of which drew more people than the last, and just as the City Council was about to take a final vote on the proposed contract, the president of the Labor Council ran up to us and said the union was willing to give in to our demands. This victory was

made possible because of the organization's commitment to democracy, to ensuring that decisions be made by those who are most impacted by those decisions. In this case, the members made a better decision than I might have made by myself, and in my experience, groups tend to make better decisions than isolated individuals, especially if those groups are able to cultivate a culture of respectful engagement. However, this is not to romanticize the wisdom of collective decision making. Groups of people are certainly capable of making bad decisions. History is not short of examples of this, but in the context of an organization, a group's bad decisions can strengthen an organization over the long term. Engaging people increases their commitment to the project.

One of the most difficult features to cultivate in an organization is a sense of ownership. So often, prospective members would approach POWER and ask us to "fix" a problem that they were experiencing. Even after we explained that we operated on a basis of collective action where "we" all work to resolve the problem, new members would often refer to POWER in the second- or third-person. "What I think you should do is..." or "When I told POWER about my problems, they helped us confront my boss..." Until a member began referring to the organization in the first-person, we knew that they had not fully integrated into the organization's work and practices, but when that same member began saying, "I think that we should...", it was clear that they had taken the organization on as an extension of themselves. While this is the desired outcome, for most people, it is a process that can take weeks, months, or even years, and it requires a supportive environment. Clear and deliberate organizational structures and practices can greatly accelerate this process. Members see that they have the opportunity and are expected to make key decisions and to carry them out. When that happens, they are willing to take on more and more responsibility to ensure that the organization

succeeds. In some ways, this is compounded when a group makes what some might consider a bad decision. In those moments, members see that there is no hidden committee waiting to veto the group's decision. The organization's practice matches its rhetoric, and more often than not, members work doubly hard to make the best of the decision that they participated in making, and with evaluation, the group is likely to make better decisions in the future. In both cases the organization is strengthened. This is a critical lesson for any organizer, but an especially critical one for organizers who come from different life experiences than the constituents he or she is attempting to organize. POWER's approach builds on the insights of Paulo Freire when he wrote:

*Certain members of the oppressor class join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation, thus moving from one pole of the contradiction to the other. Theirs is a fundamental role, and has been so throughout the history of this struggle. It happens, however, that as they cease to be exploiters or indifferent spectators [...] and move to the side of the exploited, they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want, and to know. Accordingly, these adherents to the people's cause constantly run the risk of falling into a type of generosity as malefic as that of the oppressors [...]. They believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust.<sup>4</sup>*

In a society where the opportunity for democratic participation is usurped, organizational structures and practices give people the opportunity to develop a vital set of skills that might otherwise go underdeveloped. Through engagement and collective decision making, members

<sup>4</sup> Paulo Freire. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum Books: New York and London, p. 60.

learn how to build solidarity with people different from themselves. This can transform an individual's expectations. After seeing genuine and thoughtful democratic participation, the benefits seem obvious, and members are unwilling to do without it in any aspect of their

lives. We've seen this happen time and time again. Democratic practice is a critical part of the transformative organizing model both because it tends to produce better decisions and because it deepens our capacity for and insistence on democracy in all aspects of our lives.

## 5. Cultivate Leaders

In order to achieve truly democratic practice, a transformative organization has to devote time and energy to growing leaders who can take up and share a diverse set of roles and responsibilities within the organization. Leadership is a controversial topic in progressive circles. Much of this controversy grows out of the long and sordid history of unaccountable leaders, who have withheld critical information, who have exploited their positions to usurp uncommon privilege, and who have squashed debate in order to secure their positions—and not only from the ruling elite, but also leaders in progressive and left movements. The weight of that legacy represents a challenge that radicals must confront. Some movement activists have decided to confront this challenge by proclaiming that leaders don't exist. The position often begins with an analysis that views power imbalances as the root cause of problems in the world. The intervention, then, is to declare the absence of leaders, but this intervention often misses its mark. Those interventions didn't abolish leadership. What they abolished was the naming of leaders and the articulation of how anyone can become a leader. The result was that those people who filled leadership functions could not be held accountable—which they themselves often wanted—and it was exceedingly difficult for new members to step into leadership roles.

The approach that we took at POWER was, and continues to be, to expect that people will bring their best and that with appropriate support

and accountability, we can all do more than we believe possible. The transformative organizing promotes accountable leadership by cultivating leadership skills among a diverse group of individuals and institutionalizing leadership in ways that makes explicit the leadership that is being exerted and that promotes lots of people to such roles at different times. As with all other interventions, this approach has had successes and its share of challenges, but on the whole, this approach has demonstrated its effectiveness. Over the course of more than ten years, POWER worked on three levels to become more efficient in nurturing people's leadership capacity. One level was institutional; the next was collective trainings; and the third, individual practice.

Institutionally, we came to learn that for most people, POWER was the first membership organization that they had joined as an adult. Many members came into the organization after years of interacting with service providers, case workers, and lawyers, where the dominant mode of interaction was one where that person came in to request assistance and then waited. After some time, that person would be notified of the decision that had been made—by some nameless, unresponsive force.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the workings of organization—when meetings happened, how decisions were made, where those decision

<sup>5</sup> Clearly, not all service provision, case management, or lawyering follows this model, but in San Francisco, where POWER is based, this model was and is dominant.

were made, and who made them—all seemed mystical experiences that happened behind a secret curtain. In order to facilitate members' integration into active engagement, POWER members and staff created structures and then made explicit the roles that those structures were designed to play. One of those new structures, for example, was a new member orientation which serves as an in-person user manual to the organization. We developed this orientation when we heard from new members that they spend much of their first months in the organization confused about what was happening and why. Creating structures like the new member orientation and communicating their functions helped to demystify the organization and what it means to be an active member of POWER. Another of the structures is the steering committee, which is now an elected body that serves as the organization's primary decision-making body. All members are invited to attend steering committee meetings to observe and offer comment on the group's deliberations. This has increased members' appreciation for the amount of work required to play a leadership role and has given steering committee members opportunities to get ongoing and honest feedback on their performance and their decisions.

In addition to institutionalizing leadership, POWER has created several political education and leadership development training programs whose purpose is to cultivate a broad set of leadership skills among a wide range of the membership. Rather than defining leadership as a very narrow set of skills, we have defined leadership as the contributions that people make to strengthen and further the work of the organization and the movement. We see the ability to inspire others with a rousing speech as one aspect of leadership, but we also see as leadership the ability to gracefully facilitate a meeting so that the group can make a difficult decision. Leadership is the ability to listen and build trusting relationships with others so that they are willing to share with you their deepest

concerns and aspirations. Leadership is organizing food to sustain participants in a long protest. Leadership is the ability to devise cunning tactics and strategies that advance the campaign's demands. Leadership takes many different forms. Some are more easily observed, but all are important and all need to be appreciated and cultivated.

Leaders are the foundation upon which organization can be built. Corporations hire in order to provide the requisite incentives to compel people take up a wide array of tasks. From the outset, we knew that neither the movement nor the organization would ever have enough money to hire all the people that we would need in order to topple the status quo; the movement would need to develop leaders from the constituencies that have the most to gain by challenging and eradicating the systems of oppression and exploitation. This was the impetus behind the initiation of POWER University. POWER University is now a two-tiered political education and leadership development program designed to move members into various leadership positions in the organization and to move organizational leaders into various leadership roles in broader social movements. The pedagogy of all POWER's leadership development draws from the teachings of Paulo Freire and Myles Horton.<sup>6</sup> The central premise behind both these educators' work is that ordinary people amass a tremendous amount of wisdom moving through the world. Where most educational models presume to dump new knowledge into the heads of empty vessels, this approach seeks to draw from and build on the knowledge that people

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<sup>6</sup> Paulo Freire (1921–1997) was a Brazilian educator and influential theorist of critical pedagogy. His book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, laid the foundation for much of the current theory and practice of popular education. Myles Horton (1905–1990) was a U.S.-based educator. He was one of the founders of the Highlander Folk School in southern Tennessee. Highlander became famous for its role as a training and strategizing center for the Civil Rights Movement and continues to be an important resource for the social justice movement in the United States.

have cultivated through their experience. Guided by this perspective, POWER University covers Marxist theoretical concepts and advanced skills but does so by rooting those concepts in the members' own lived experiences.

For POWER, leadership is a collective responsibility. Often multiple people take on leadership roles, but even when only one person takes on this role, we recognize that the people not assuming these roles can greatly influence the organization's success or failure. For example, there might be one person facilitating a meeting, a role that might traditionally be classified as a leadership role. But it is also true that the person taking minutes of the meeting, the person welcoming and orienting new members, and the person asking questions in a way that moves the process forward are all contributing to the facilitation of the meeting and to the success of the organization. They are all leaders. POWER's leadership development program cultivates what we refer to as followship skills as well, because blind and passive obedience is incompatible with accountable leadership. Some have criticized POWER for spending so much time and energy offering political education trainings for members and staff. Others have said that their organization simply doesn't have the time to do such extensive leadership development. It is true that by doing this work, we were deciding not to take on some other work, but our experience has been that by investing in the development of new leaders, the organization is strengthened. Members are able to take up work they might not otherwise feel comfortable doing, and members remain active in the

organization's work for longer periods of time because, according to their evaluations, they do not see where else they can receive this level of leadership development and political education.

POWER's approach to growing and nurturing leadership does not happen only in trainings. Activists learn to lead by doing, so POWER places a premium on supporting and encouraging people to take on new roles, often roles that they themselves would have thought themselves incapable of. But rather than simply throwing people into roles that they are unprepared for—which can have a demoralizing impact—organizers and other leaders spend much of their time having one-on-one meetings with members and prospective leaders. In these meetings, members and organizers work together to develop plans to develop and sharpen the member's leadership skills. Whether it's facilitating a meeting, presenting a testimony at a legislative hearing, or speaking at a rally, members take on leading roles in many of the organization's activities, and after each of those activities, the leader has an opportunity to evaluate the experience—to analyze what went well and what might have gone better, and to think about what to change in the future. Hundreds of leaders at POWER have emerged out of this process. Many of those leaders are still active with POWER, but even for those who aren't, the skills and perspectives that they learn and cultivate through POWER's leadership development program equip them to take a proactive role in addressing any challenge they experience in their personal lives, in their workplaces, and in their communities.

## **6. Build Strategic Alliances**

Most community-based organizations build coalitions to give them a better chance of winning their campaign demands. The basis of the uni-

ty that brings those organizations and individuals together is their support for the demand that the coalition is calling for—whether it's an

increased minimum wage, the prosecution of a murderous police officer, or the passage of legislation to establish labor protections for domestic workers. Building strong coalitions is not anything that should be taken lightly. It requires a high level of attention, skill, and flexibility. Each organization involved in the coalition comes with its own unique customs, procedures, and interests. Every organization must be willing to adjust its practice in order to maintain unity with the other organizations. Ultimately, organizations take these steps because they are committed to achieving the coalition's goals.

A transformative organization must see that unity as tactical. The organizations participating in a coalition likely have differing visions and strategic orientations. This difference need not be a point of contention, although remembering that can be difficult. It was for POWER. In its early days, POWER looked to build unity around questions of long-term vision and strategy with coalitional allies. This was important to us because we saw how our long-term vision influenced the immediate decisions we chose in our campaign work, and we didn't have another outlet to have these conversations with other organizers. But attempting to build this long-term unity with organizations and individuals who had different visions was a distraction to the coalition. After long, contentious debates, we would often return to our office complaining about how problematic our coalition members were being, but after some reflection, the members and organizers of POWER realized that we were a part of the problem. We were seeking a level of political unity that was unrealistic. Coalitions are forged by the tactical unity of shared work and a shared commitment to achieving the campaign's demands, but we wanted more.

This realization prompted POWER to couple our tactical alliance-building work with work to build strategic alliances with organizations that shared our long-term vision and strategic orientation. Some of those organizations worked with

very different constituencies. Some worked on different issues. And others were based in far away cities, but the relationships that POWER was able to build with organizations like Causa Justa :: Just Cause, the Chinese Progressive Association, Coleman Advocates, the Miami Workers Center, CAAAV, and the Labor Community Strategy Center, among others helped to refine and sharpen POWER's vision and practice as much, if not more, than work with tactical allies. Many of the exchanges among our strategic partners were informal—ongoing conversations between organizers, directors, and leaders. Instead of trying to find work to do together, we would reflect on the minutiae of how we do the work—how to craft demands, how to develop leaders, how to recruit new members into the organization, how to provide childcare and interpretation, how to compensate staff. The totality of these small, seemingly insignificant discussions helped to refine and sharpen POWER's vision and practice as a transformative organization and allowed POWER members and staff to broaden our perspective by engaging with comrades working in very different contexts.

A good example of this comes from POWER's alliance with the Miami Workers Center. Beginning in 1999, POWER members had a series of monthly conference calls with members of the Miami Worker Center. Because of the regularity of the conversations, the organizations had a deep appreciation for the work of each other, and the members had developed trusting relationships with one another, even though many had never met in person. In May 2000, just before Elián González was returned to his father and his homeland of Cuba,<sup>7</sup> the mem-

<sup>7</sup> Elián González became the center of a heated controversy in late 1999 and early 2000. In November 1999, González's mother drowned while attempting to leave Cuba for the United States with the then-five year-old Elián. The mother had left without notifying Elián's father, Juan Miguel González Quintana, of her intentions to take Elián with her. Rescued off the coast of Florida, the U.S. government placed Elián in the custody of relatives who sought to keep him in the United States against the demands of his father that his son be returned to Cuba.

bers decided to discuss this saga. The U.S. corporate media had broadcast nightly programs questioning the wisdom of sending the young man back to what they classified as a socialist dictatorship. On the call, the members of both organizations quickly dismissed that perspective. The corporate media line was ludicrous. The young man belonged with his father. The conversation then switched to the issue of the police. POWER members—who had participated in protests calling for accountability after the 1995 police murder of Aaron Williams, an African American man in San Francisco—condemned the use of the police. Their central concern was that the police have historically played the role of occupying, harassing, and violently repressing low-income people, especially in African American and Latino communities. If that level of police violence was tolerated, even in this instance where we agreed with the outcome, then that level of repression would eventually target our communities. This comment was greeted by an uncharacteristically long silence on the other end of the line. At first, we all thought that our comrades in Miami had lost their phone connection. Then a voice spoke up. One of the members of the Miami Workers Center explained that most of their members were pleased not only by the outcome but also by how the incident was resolved. She continued to explain that the right-wing, expatriate Cuban community had a stranglehold on political and economic power in their city; that more times than they could remember, this part of the Cuban community had disregarded law and decency—often at the expense of low-income African Americans and Latinos from other countries. She reasoned that the reactionary Cubans would have never voluntarily allowed the father and son to reunite, and they were happy to see

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The legal case moved through the high courts where it was eventually ruled that Elián should be returned to his father in Cuba. Many right-wing, expatriate Cubans in Miami rallied, vowing to turn back any attempt by federal authorities to return Elián. After a very public showdown, armed federal agents stormed into his relatives' home and returned Elián to Cuba in June 2000.

their city's ruling elite finally be taken to task. For this reason, they supported the federal government sending in armed officers to rescue Elián González. The rest of the agenda was trashed, and the members had a more than hour-long conversation discussing the different conditions in each community. At the end, all the members said that they were opposed to police violence and to one group using power to subjugate another, but we also all left with a new appreciation for the specificity of local politics. For transformative organizations, strategic alliances can serve to deepen the organization's practice.

Strategic alliances can also lead to concrete work. After a series of exchanges, shared political education sessions, and joint contingents in larger marches, POWER joined together with eight other community organizations rooted in working-class communities of color in San Francisco in 2007 to found San Francisco Rising. San Francisco Rising is an independent project which allows for member alliances to come together to make endorsements of candidates and propositions in San Francisco elections. Shared work was not necessarily the objective at the beginning of these exchanges. Most of the organizations work on different issues in different communities. We had a long history of supporting one another's work and marching together at large rallies, but that was on an ad hoc basis. The initial objective that brought us together was to share experiences in an effort to accelerate our learning from those experiences. But over time, the commitment to develop shared work became apparent to all.

Electoral work is traditionally contentious since organizations often enter the electoral arena with divergent goals and objectives, but the experience with San Francisco Rising has been exactly the opposite. The bonds of solidarity seemed to strengthen after each campaign, and the work is having greater and greater impact. In a city where the difference between a winning and losing campaign is around 20,000

votes and where there are close to 35,000 people in working-class African American, Latino, Chinese, Filipino, and Pacific Islander communities who regularly sit out elections, San Francisco Rising has the potential to shift the outcome of key city-wide elections. In its first two electoral campaigns, San Francisco Rising

has mobilized upwards of 20,000 voters traditionally ignored by the Democratic Party, and all this work is being done with a high level of political and strategic unity between partners. This has allowed the work to move forward faster and more boldly than we would have ever imagined.

## 7. Commit to Movement

POWER's mission is to eliminate poverty and oppression—once and for all. We have been clear since the founding that this is not an objective that POWER will be ever able to achieve alone as a solitary community-based organization. The causes of these problems are global; achieving this outcome will require nothing less than the building of a global social movement willing and capable of confronting capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy with a commitment to global justice. For this reason, POWER, like other transformative organizations, holds solidarity as a foundational principle of the organization's work.

Samora Machel once said: "Solidarity is not an act of charity. It is an act of unity between allies fighting on different terrains toward the same objective."<sup>8</sup> This perfectly captures POWER's understanding of solidarity, and for us it's important that Machel's definition rests on the assumption that both allies have clarity about the objective for which they are struggling, echoing the first component of the transformative organizing model.

Transformative organizations have to be willing and prepared to allocate time, energy, and re-

sources to support the struggles of comrades fighting on different issues and in different places. The preparation to allocate these resources is one of the key aspects of this. Given the frequency of abuses that befall so many communities, it is easy for an organization to expend all its capacity responding to these assaults. This, then, makes it challenging for organizations to act in solidarity even if there is a genuine desire to do so. In our best moments, POWER has incorporated the actions and demonstrations of our allies into our own organizational calendar so that we can mobilize our communities to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with other struggling organizations, even if we didn't see those actions as contributing directly to the campaigns that we were working on. We also use political education as an opportunity to prepare the groundwork since members and staff are more willing to act in solidarity if they understand the connections between our fights and struggles. These actions often paid unexpected benefits.

In 1999, POWER decided to send two representatives—a staff person and a member—to join the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO). We had little idea of what to expect. We thought it would likely be just another demonstration, but we hoped it would provide an opportunity to broaden the experiences of an emerging leader and a young organizer. Little did we know what they would

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8 Samora Machel (1933–1986) was a revolutionary leader from Mozambique who led the national liberation struggle against the Portuguese. After independence in 1975, Machel was elected Mozambique's President until his death, when his presidential airplane crashed near the borders of Mozambique, Swaziland, and South Africa.

experience on the rainy streets of Seattle. When Emma Harris, a leader who had emerged from the campaign for labor protections for workfare workers, left for Seattle, she had attended many of POWER's demonstrations but was unsettled whenever the police would instruct us to cease our non-violent protests. She came back from the WTO protests a changed person. She spoke about the power of the people turning back the police. She became a voice calling for cross-sectoral unity after seeing indigenous communities leading trade unionists who formed alliances with environmentalists and direct action activists. Back in San Francisco to this day, Ms. Harris insists on escalating the militancy of our tactics since, as she says, "We'll only win with struggle. We've got to keep the pressure on them."

Although a transformative organization might focus the majority of its energy and activities on one particular issue, it must remain vigilant in looking for opportunities to offer support. Sitting back and waiting for an invitation serves no one. We have to examine the situation so that we see where our interests lie. Once in the struggle, the transformative organization follows the leadership of those leading that campaign. These actions are critical not only because they serve to strengthen the struggles of popular forces, but they also provide an opportunity to forge class consciousness as the participants see allies from different sectors and of different races, ethnicities, national origins, genders, and sexual orientations standing together in the quest for justice and equity.

## 8. Extract Every Lesson

Rooted in the sober assessment that for the foreseeable future our opposition will be able to outspend us, the transformative organizing model rests firmly in the belief that in order to be successful popular forces must be more cunning, more efficient, and more strategic with the resources we do have. As Willie Baptist, a transformative organizer of homeless and low-income people, points out, "Nowhere in world history can anyone find where a dumb force rose up and defeated a smart force."<sup>9</sup>

As previously mentioned, the transformative organizing model aims to develop the capacity of members and staff. Political education and leadership development prepares the ground for the development of skilled organizers and committed leaders, but action forges this development. Organizing generates lots of action—from confronting exploitative bosses and

controlling police, to testifying before hostile governmental officials, to meeting with potential allies, to recruiting new members. Every one of these experiences has dual product—the outcome of the action itself and a more experienced activists who has access to the lessons of what went well and what might be improved in the future. Left unexplored, those lessons go to waste. The individual and the organization lose an opportunity to improve future work.

While there is nothing particularly innovative about the method of evaluation in the transformative organizing model, it is the steadfast commitment to evaluating all our work that is characteristic. Evaluation can take many different forms. Some is individual, some collective. Some is done immediately after an action, and some is done to assess a period of the organization or individual's work. Some evaluations happen in a quiet space, conducive to reflection, and others happen on the streets after a

<sup>9</sup> Willie Baptist. 2000. "The Cockroach vs. The Dinosaur." *Economic Human Rights Education Series*, p. 6.

rousing demonstration. But the point is always the same: to extract all the lessons that might lead to more effective action in the future.

After POWER concluded an action in which we occupied the office of a local bureaucrat, members and staff assembled in a circle on a nearby sidewalk to do a quick evaluation of the action. Everyone took a turn offering perspectives on what the group did well and what we might improve in the future. Later on, organizers would meet with the members who took on particular roles to assess their individual performance. Like brushing one's teeth, these evaluations are an assumed part of the organization's work. Then, every six months, the organization does a more comprehensive assessment of the previ-

ous period's work, and every year, members of the staff participate in a process of criticism and self-criticism where individuals assess their own work and receive feedback from comrades. The planning for future actions then draws from past evaluations of similar work.

The transformative organizing model places a heavy emphasis on evaluation because relentless and sober assessment allows the transformative organization to extract all the lessons that our experiences have to teach. Transformative organizations look to develop our skills and ability to make accurate assessments through constant, thorough, and honest reflection so that we never have to rely solely on luck.

## 9. Personal is Political

Building on the insights of the feminist movement, transformative organizing connects the transformation of society to the transformation of the individual in order to achieve genuine and lasting liberation for all. Transformative organizing aims at nothing less than changing the world. Firmly rooted in an understanding of the interaction between society and the individual, transformative organizing seeks to transform not only the policies, structures, and systems of society, but also seeks to shape the transformation of the individual and of our relationships. Capitalism, poverty, sexual violence, police repression, discrimination, and social exclusion all produce social inequity, and they also scar the individuals who experience and who perpetrate those ills. As the organizer Tómas Garduño points out, "We are living in a period of social disintegration."<sup>10</sup> Struggling to realize a society based on solidarity, equality, and freedom

allows us all to explore and expand the best parts of ourselves. As Ng'ethe Maina reveals, the transformative organization adopts individual and collective practices to promote collective and individual "liberation from suffering."<sup>11</sup>

Organization is a social form that brings individuals together in order to achieve a collectively identified goal. Those individuals who come to the organization—whether as staff, members, or volunteers—all bring the complexity of their experiences with them, and these experiences can shape, for better and for worse, how that individual views and moves in the world. Like it or not, focusing solely on the structures of social and political oppression and exploitation while ignoring the suffering and trauma that individuals carry with them can be toxic to the attempts to build a strong organization.

<sup>10</sup> Interview by the author with Tómas Garduño on October 18, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Ng'ethe Maina. 2010. "Transformative Organizing: Towards Liberation of Self and Society, Part 1," <http://transform.transformativechange.org/2010/12/transformativeorganizing>.

From the outset, POWER has seen the challenge of breaking down the alienation that people feel as key to our ability to develop a strong organization of people who believe that they deserve a better future. POWER membership meetings routinely begin with a go-around where participants share their names, how they are doing, and one thing that they'd like to share with the group. Sometimes, people announce upcoming events. Other times they cheer for local sports teams. Eventually, someone will share a problem they are having. A bank is threatening to foreclose on their family's home. They just got laid off from their job. They were harassed by police while walking home from the store. This brave act of sharing is often done timidly, with shame and isolation hanging from every word. Then someone else in the circle will reach out a hand, sharing that they too are going through a similar challenge. And then someone else. Soon, social alchemy has transformed shame and isolation into outrage and solidarity. This sharing takes time out of organizational meetings, time that could be spent on other business, but our experience is that by opening meetings in this way, we allow people to see through the hypoc-

risy that would suggest that they alone are to blame for their problems and that they are the only ones facing such problems. Once people develop genuine relationships with each other with a deeper recognition of the systems that perpetuate the proliferation of these problems, then people are more inclined to see themselves and those around them as subjects capable of making change, rather than as objects of life's cold cruelty.

Organization can also support an individual in her process of transformation. In 2006, POWER opened an unused room in the office to a somatics practitioner who meets with members and staff who would like support in addressing the impacts of past trauma. The staff and members who have worked with the practitioner are now more consistent and capable in their roles.

The task of the transformative organization cannot be limited to transforming how individuals relate to the economy, to the state and to society. We must also transform how individuals relate to one another and how we all relate to ourselves.

## 10. Conclusion

As the reader has likely observed already, the components of the transformative organizing model form an organic system in that each component interacts with and supports the others. While the specific implementation of the nine components may vary from organization to organization, the intentionality around the nine components is essential. The transformative organizing model is not a mix-and-match approach to building power. I'll share one final story to illustrate this point.

POWER was founded as a multi-racial organization and quickly developed a membership with

strong roots in the African American and Latino communities. These racial groupings are often at odds with each other in communities across the United States, but because the founders saw the strategic necessity of uniting various working-class communities of color, the organization was an experiment in multi-racial, working-class unity. In some important ways, this unity was maintained by the slogan: "We have more in common than we do that's different. Divided, we will eventually all be defeated, but united, we can win." POWER was able to maintain a level of racial tolerance. There were moments of tension—occasional derogatory comments, disre-

spectful behavior, and social snubs—and when these events happened, the staff would hold one-on-one meetings with members to explain why this was unacceptable in the organization and why it was counter-productive to our shared work for liberation. All in all, we were able to develop an air of tentative tolerance. Even this was no small achievement given the state of relations between these communities in the outside world, but it was also a far cry from the level of multi-racial solidarity to which we aspired.

Because there was always so much other work to do, we chose not to intervene. That is until the spring of 2004, when tensions began to boil over. African Americans were angry about the interpretation of the meetings in Spanish. Latinas were angry about how some African American members seemed to judge their parenting styles. Everyone felt that the organization's campaigns were privileging the other racial group. Tensions were high, and some members were openly suggesting that the organization should split into two separate organizations—one for African Americans and one for Latinos.

The staff realized that this had become an organizational priority. We also knew that to truly resolve this issue the members had to be the body to make this decision, rather than the staff issuing a decree. It also seemed that if there were a simple election in this heated environment that the decision might actually lead to the rupturing of the organization on hostile terms such that the organizations might never even partner in the future. In response, the staff proposed a member vote on the issue after a political education process to explore the context of the decision. At the conclusion of that process, the democratic will of the members would decide the matter. The members agreed, and the staff set to work developing the political education process.

The process to contextualize the members' decision was a ten-week-long process where the

organization's leaders and any other interested members came together once a week. After an introduction to the process and the decision that we would be making at the end, the first session began with small groups where the African Americans and the Latinas each named the biggest problems facing their communities. Then, they named what they saw as the biggest problems in the other racial group. That first session ended with each group reporting back on what they saw as the biggest problems in their communities.

Using a wide variety of pedagogical approaches and materials—from film clips drawn from the tele-documentary *Roots* to statistical information to member testimonials—the next four sessions examined the history of African Americans in the United States from the trans-Atlantic slave trade to current period. Throughout these first sessions, it was apparent that many of the Latinas were learning this information for the very first time. Living in the racist culture of the United States, many of the Latinas found it difficult to understand the miserable conditions in the African American community. Before this political education, many of the Latinas saw African Americans as just another immigrant community—but one that speaks English and that has its citizenship papers—so they couldn't understand what the problem could be, other than what they hear every day through the political hegemony of the United States: that African Americans are the cause of their own problems.

Next, the sessions turned to examine the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America—from the first New World colonies to the 19th century westward expansion to the military and economic assaults on the people of Mexico and Central America. We then looked at the impact that these attacks had on the push-and-pull factors influencing various waves of immigration to the United States. As we focused our attention on the history of the United States' brutal role in undermining the Sandinista movement, many

of the African American members made instantaneous breaks from the ahistorical and hypocritical discourse on immigration in the United States. All of a sudden, many of the African American members saw their own experience as tied together with the immigrant experience.

The final session began with a review of the problems that each of the racial groups had named at the beginning of the process. Then, we discussed what struck them in looking at those lists. It was an amazing moment. In their own words, people talked about the destructive impacts of white supremacy and colonialism. They talked about the ways in which people of color have been subjugated, terrorized, and de-humanized throughout the history of this country that speaks of itself as a bastion of freedom and democracy. They talked about the fact that the listed problems grew out of capitalism and that while the conditions in our communities may look different, they are all the rotten fruit of imperialist domination. We then posed the question that had launched this process: should POWER remain a multi-racial organization or should it split into separate organizations?

At various points in the process, members came to different staff members to ask how this decision was going to be made. Many couldn't believe that the staff, the director, and a co-founder would allow a group of low-income people to sever something that had taken years to build. We all responded with one simple point: "This is your organization, so this is your decision. We trust that you'll do what you consider to be in the best interests of you, your community, and the working class as a whole." Members left these one-on-one meetings more committed to engaging the sessions and the process. When it came time to make the decision, the discussion made it clear that the organization was likely to remain one multi-racial organization, but it was so one-sided that the staff made an impromptu decision to argue the other side—in

favor of splitting into two racially-specific organizations—if only to ensure that the view had a fair hearing. The members quickly argued this position down and then went on to vote unanimously to remain a multi-racial organization. Through the process, POWER members came to see more the white supremacist roots of the United States, and they saw their organization as a vital instrument in building a new and liberatory future.

There were so many lessons from this experience—including that the staff had not engaged in explicitly political conversations about the nature of our work out of fear of alienating some members. This experience showed us that working-class people are hungry for challenging and complex conversations, but it also showed us how each of the components of the transformative organizing model—from member democracy to leadership development to evaluation and minimizing egoism in our approach to the work—all depend and build on each other.

Organizing will continue to be a central approach that activists around the globe will employ to address problems from economic inequality to unbridled militarism, from the subjugation of women to the catastrophes of global warming. As more organizers are forced to grapple with the ways that these issues overlap and intersect, approaches to organizing will and must identify practices that allow organizations to go beyond transactional campaigns. Our task is to transform social relations in order to liberate the planet and humanity. This will require the cohesion of the strengths and insights learned on the frontlines of struggles in workplaces and communities around the world. Drawing from the experiences of historical and contemporary social movements, the transformative organizing model demands everything. It sets out audaciously revolutionary objectives because we deserve nothing less.