

NPOQ

NONPROFIT QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

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Movement Economies

*Making Our Vision
a Collective Reality*

**The Eldests—
Stories of
Economies**



**Building an Economics
Rooted in Movements**

**What Does It Mean
to Dismantle Racial
Capitalism Anyway?**

**The Great Awakening,
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In This Issue . . .

COVER STORY

98 **The Eldests— Stories of Economies**

“We all begin with a story. It is through story that we are connected, not only to each other, but also to our homes, to our lands, to our communities, to our people, to our past, and to our future grandchildren. It is the collection of stories that we are able to hear and witness that will make the whole of our lives and define the shape and character of our community, but also, through the stories, we share and tell and retell what will shape the whole of our future.”

by A-dae Romero-Briones



7 **Welcome**

8 **Movement Economies: Building an Economics Rooted in Movement**

“How do social movements come to make the language of economic systems change their own? Building a more just and democratic economic system requires that people understand the problems of the current economic structure, propose democratic alternatives, and *organize* to make those ideas a reality.”

by Steve Dubb and Rithika Ramamurthy

22 **“Educational Purposes”: Nonprofit Land as a Vital Site of Struggle**

“In today’s higher-education landscape, classrooms filled with professors and students have become a minor side business on the increasingly profitable college campus. The greater value of campus land is in its nonprofit tax-exempt status, which serves as a financial shelter for profitable research and private investors. The meteoric rise of the knowledge economy positions schools as financial titans in our big cities and small towns, and the financial arrangements produced by the tax-exemption of nonprofit land is central to their wealth hoarding.”

by Davarian L. Baldwin

34 **What Does It Mean to Dismantle Racial Capitalism Anyway?**

“As Georgetown philosopher Olúfẹ̀mí O. Táíwò smartly put it, the broader strategic issue is that ‘If it is true that racism and capitalism are in a mutually supporting relationship, then we should expect that any potentially effective anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles will also be mutually supporting.’ This means we must focus our aim not just on structural racism and not just on capitalism, but rather on how those two forces are interconnected and intertwined.”

by Saqib Bhatti and Bree Carlson



42 Building Movement-Accountable Government: A Conversation with Steve Dubb, Rithika Ramamurthy, and Maurice Mitchell

“Imagine a world with vibrant, nonextractive, nonexploitative economies that were explicitly political, saw themselves as the economic reflection of people’s organizations, and made significant investments in organizations that helped create their conditions. I get excited thinking about that.”

48 The Great Awakening, and Workers’ Fight to Stay Woke

“It’s time to admit it. We were asleep. Many of us who are privileged enough to be paid to work for justice had all but given up on winning unions at multinational brands in the near term. Then, somewhere in the last two years, there was a ‘great awakening,’ and the entire landscape for what is possible changed overnight.”

by Erica Smiley

58 Building a Green, Equitable Economy: A Conversation with Steve Dubb, Rithika Ramamurthy, Johanna Bozuwa, and Daniel Aldana Cohen

“In my research on climate policy and climate politics, I’ve found that the most effective climate policy is equitable climate policy. You can’t build a base to transform the economy with just a few renewable energy companies, some very smart people working in policy schools, and some well-meaning politicians. . . . If you’re going to make major, disruptive change, you have to bring a large number of people along with you. And to do that, you have to show them the economic benefits.”

66 Unlikely Advocates: Worker Co-ops, Grassroots Organizing, and Public Policy

“When time and resources are limited and the priority is—as it must be—the needs in our communities, among our members, and among our people, it can be tempting to neglect the advocacy apparatus needed to move even realistically winnable initiatives. Through the lessons of our advocacy for the Main Street Employee Ownership Act, and since then, we’ve drawn lessons on how to be effective advocates.”

by Esteban Kelly and Mo Manklang

76 Stories of Organizational Transformation: Moving toward System Change and a Solidarity Economy

“The Center for Biological Diversity, Marbleseed, and Wellspring Cooperative provide three examples, from the environmental, agricultural, and worker co-op sectors, of organizations that have shifted over the past few years from single-issue and/or reformist work within the context of capitalism, to embracing a post-capitalist framework of the solidarity economy.”

by Emily Kawano, Lori Stern, Adoma Addo, and Kelley Dennings





“

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Shelly Kuyatt

Director of Operations, Every Meal

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Mutual**
INSURANCE

84 **Building the Mutual Economy:
A Conversation with Steve Dubb,
Rithika Ramamurthy, and
Manuel Pastor**



“We should ask ourselves why—in a country that is so upset about income inequality, in which there is so much dissatisfaction with racial inequality, in which there’s so much generational anger about the climate disaster—why can’t we do more?”

92 **Experiments in Community
Ownership: Taking Charge of
Commercial Real Estate**

“In communities all over the country, commercial corridors are lined with small mom-and-pop establishments that provide communities with food and services but also hire locally and act as ambassadors for culture. Long-time small business owners are often the unofficial historians of a community, helping to make a neighborhood truly a neighborhood. Despite the American romance with such entrepreneurship, however, many small business owners in communities like ours are simply trying to make ends meet.”

by Rudy Espinoza

104 **Public Dollars for Public Good**

“What do community organizing calls for police abolition and recent federal public investments like the American Rescue Plan Act (more popularly known as ARPA) have in common? On their face, they might be seen as wildly different approaches to safety, well-being, and economic security in the United States. In reality, they are two sides of the same coin: both involve the use of state power.”

by Carmen Rojas



110 **Economic Justice:
Nonprofit Leaders
Speak Out**

“In this issue on *movement economies*, we invited seven field leaders to answer the above question and consider how nonprofit practice might better align with stated economic justice goals. . . . In their contributions, the authors grapple with how best to face the challenges inherent in the struggle for economic and racial justice.”

*by Akilah Watkins, Nelson I. Colón,
Jon Pratt, Marla Bilonick, Clara Miller,
Seema Agnani, and Gary L. Cunningham*

120 **ENDPAPER
A Flower Opened in the Tail**

On the Cover . . . “Street at Night” by Yuet-Lam Tsang/
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WELCOME



Dear Readers,

How do people not only develop a vision of a democratic economy rooted in values of solidarity but come together to make that vision a collective reality?

That is the daring question contained in this issue of *Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine*. Building on last summer's issue on ownership, *NPQ* economic justice editors Steve Dubb and Rithika Ramamurthy call on us to consider what they label *movement economies*.

The main claim is simple enough: ideas alone do not create change. Social transformation needs to be driven by groups of people acting together to develop collective strategy to achieve common goals. In other words, the “what” must be connected to the “who” and the “how.” This conversation is organized around three themes: first, *critiques* of existing economic practices; second, analyses of *movement strategy*; and lastly, articles that highlight emergent *solutions* from the field.

In our conversations with leaders in the field, we found a desire to explore these questions. As one said to us, many activists “don't quite grasp how solidarity economy fits into their movement work,” but they know that it is needed, and that the failure to fully integrate a democratic economic vision into movement work has been costly. In the past half-century, economic inequality has gotten considerably worse. Activists today are increasingly connecting the dots between racial, economic, climate, and health justice—and gaining ground in doing so.

In that vein, there are echoes here with our most recent issue, on “The Space Beyond.” Visioning is hard—and it's essential. Movement leaders have come to understand that the solutions to structural inequality and the many crises that we face lie far beyond the economy as it functions today. We exist these days in a liminal space, halfway between what is and what can be. As the writers of this collection remind us, if you look carefully, you can see a more just and equitable world emerging.

Cyndi Suarez
President and Editor in Chief
NPQ

Movement Economies

Building an Economics Rooted in Movement

by Steve Dubb and
Rithika Ramamurthy

■ Bringing the question of *movement economies* to the fore not only helps shed light on the challenges in achieving structural economic change but also elevates the people who are making those changes in real time. The time to inquire into how movements can more effectively integrate economic justice into their social transformation work is *now*. After all, the goal is not simply to develop ideas but to enact them.

H

ow do social movements come to make the language of economic systems change their own? Building a more just and democratic economic system requires that people understand the problems of the current economic structure, propose democratic alternatives, and *organize* to make those ideas a reality. As has been noted by NPQ, “The struggle for a solidarity economy is a practical one, and there is no path forward without social movement.”¹

In short, we need “movement economies”—that is, democratic economic structures that social movements understand to be in their interests and worth fighting for.

Conversations about economic justice often offer frameworks for pursuing the democratic allocation of resources in a participatory manner, such as the idea of a solidarity economy.² Theory—the *what*—is important; but the ways in which such frameworks connect with the larger social forces that drive them—the *how* and the *who*—are necessary to achieve those gains.

We know there’s a deep hunger in movements for an economy that people collectively own and democratically manage. Increasingly, the old stories of a happy capitalist







Can this movement energy coalesce into a cohesive vision? We think it can. But doing so will require both naming our current economic problems and connecting theory to practice.

economy simply do not hold water, particularly with younger people, many of whom are saddled with student debt and see diminished economic prospects. As Belén Marco and Tori Kuper of the New Economy Coalition recently noted, “Disillusionment with capitalism is so ubiquitous it’s trending on TikTok.”³ And there is a virtual cottage industry of books coming out that critique capitalism and the core social myths that uphold our current economy.⁴

We see, too, movement energy in the organizing at Amazon, at the over 200 Starbucks branches that have unionized, in the new vigor behind the pursuit of worker cooperatives and community land trusts.⁵ But we would not be writing about movement economies if there were not still a large gap between social movements and efforts to develop a solidarity economy.

Can this movement energy coalesce into a cohesive vision? We think it can. But doing so will require both naming our current economic problems and connecting theory to practice.

UNDERSTANDING THE ECONOMIC CONTEXT: THE INCOME AND WEALTH SHIFT

It is well known that over the past few decades, the rise of neoliberalism has turbocharged economic inequality. It has done this by damaging unions, reducing social regulation, and encouraging corporate maximization of wealth for shareholders.⁶ Capitalism, by its nature, concentrates income and wealth among those who own capital⁷—or, as Dr. Ayodele Nzinga has accurately noted, “hoard resources.”⁸ Indeed, if one looks at the US economic picture of the past half-century, it is obvious that inequality has increased with extraordinary speed, with more and more income concentrated at the top. According to two Economic Policy Institute researchers, in 1979, the top 1 percent of wage earners received 7.3 percent of income, compared to 13.2 percent in 2019. Meanwhile, the bottom 90 percent of wage earners saw their share fall from 69.8 percent to 60.9 percent—a nearly nine-percentage-point decline in earnings.⁹

In terms of wealth, the data are even more dramatic. At the end of 2021, the top 1 percent of Americans held 32.2 percent of total wealth. The bottom 90 percent of Americans, by contrast, held 30.5 percent of total wealth, according to Federal Reserve figures. In other words, by the end of 2021, the top 1 percent of Americans held more wealth than that held by the bottom 90 percent of the population *in total*.¹⁰

The Fed’s data series goes back to the third quarter of 1989. Back then, the top 1 percent held 22.5 percent of all wealth, while the bottom 90 percent of Americans held 40 percent of all wealth. The nine-and-a-half-percentage-point decline in the share of wealth for ordinary Americans (that is, those in the bottom 90 percent) is remarkable. If you run the numbers, of total US wealth of over \$142 trillion, that works out to \$45,000 less per person for nearly 300 million Americans than if their share of wealth had stayed the same.¹¹

Nor are the economic data any more encouraging when one measures inequality by race. As the *New York Times*’ David Leonhardt has written, the Black–White ratio of wages as of 2014 was about where it was in 1950.¹² Meanwhile, in terms of the racial wealth gap, a 2017 report authored by researchers at Prosperity Now and the Institute for Policy Studies found that median Black wealth would fall *below zero* shortly after mid-century, with Latinx wealth to follow by 2073, if current trendlines are not altered.¹³

A few years ago, drawing on the research of William Lazonick, Philip Moss, and Joshua Weitz, *NPQ* analyzed why the racial wage gap has persisted—and how initial gains were reversed.¹⁴ The story involves many different economic and political factors. Part of the explanation on the economic side was a shift in how corporations were organized. In addition to the broader policy and ideological shifts that neoliberalism wrought, Lazonick and his colleagues point out more specifically that one of the most effective civil rights remedies of the 1960s involved getting corporations to open access for Black Americans to well-paying, long-lasting,

blue-collar union jobs. In short, back then there was a sizable sector of corporate America where employment stability prevailed—if you could get in, you stayed in—but when these “lifetime employment” opportunities disappeared in the 1980s, the racial wage gap widened again.¹⁵

Today’s economy places a premium on being able to access social networks to jump from job to job, which reinforces existing privilege, because the very definition of social networks in the job market depends on having connections in high places. Not only have federal policies—such as reduced civil rights enforcement beginning in the early 1980s¹⁶ and the rise of a mass incarceration regime that continues to incarcerate Blacks at “roughly five times the rate of White Americans”¹⁷—directly harmed Black Americans, but the very structure of the economy (namely, one marked by frequent job changes and increasingly insecure employment) also makes civil rights enforcement strategies less effective. After all, if one has been unfairly terminated from a job, being reinstated due to a successful civil rights claim, while certainly still of value, is less valuable if the person, after being reinstated in the job, is likely to have to find another job within a few years. This was not so often the case in the 1960s, when civil rights laws were passed and long-term employment, at least in unionized sectors, was the norm; it is the case today.

THE POLITICS OF MOVEMENTS

How have movements responded to the causes and effects of skyrocketing inequality?

It is important to recognize that movements operate in the context of a system that, at its roots, is racial capitalism, as scholar and activist Cedric Robinson highlighted in his 1983 book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*.¹⁸ And they are influenced by that context, even when they are building democratic alternatives and/or are engaged in resistance strategies; for instance, because of its racial roots, capitalism has served to weaken the bonds between Black workers and White workers, which has been an important factor in retarding union organizing.¹⁹ While the need to employ an intersectional lens in movement work is widely acknowledged at a theoretical level,²⁰ actual movement activity often falls into narrower silos.

The truth that different oppressions influence one another does not always get recognized in the context of social movement work. Until quite recently, many economic justice

movement organizations were “race neutral” in their approach. This was seen as a politically smart means to avert White backlash. A 1996 political science journal article, for example, argued that policies were most likely to be effective in addressing race and economic inequality if they were targeted to benefit Black Americans but “advanced and defended on universalistic grounds.”²¹ In other words, until quite recently, it was considered politically smart for economic justice groups to avoid talking about race.

Scott Reed, longtime director of PICO National Network (now Faith in Action), noted, before retiring in 2018, that only in his last decade was there a shift to what he called a “race-conscious” approach. Previously, he said, “for much of the field of community organizing, there was a lot more race neutrality.”²²

Yet as racial justice movement leader Dedrick Asante-Muhammad has detailed, a race-neutral or “race-blind” approach to addressing racial economic inequality has left the nation hobbled in public policy efforts to undo ongoing structural racism.²³ William Gale, codirector of the Urban Brookings Tax Policy Center, concurs.²⁴

Reed notes that from a movement perspective, his group, in the wake of the rise of Black Lives Matter, had come to adopt this same point of view, one that recognized that race neutrality is a “false narrative.”²⁵ As a result, “We have become much more thoughtful of moving race and power into our organizing efforts.”²⁶

Even so, Isabelle Moses, Faith in Action’s chief of staff, explained that, after Reed left, it required “a comprehensive effort to transform the culture of the national staff team through self-examination around race and gender” that lasted more than three years. The effort resulted in a shift from a White-led nonprofit to an organization that reflects the majority people of color communities that it serves—not just in terms of staffing and leadership but also in terms of overall movement practice. “It’s about considering every day how to design an organization for liberation and not oppression,” Moses noted.²⁷

One can also find many examples of racial justice groups that have failed to fully include class inequality and capitalism in their analysis. Referencing pledges of up to \$200 billion from philanthropy and corporations to invest in racial justice after the 2020 uprisings, Francisco Pérez, codirector of the Center for Popular Economics, observes that such commitments

typically “take Black capitalism as their operating theory—that is, they assume that the path to racial equality is paved with Black business success. If racism has left Black Americans with less capital than White Americans, then the solution is to help Black Americans eventually own businesses as large and profitable as those of White Americans.”²⁸

Yet an approach that prioritizes “Black faces in high places,” Pérez insists, is insufficient. “Are poverty wages less miserable because your boss is Black? Is substandard housing less dangerous because your landlord is Black? Are monopoly prices any more affordable because the company is Black owned?” Pérez asks rhetorically. “Liberation,” Pérez concludes, “will only come if we are expansive enough in our vision to address inequality in all its forms.”²⁹

History has shown that this important work of intersectional organizing is both the most challenging and the most rewarding. Leaders from Bargaining for the Common Good explain that the idea of intersectionality is rooted in the struggle of Black feminist workers, who fought against layoffs that were rooted in racist and sexist policies and practices. Intersectionality helps us understand the “interconnectedness of different unjust and exploitative systems” and build movements that are more inclusive, engaged, and democratic.³⁰

In a recent article, renowned labor historian Robin D. G. Kelley writes that the movements of the 20th century show that *not* choosing between racial or economic justice is the right path to liberation: “Black Communists taught me that we need not choose between anti-racism and class solidarity; they are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually constitutive. The same holds true for the fights against all forms of oppression: sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism.”³¹

A NONPROFIT DOUBLE BIND

This era of complex economic justice struggles has made it challenging to advance social transformation, even as movements for community ownership and a solidarity economy gain ground. The nonprofit sector itself has, in some respects, become an important obstacle to change. As conditions worsen, the size and scope of the nonprofit sector have grown—employing more of the workforce, increasing revenue, and contributing more to gross domestic product.³² But the reasons for this growth are not straightforward and speak to the contradictory situation in which the sector finds itself today. Nonprofits often play quasi-governmental roles.³³ In so doing, they often serve to reinforce, rather than

challenge, inequality. As Claire Dunning writes, “In Boston, the city’s most economically and socially distressed neighborhoods in the twenty-first century are also those with the most neighborhood nonprofits.”³⁴

It is worth noting that the central role that nonprofits have come to play in social movement organizing is rather odd. Movements were not always organized this way, and this shift of movements from the self-financing movements of the past (such as labor unions in the 1930s) to the grant-dependent movement organizations of the present creates significant challenges for achieving transformative change. As movement lawyer and activist Dean Spade has noted, nonprofitization is “understood to be a response to the revolutionary movements of the mid-20th century.”³⁵ In other words, it is no accident that movement energy has often been channeled into nonprofits—this was an explicit elite strategy of control, and a rather effective one at that.

To understand the current issues in the nonprofit sector at hand, we can turn to the history of social infrastructure in the United States. The decline of social institutions is an important context to understanding why and how the nonprofit sector has become such a central fixture today.

The federal government and its welfare state programs—often known as the New Deal, and including federal programs and reforms such as Social Security and the Works Progress Administration, were forged in the world-historical political events of the first half of the 20th century and the rise of a powerful labor movement. The unions that emerged during this time were the major institutions that shaped the struggle for economic equality by pressuring corporations and the government for better wages and social welfare.

Over the second half of the 20th century, the labor movement suffered a targeted political defeat. According to the Economic Policy Institute, in the 1950s and 1960s, more than 1 percent of workers participated in a union election each year. In the 1970s, that number fell to 0.78 percent. In the 1980s, it fell to 0.29 percent. Studies show that in the 1970s, employers began to deploy a series of tactics—such as firing union activists, breaking strikes, and subjecting workers to mandatory “captive audience” anti-union meetings—to discourage union membership. Conservative politicians and business lobbyists wielded labor law to suppress union activity, such as making boycotts and solidarity strikes illegal. The comprehensive impact of these forces made

This era of complex economic justice struggles has made it challenging to advance social transformation, even as movements for community ownership and a solidarity economy gain ground.



workers more vulnerable than ever to the whim of employers. After the 1970s, inequality skyrocketed, the racial wealth gap widened, and union membership continued to dwindle.³⁶

The nonprofit sector grew in this vacuum, filling the gaps where the federal government did not make provision. In fact, sources show that the growth of nonprofits was inversely proportional to the decline of private sector unions: while unions declined more than 80 percent, the nonprofit sector far outpaced overall economic growth.³⁷ The sector currently employs more than 10 percent of the workforce and generates more than \$2 trillion in revenue. But its flourishing has not resulted in mitigation of wealth inequality, defeat of structural racism, improvement in quality of life, or an increase in the quality or scope of federal social program supports.

Essentially, nonprofits have often served as patches on the political and economic system—and this has often been highly functional for neoliberalism. “The basic assumption behind this,” as was noted in *NPQ* in 2018, “is that the system, despite major problems here and there, is more or less functional, and our role is to come up with clever solutions—be good social entrepreneurs . . . plug the holes and fill in the gaps.”³⁸ But it is becoming ever more apparent that this is neither an accurate nor effective approach.

The nonprofit sector, in short, is caught in a double bind. Many nonprofits seek to work against the forces of harm and oppression that make life difficult for everyday people—but they also depend on neoliberalism to keep going. Yet, there is good news, too. Within the nonprofits that aim to tackle the effects of inequality—the housing crisis, the racial wealth gap, climate change—exist many workers who are dedicated to transformative change. These workers can fight for liberation both by organizing in unions to improve equity within their own organizations and by linking with other workers in the sector.

Even as this movement-building work continues, it’s worth remembering, too, that movements must build ecosystems

to succeed. Not everyone can or should play the same role. Author and impact investing leader Deborah Frieze (with Meg Wheatley), for instance, has created a typology of critical roles that she sees as central to social transformation.³⁹ One is the “hospice worker”—many who are employed in human service nonprofits and help people survive the ravages of capitalism (such as by operating food banks) work in this lane. A second role is “protector”—that is, folks in positions of power who shield those who advance transformative change; this might be a productive role that supporters in philanthropy could play. A third role is “illuminators”—people who tell stories about the emergent system that is seeking to be created. A fourth role is “trailblazers”—the activists who are leading unions and solidarity economy institutions and who are fighting directly for liberation. This fourth role tends to be the one given the most consideration, but as Frieze highlights, trailblazers are just one part—if indeed, a critical part—of an integral whole.

MOVING TOWARD LIBERATION

Changing the present dynamic is challenging. Nonprofits depend on government and philanthropic funding to serve communities, meaning that their work is tied to the agenda of those funders. But there are strategies, both within and outside the sector, that can help break this logjam. For instance, former Common Future CEO Rodney Foxworth has advocated for movement funding to become community controlled. If nonprofit and community organizations were able to restore the self-financing that was once the norm for social movements, they could begin to do the work of moving society away from its extractive and exploitative practices.⁴⁰

In a similar vein, Freelancer Union founder Sara Horowitz has called for a return to “mutualism”: a political and economic system that builds solidarity among people within their community.⁴¹ Mutualism harnesses the human tendency to collaborate, share, and construct institutions that last.

Reclaiming this economic capacity for the movement ecosystem would mean changing both attitudes and practices within and beyond organizations. It would also mean, critically, restoring a larger element of self-financing to movement work. As Horowitz writes, “Mutualist organizations . . . plan for the future by investing in themselves. They do this by *recycling excess capital* generated by their economic mechanism back into the organization.”⁴²

To reorient the sector toward justice, activists also need to organize nonprofits from within to pursue the social justice missions that are supposed to motivate their work. Instead of modeling themselves after short-term and top-down models, what movements require are reciprocal and democratic organizations that can sustain long-term institutions for the public good.

Here, nonprofit unions can also play a catalytic role. Efforts to organize workers into unions within the sector have been on the rise—including among universities, museums, and community advocacy groups. Nonprofit unions, when oriented toward liberation, can help their worker-members make their organizations more equitable, effective, and democratic—not only by improving wages and benefits but also, crucially, by facilitating a far more equitable internal organizational distribution of decision-making power.

Of course, such efforts have faced and will continue to face resistance. For example, earlier this year, 44 human service providers in Chicago signed onto a letter to push back against legislation that would make it easier for workers at nonprofits with city contracts to unionize.⁴³ Former and current presidents of the Nonprofit Professional Employees Union, Katie Barrows and Hayley Brown, write, “Like other bosses, bosses at progressive nonprofits can be reluctant to give up power, and unions redistribute workplace power to the workers. But organizations flounder when those in charge prioritize preserving their own power within the organization over fulfilling the organization’s mission.”⁴⁴

Another approach—and one that can also face resistance—is what is known as the worker self-directed nonprofit, which applies management strategies in the worker co-op sector to nonprofits. In this alternative, as employed by such nonprofit organizations as the Sustainable Economy Law Center and others, a collective management structure is used to spread decision-making authority among workers throughout the organization.⁴⁵

There are additional steps as well that movements can and must take beyond the nonprofit sector. For instance, the Carolina Federation, a North Carolina 501(c)(4) advocacy group, centers its political and economic power-building work in nine DNA principles, specifying the core values that guide their work—including solidarity, the need for structural economic change, and a commitment to developing leaders and repairing harm.⁴⁶ Education in community economics is also key. In the Bronx, co-op organizers have partnered with public school teachers to develop a curriculum where high school students “learn by doing.”⁴⁷ As Harold McDougall, author of *Black Baltimore*, has put it, advancing liberation requires building “a cooperative economic, political, and social system that grows out of the community itself.”⁴⁸ In a thriving community, this civic infrastructure acts as a kind of “shadow government.”⁴⁹ There are many examples of this. The Black Panther Party offers a prominent US historical example of creating a parallel community-based power structure. As co-op author and scholar Jessica Gordon Nembhard and her daughter Susan Nembhard have written, “The Panthers engaged in community organizing to manage and provide myriad services to their communities. Notable successes include distribution of free shoes, clothing, healthcare, and food that was often produced through cooperatives and collective activity. . . . Solidarity and cooperative economic activity allowed them to walk their talk and provide viable alternatives.”⁵⁰

THE ROAD AHEAD

It isn’t enough that we affirm the idea that movements for social justice are connected—movements must envision a different economy altogether, and organize to put it into place. So, what comes next? What does a more democratic economy look, taste, and feel like?

Emily Kawano of the US Solidarity Economy Network has noted that the core values of a solidarity economy are: “solidarity”; “participatory democracy”; “equity in all dimensions—race, class, gender, abilities, etc.”; “sustainability”; and “pluralism.”⁵¹ As Kawano observes, this is a “big tent.”⁵² Indeed, it is. Kawano offers an explicitly post-capitalist vision, one that we support. But the same principles can—and do—also motivate more reform-minded movement advocates, such as activist-scholars Chris Benner and Manuel Pastor.⁵³

Vision is one piece of the puzzle. A second piece is to identify and critique common economic practices—such as the cost-shifting practices of private equity or the extractive



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practices of nominally nonprofit universities—that undermine solidarity economic principles.⁵⁴ Yet another is to center broad-based ownership in the work and, in particular, to implement strategies that shift ownership of the means of economic production and resource allocation from the wealthiest 1 percent to the broad majority; participatory processes regarding investment and planning (such as participatory budgeting) are also critical in this regard. And we must celebrate victories when they occur—be it the formation of a new co-op enterprise or advances of worker rights through unionization and union–community coalitions.

As NPQ's Cyndi Suarez has pointed out, moving forward does not require agreement on everything or even most things. Indeed, she labels the assumption that agreement is always the preferred condition the “fetish of agreement,” and observes that an insistence on agreement on everything often paralyzes movements.⁵⁵ We would contend that agreement on direction and a willingness of movement actors to work through difference is what the idea of *movement economies* is all about.

The good news is that we are currently living through a moment where everyday people and movement activists are taking this charge of seeking structural change seriously. New approaches to resisting exploitation and organizing the economy differently are not just abstract ideas, and many current efforts to realize what's possible are built on the premise that struggles are connected through solidarity and a respect for multiplicity. Black Lives Matter activists traveled to the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in 2016 to protest the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, joining demonstrations there and organizing others across the country to link Black and Indigenous struggles against common oppressors. The Debt Collective, at the forefront of the ongoing push to cancel the \$1.757 trillion (as of December 31, 2022) held in student debt by over 43.8 million

borrowers in this country, also builds their movement on the vision of a world entirely without debt—one with not just free college but also universal healthcare, affordable housing, and without prisons.⁵⁶ And the Amazon Labor Union—which grew, independently, from energy coming from the ground up at the JFK8 Amazon Fulfillment Center—successfully organized the first union at the tech giant in 2022, on the premise that the majority non-White workforce needed a new approach that centered the experiences of working-class people of color.⁵⁷

As Stephen Lerner, Sarita Gupta, and Joseph McCartin wrote in the *Boston Review* a few years ago, the worker movement is a cause for hope: “The left is alive with creative energy not seen in many decades.”⁵⁸ Since then, interest in unions has continued to soar, with labor organizing advancing in crucial sectors such as media, service work, and in industry.⁵⁹ Increasingly, the public is questioning whether capitalism works, and coming up empty. Struggles today are beginning to foreground intersectionality in explicit ways, but this is still a work in progress. As Maurice Mitchell, national director of the Working Families Party, has noted, many still “battle inequity and oppression inside our movements.”⁶⁰

In 2020, polls showed that somewhere between 15 and 26 million people had participated in the demonstrations against police brutality after the murder of George Floyd, making the protests the largest in the history of the United States.⁶¹ But the question remains whether this newfound energy is strong enough to concretely realize the world for which millions of people are fighting. In the early 2010s, movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter sharply articulated the state of economic inequality, financialization, state repression, and structural racism in US political reality. The effects of these influential movements are widespread, inspiring organizing that led to the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign;⁶² renewed attention to democracy within major industrial unions;⁶³ real efforts to

reduce police budgets in some cities;⁶⁴ demands for student debt cancellation;⁶⁵ the youth-led movement to combat climate change;⁶⁶ and more.

That's the good news. The less good news: there are still deep flaws. Writing about Occupy in 2021 at the movement's tenth anniversary, Occupy Wall Street activists Cheyenna Layne Weber and Ali Issa have acknowledged this. As they pointed out, "The camp replicated the same forms of oppression and violence that existed—and continue to exist—in our dominant US culture. Most of the Occupiers were White, and the movement often alienated communities of color."⁶⁷ There has been progress since, but some of the dynamics that Weber and Issa identify in terms of incomplete movement structure and difficulties in bridging across race and difference persist.⁶⁸

The dynamics of racial justice organizing are very different, but the movement has its own challenges, one of which is its dependence on philanthropic funding. Shortly after the murder of George Floyd, Will Cordery, a nationally prominent philanthropic advisor and consultant, pointedly reminded philanthropy that racial justice funding increased sharply in

2014, after the uprising in Ferguson, only to recede just two years later after the 2016 elections. Cordery warned philanthropy not to repeat this pattern, yet signs of slippage were apparent as early as fall 2021.⁶⁹

The task, in short, is to build the infrastructure, institutions, and movement connectivity needed to foster structural change. This, as we have observed, is not easy. As Mitchell notes, movements must overcome their internal incoherence and prioritize base-building, shared power analysis, collective visioning on grounded solutions, and democratic and strategic organizations to succeed. "We are closer than we think to such a reality," he writes, but "[w]e must go through a humbling but necessary period of change to achieve it."⁷⁰

Bringing the question of *movement economies* to the fore not only helps shed light on the challenges in achieving structural economic change but also elevates the people who are making those changes in real time. The time to inquire into how movements can more effectively integrate economic justice into their social transformation work is *now*. After all, the goal is not simply to develop ideas but to enact them.

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“Educational Purposes” Nonprofit Land as a Vital Site of Struggle

by Davarian L. Baldwin

■
This story, about the monetization of nonprofit land and the mounting demands for community control, offers us a critical touchstone for grasping some conditions of precarity; but it also points the way to forging a different path in the world—one beyond today's late capitalism.

A

t the height of the pandemic, I was swept up in a titanic battle being waged over the right to a city.¹ That city was New Haven, Connecticut. I found myself in the middle of a David and Goliath struggle between the citizens of the town and its biggest economic powerhouse: Yale University. At the center of the story remains a pivotal question, with implications that reach far beyond New Haven: Who actually benefits from the land controlled by wealthy nonprofits?

There was no better example of the costs of wealthy nonprofit land control than Yale University's dominance over New Haven. And the city's residents were starting to push back. 2020 found New Haven residents, organized by the coalition New Haven Rising, storming the city's March 30th Zoom budget meeting to express their disgust at Yale University's continued strain on the city's finances. In a campaign that was ultimately called “Yale: Pay Your Fair Share,” many pointed to the university's vast, tax-exempt property holdings as one of the biggest landholders in the city. This publicly subsidized real estate portfolio, as they pointed out, sits in sharp contrast to the deficit-ridden New Haven public schools hungry for property-tax dollars. Two months later, residents followed up with a 600-vehicle “Respect Caravan” that brought downtown traffic to a halt.²

While immersed in organizing, this powerful coalition of residents, university wage-workers, city alders, and students were also reading. Members of the New Haven Rising coalition reached out to me in 2021, including Edwin Camp and Barbara Vereen, who told me that Yale's powerful hold on the city had made them



Today, universities turn their research into lucrative commercial goods and patents in a range of fields, from the pharmaceutical industries and software products to health services and military defense weaponry.

feel sometimes isolated, but they finally saw their struggles reflected in my book, *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities*.³ In this book, I explored what happens to host communities when wealthy nonprofit organizations control exorbitant amounts of land in our cities and towns. New Haven Rising insisted I put down the pen and join their fight. Given the work that I was doing around universities and cities, how could I refuse?

Even before getting to New Haven's Prospect Street, I could hear that residents and organizers had already begun the process of taking back a piece of the city. On a sunny May afternoon, they had disrupted the quiet and solemn atmosphere of Yale's ivy-covered stone buildings with the sound of R&B and hip hop blasting from a powerful sound system.⁴ Once on Prospect, I was awash in a sea of excitement and activity as over 150 residents, labor activists, students, and onlookers buzzed about, handing out food and water, playing with young children, stewarding informational tables, dancing to the music, and finishing a massive art project that immediately drew my attention. This rally sat in the shadows of Yale, but school was in session out on Prospect Street.

I was brought there to discuss how the Yale struggle is situated within a much larger national context, but all of my words and research paled in the face of the stunning data visualization before me. Comrade artists had begun by painting a tiny red stripe on Prospect St, representing Yale's then-\$13 million annual voluntary contribution for taxes. This was juxtaposed with a massive 670-foot blue stripe that ran the length of the block, to capture the university's then-\$30 billion endowment. The visual contrast between this nonprofit university's financial contribution and its wealth accumulation was stunning. And the endowment was just the beginning of the story.

Speaker after speaker offered moving testimonies of what it means when one of a city's biggest landholders is a tax-exempt nonprofit like Yale University. A young adult explained how Yale's expansion into the neighborhood was a direct agent of violence, both raising property values and pushing youth into dangerous enemy gang territory.

Students and teachers described how their property-tax-starved schools had outdated textbooks, overcrowded classrooms without enough seats, and bathrooms with no soap. The connections here between university prosperity and neighborhood impoverishment were direct and deadly, and the nonprofit control over land was the smoking gun.

HEDGE FUNDS THAT CONDUCT CLASSES

We have largely presumed that higher education is an inherent public good, most clearly marked by its tax-exempt status. Colleges, universities, and their medical centers are registered with the Internal Revenue Service as 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofit organizations. Because higher education institutions provide the public good of education to surrounding communities, their property holdings are exempt from taxation in all 50 states. Even on the point of educational service, one could question the legitimacy of this arrangement, as schools become increasingly more selective and target out-of-state students who pay a larger tuition.⁵ But furthermore, we must consider the broader implications of the financial consequences wrought by this property arrangement.

In today's higher-education landscape, classrooms filled with professors and students have become a minor side business on the increasingly profitable college campus. The greater value of campus land is in its nonprofit tax-exempt status, which serves as a financial shelter for profitable research and private investors. The meteoric rise of the knowledge economy positions schools as financial titans in our big cities and small towns, and the financial arrangements produced by the tax-exemption of nonprofit land is central to their wealth hoarding. After a group of universities lobbied to pass the Bayh-Dole Act in 1980, higher education institutions could now take the results from publicly funded research and convert it into intellectual property.⁶ Schools like Stanford, MIT, and Yale immediately scrambled to create technology transfer offices that helped them privatize and profit from the work done in laboratories sitting on tax-exempt land.⁷ Today, universities turn their research into lucrative commercial goods and

Under the cover of “educational purposes,” research that has the potential to produce millions in patents—let alone the revenues from construction or health services—benefits from the reduced overhead of sitting on property-tax-exempt campus land.

patents in a range of fields, from the pharmaceutical industries and software products to health services and military defense weaponry.⁸ And after the fall of factories in the United States, knowledge has become the new face of capitalism, with university bell towers described in glowing terms as the smokestacks of today’s cities and towns.⁹

Both university leaders and city and town officials laud the “economic impact” that comes from the public–private partnerships now converging on campus land.¹⁰ The research makes lifesaving discoveries, trains the next generation of knowledge workers, generates spin-off companies, and attracts new investors and workers to invest back into cities. And now, from New York’s Cornell Tech on Roosevelt Island and the new Arizona State University Polytechnic campus in Mesa to the glittering glass and steel partnership between Amazon and Virginia Tech, everyone wants a campus. Such campus formations don’t even account for the millions made off of uncompensated “student athletes” and the low-wage workers who service massive tax-exempt college sports stadiums in the same neighborhoods.¹¹

After decades of urban disinvestment, many urbanites celebrate these schools as “anchor institutions” to help drive their area’s big comeback or renewal.¹² Today’s schools redirect to cities and college towns what used to be known as “suburban research parks”¹³ and now are termed “innovation districts,” in which academic research and corporate sponsors bring together real estate development, various forms of retail, and relatively cheap knowledge labor.¹⁴ Once-impoverished neighborhoods, largely populated by residents of color, are now being redeveloped to optimize “value capture” via the conversion of city or town blocks into both research and real estate development profit-making ventures.¹⁵

Local governments, developers, and universities reap economic rewards by dressing up spaces of academic/industry collaboration in a mix of luxury housing, storefronts, classrooms, and laboratories. Real estate developers like Wexford: Science + Technology have calculated the benefits of working on property-tax-exempt campus land. Wexford

focuses exclusively on what they call “knowledge communities” and works with cities and schools to build a monied portfolio of university-affiliated projects like Philadelphia’s UCity Square, Converge Miami, and Aggie Square in Sacramento.¹⁶

Under the cover of “educational purposes,” research that has the potential to generate millions in patent revenues—let alone the revenues from construction or health services—benefits from the reduced overhead of sitting on property-tax-exempt campus land. Again, these financial and spatial arrangements can be quite lucrative for cities, towns, universities, and their private investors. But exactly how does this anchor model benefit the residents who live in the surrounding neighborhoods and most likely also clean the campus floors, work in its labs, or secure its perimeters?

As we saw in the case of New Haven residents or with the developments of Wexford, a critical paradox has emerged from higher education’s nonprofit status that is especially acute when thinking about the issue of land: property-tax exemption is meant to signal higher education’s public good but actually allows for an easier transfer of public dollars into a school’s private developments. Even public universities, which are in fact government entities, use this public good status to secure their own interests in for-profit research and/or to shelter the financial security of private developers and investors that sit on campus land.

First, the profitable research produced for private companies in educational buildings creates what former New Haven mayor Toni Harp has called a “property tax gray area.”¹⁷ Second, many schools also reap the benefits of police and fire protection, snow and trash removal, road maintenance, and public schools—all public amenities that are usually funded by property taxes. The property tax exemption of nonprofits then passes the financial burden of public services on to the host cities and their residents.

In 2016, Princeton University was ordered to pay more than \$18 million to settle a lawsuit with residents of the historically Black neighborhood of Witherspoon-Jackson. Residents discovered a noticeable jump in their property tax

One plaintiff in the Princeton case was so disgusted that he dismissed the university as a “hedge fund that conducts classes.” It’s the kind of insult increasingly lobbed at today’s schools, with NYU often described as a “real estate company which also issues degrees.”

bills but few structural improvements in the neighborhood—and wondered why. They realized that nearby university buildings remained tax exempt while research for the pharmaceutical company, Eli Lilly, generated millions of dollars in commercial royalties in those same school buildings. One plaintiff in the Princeton case was so disgusted that he dismissed the university as a “hedge fund that conducts classes.”¹⁸ It’s the kind of insult increasingly lobbed at today’s schools, with NYU often described as a “real estate company which also issues degrees.”

Many have described these new financial arrangements as the “corporatization of the university.” But while accurate in some ways, such descriptions can also be misleading: the property-tax exemption afforded university campus developments actually reveals how their nonprofit status creates financial benefits specific to nonprofits *that exceed explanations of corporatization* and require their own analysis.

For example, I received a phone call from a Missouri local official serving an inner-ring St. Louis suburb (aptly called University City),¹⁹ describing how the distinct status of higher education brought unique forms of exploitation to his community. After the nearby (and more affluent) town of Clayton halted Washington University’s campus expansion in St. Louis, the school turned to the nearby, more vulnerable working-class, multiracial town of University City. The school has started to buy up multifamily residential properties in the community for student housing. And the conversion of these buildings into what are sometimes derisively called “mini-dorms” not only takes the properties off the tax rolls but also inflates land values beyond the reach of the working-class single families who have traditionally called University City home.²⁰ And this tax hustle is not unique to wealthy, private schools. Let’s turn to Arizona State University.

In 2018, with a six-to-one vote, the Tempe City Council approved an Omni Hotel and Conference Center project that would pay almost no sales tax for up to 30 years. It would also pay no property taxes, because it was slated to sit on university land owned by the Arizona Board of

Regents.²¹ Meanwhile, as in many states, Arizona continued to pull back on its contributions to public higher education.

Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University and a self-proclaimed “academic entrepreneur,” was unabashed about looking for new “revenue stream[s]”.²² ASU realized that in real-estate-friendly Arizona, they could lease their tax-exempt land directly to private companies. And instead of shelling out property taxes, such companies make a lower direct payment to the university. In this arrangement, the state legislature has no say on how the money is spent—which is usually on such things as new sports stadiums and the gigantic salaries of high-profile athletic coaches, like former NFL coach Herm Edwards.²³ Such university developments simultaneously raise property values and contribute little to public services. The most embarrassing edifice to this type of land scheme is the State Farm Insurance regional headquarters that sits on ASU land. This is the largest commercial development in Arizona, and it pays just a fraction of its property-tax burden, with public service costs passed on to residents.

In January 2019, Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich sued the Arizona Board of Regents for, essentially, renting out its tax-exempt status to private businesses.²⁴ Few were surprised when the State Supreme Court dismissed the case in developer-friendly Arizona. The Arizona Supreme Court recently revived this lawsuit,²⁵ but ASU continues to expand its campus projects throughout the region, including a Wexford-developed innovation campus in downtown Phoenix. Such unabashed manipulations of the property-tax gray area of nonprofits have only multiplied in recent years—but these glaring acts of exploitation, in the name of the public good, have not come without a response.

EQUITABLE URBAN COMMUNITIES: THE SMART CITIES LAB APPROACH

As I continued to work with the members of New Haven Rising, the experience was transformative. With all of the data accumulated from writing *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower*, I created the Smart Cities Lab, to research and

The work here is guided by a mantra heard in the communities where I studied and struggled: *The smartest cities develop without displacement.*

consult on best practices for building equitable urban communities. Given my work, it specifically focuses on university-driven urban development. The notion of “smart” has often focused on technological innovations and sustainable design, and I asked: What about the people—the diverse and marginalized communities that struggle to maintain sustainable lives in changing urban locales? And not only what about them as victims of urban development, but also how can people’s practices of historical preservation, mutual aid, and even speculative/artistic visions of life serve as models for smarter cities?

The work here is guided by a mantra heard in the communities where I studied and struggled: *The smartest cities develop without displacement.* Admittedly, the work at SCL was initially quite academic, focusing mostly on data collection and research dissemination; but the twin forces of the global pandemic and the racial justice mobilization of summer 2020 found communities all over the country seeing themselves in my research and insisting that I push past research and toward advocacy.

I continued to work with the “Yale: Pay Your Fair Share” campaign, which ultimately forced the university to add \$52 million over the next six years to the city’s budget in compensation for property tax loss.²⁶ Of course, for a school with a now-\$41.4 billion endowment, \$10 million a year is little;²⁷ but this modest victory is important, because Yale identified the payments as tax compensation—which, after years of resistance, signals that schools do in fact have a fiscal responsibility to their host communities. Other communities have watched this development with great interest, and now the lab is working on various strategies to realign the land control of nonprofits with a more robust public good ethos.

We have worked with organizations in both Massachusetts and Rhode Island to push forward legislation that would force nonprofits into a greater fiscal responsibility for their property tax exemption. For years, the city of Boston asked wealthy nonprofits with property holdings over \$15 million to give 25 percent of what they would pay in property tax if they were for-profit entities. This calculation was designed to not penalize modest nonprofits and only account for the

percentage of tax collections that fund public services. And still, not one school ever paid the full 25 percent.²⁸ The lab is now working with a collection of residents and elected officials to make that 25 percent mandatory and applied statewide.

The lab has also supported communities in protracted land use battles in both Berkeley and Miami. As a way to generate more revenue, the University of California, Berkeley has continued to raise enrollments in violation of its Long Range Development Plan.²⁹ A mixture of affluent NIMBY types, historic preservationists, and working-class residents finally had enough. In a series of lawsuits, they generally demonstrated how unregulated enrollments, without enough campus housing, pushed students out into the city and shifted burdens for facilities onto the city; and private landlords converted single homes into “mini-dorms” to profit from the growing market.³⁰

We are working with various groups to highlight these real estate deals and private partnerships brokered by UC Berkeley in the name of serving the public good, and the lawsuits cite research from the lab. The involvement of NIMBY-type homeowners made the struggles over UC Berkeley’s profit-oriented developments a little murky, because, while far more complex, the fight over growing enrollments was spun as being led by disgruntled citizens more concerned with property values than expanded educational opportunities. But the broken promises of national developers like Wexford clearly demonstrate the exploitative nature of private investors seizing on the financial shelters provided by nonprofit campus land.

When Wexford partnered with the University of Miami to build their Miami Converge development, community organizers valiantly pushed back, forcing them to at least agree to lease ground floor spaces to nonprofits that served the Black and Latinx communities of Overtown and Allapattah that surround the property. Now those nonprofits are being threatened with eviction. Because SCL is working at a national scale, we use Wexford’s efforts to resolve tenant concerns at Miami Converge as a litmus test for Wexford outreach and development ambitions in other communities where we also work. In short, SCL’s global vision

Struggles over campus expansion have been instructive on their own, but the summer of 2020 protests also helped us clarify the central role that campus policing plays as a critical mechanism for higher education’s seizure—as well as control—of campus land in projects of expansion.

allows us to say that Wexford’s efforts to resolve the harms they are inflicting on our partners in Miami will dictate our capacity to support (or resist) the firm in other communities. One of those communities is the Black Bottom, located in West Philadelphia.³¹

Penn, Drexel, and other nonprofit members of the West Philadelphia Corporation have run rampant in the Black Bottom since the 1950s, displacing hundreds of Black families and, ultimately, renaming the area University City.³² SCL worked with community historians and residents to recover the original 1969 agreement for University City that came as a result of hard-fought community organizing.³³ The actual agreement mandated that affordable housing would exist alongside the university research and private development projects targeted for the area (to be renamed University City).

The recovery of this original plan happened just as UC Townhomes, the one affordable housing development in the area, is currently threatened with demolition to make way for the many med-tech investors and real estate developers that continue to feed on the breached agreement. (The development buzzards currently circling include Wexford.) SCL worked with Councilmember Jamie Gauthier to advocate for a modest inclusionary zoning overlay pilot to help compensate for the failure to construct affordable housing as outlined in the original commitment. We continue to partner with the organization Black Bottom Tribe to help craft their demands for a comprehensive reparations package in the face of historic damages caused by members of the West Philadelphia Corporation.³⁴

One modest form of repair came out of a meeting with medical students at Penn, in which I referenced the tons of food thrown away daily at school cafeterias as “low-hanging fruit” in building out more just land use practices in West Philadelphia. I talked about how that food could be easily repackaged into healthy meals for communities in need. A medical student, Cooper Penner, took me up on that challenge, and with the voluntary assistance of low-wage food service workers, is now running a food redistribution program from the Penn medical school cafeteria.

And even though the university—of course—benefits from the good publicity, it still (as of May 2023) fails to offer financial aid to this worthy endeavor.

We were also proud to offer support to the Baldwin Hills, Los Angeles, residents who faced eviction at the hands of Boston University (BU) this year.³⁵ When wealthy LA real estate developer Frederick Pardee died, he left these residential properties to his alma mater. BU initially favored profits that could come from the offers submitted by private developers—which would, of course, have made the nonprofit university a direct driver of gentrification and displacement. But after a resident-driven campaign (fought in the streets and on social media) built momentum, the university felt compelled to accept an offer from the tenants’ community land trust.³⁶

Struggles over campus expansion have been instructive on their own, but the summer of 2020 protests also helped us clarify the central role that campus policing plays as a critical mechanism for higher education’s seizure—as well as control—of campus land in projects of expansion. By working with organizations like the Cops Off Campus Coalition, SCL has also been able to develop an analysis of campus policing as a pernicious and violent mechanism of land control, labor management, and political disenfranchisement. The jurisdictional politics of campus policing reveal this higher education unit’s primary role as an agent of gentrification and displacement far above any claims to “community safety.”

Schools, including the University of Chicago, hold policing jurisdiction and arrest and detention powers wherever there is a campus building even just *projected* for development, while other institutions, like Yale and the University of Cincinnati, have Memorandum of Understanding agreements to police the entire city. And in an overwhelming number of states, the Freedom of Information Act exemption for private institutions is extended to campus police even when engaging nonuniversity residents. In practice, students at predominantly White institutions continue to be given amnesty for campus crimes, while the largely working-class neighborhoods and

During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, UCLA allowed this stadium to be used as a field jail to detain protestors without access to food, water, or medical attention.

communities of color in these host cities face overpolicing and racial profiling.

The disparities in policing share a common thread of signaling safety and convenience for students at predominantly White institutions alongside the researchers and investors that converge on lucrative campus lands. At the same time, the extended jurisdiction of these policing units allows the institution to regulate community behavior. Such university-oriented policing sets the stage for university affiliates and buildings to occupy spaces and retrofit neighborhood lands for university value capture.

The convergence here between the campus and policing extends beyond individual patrol units in host communities. Consider the struggles over UCLA's Jackie Robinson Stadium. Through the powerful UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy, we learn how universities deployed the legacy of a racial justice icon to both seize public lands and turn them into a detention center in the face of lawful public assembly and protest.³⁷ During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, UCLA allowed this stadium to be used as a field jail to detain protestors without access to food, water, or medical attention.³⁸

Moreover, this sports complex sits on land that was initially deeded to the federal government to serve disabled and houseless veterans. But over the twentieth century, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs abandoned its housing mandate and leased out parcels of the property to various agencies and nonprofits, including UCLA. When houseless veterans sued the VA in 2011 for lack of housing, a court ruled UCLA's lease illegal. But the university joined a lawsuit for the recovery of land and quickly began diversity-washing the property with the name Jackie Robinson. Now largely Black and Latinx veterans struggle to maintain lives in a "Veteran's Row" of makeshift shelters sitting along the fence of the VA.³⁹

And interest in these nonprofit land struggles has gone global. In the Netherlands, partners at Erasmus University's Vital Cities and Citizens watched as their institution partnered with local and regional government actors and other nonprofits to propose a Cultuur Campus project in

the largely immigrant community on Rotterdam's South Bank.⁴⁰ Colleagues saw devastating parallels with the work of my lab and their own experiences around nonprofit-driven land development and policing in this marginalized South Bank community. We are now thinking through efforts to negotiate more equitable terms for the host neighborhood that will surround this proposed development.

FORGING A DIFFERENT PATH

To be fair, the successes of the SCL have been piecemeal and incremental. Pushing higher education to reconsider its profit model is a daunting challenge. At the same time, it is in struggle, with communities, that we cocreate the building blocks for nonprofit land use strategies that serve a broader range of public interests and more equitable visions of community development.

SCL has partnered with the Humanities Action Lab at Rutgers University-Newark and Minnesota Transform to initiate *The Renewal Project*. This will be a research and public engagement project about higher education's largely untold national role in the devastating history of demolition and displacement during the urban renewal period following World War II.⁴¹ The work will include a mix of historical recovery, coursework, public commemorations, and—crucially—campaigns for reparations to atone for both historical harms and their present-day legacies.

There is no question that nonprofit land is a vital site of struggle for economic and racial justice; and in SCL's varied efforts of research and advocacy with communities on the ground, we have come to a series of broad conclusions that guide our work:

1. Colleges and universities must offer reparations for their role in in the slave economy, Indigenous land seizures,⁴² Jim Crow segregation, and urban renewal practices.
2. Schools must calculate some form of Payments in Lieu of Taxes for the public benefits they reap from tax abatement. Instead of a flat rate, we believe that educational institutions can contribute a

These schools, and their medical centers, are today's workshops . . . and their campuses are a critical urban land form that not only sets land values for whole cities but also has become the site of much broader struggles over affordable housing, living wages, neighborhood displacements, and democratic governance.

degree of PILOTs in relation to their contribution to local projects, including the transfer of endowments to community-serving financial institutions.

3. County or city/town assessors must develop a formula to properly evaluate higher education's land use claims of "educational purposes" on campus properties.
4. A community benefits agreement must be attached to all campus development projects, which can include affordable housing mandates, zip-code-specific job outreach and job training, and scholarships. Further, the common areas of all campus properties should be governed by a community charter to guarantee the equitable public use of campus space. Of course, CBAs have been created to uneven effect. So, in addition, city/town governments must create community-based zoning and/or planning boards with the legislative authority to approve or reject projects based on their community benefit.
5. Finally, both private school and state university police have functioned as an occupying force to protect the assets of campus developments through militarized mechanisms of land control. Yet crime

runs rampant on predominantly White campuses while surrounding neighborhoods of color face over-policing. We call for divestment from campus police and investment in teams of preventative outreach and trauma care alongside investments in housing and food security programs—all of which research proves actually reduce harms for everyone and are functions best provided by a university.⁴³

In the broadest sense, we must continue to discard the dated—and in some corners, persistent—myths of these nonprofits as simply "cathedrals of learning." In fact, these schools, and their medical centers, are today's workshops—our knowledge factories—and their campuses are a critical urban land form that not only sets land values for whole cities but also has become the site of much broader struggles over affordable housing, living wages, neighborhood displacements, and democratic governance. The challenges are vast, but the response has been mighty—and it is growing. This story, about the monetization of nonprofit land and the mounting demands for community control, offers us a critical touchstone for grasping some conditions of precarity; but it also points the way to forging a different path in the world—one beyond today's late capitalism.

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What Does It Mean to Dismantle Racial Capitalism Anyway?

by Saqib Bhatti and Bree Carlson

■ We are motivated to run the campaigns that we do because we want to live in a world where Black people and people of color can thrive. To us, this looks like improved access to healthcare, housing, and education. It looks like building not just individual, but community wealth. We know a better world is possible.

■ imagine this.

Flint, MI, has clean water and kids aren't poisoned by lead. All of our communities have fresh, potable water, and our lakes and rivers aren't polluted. Everyone is safely and comfortably housed. All of our children are well fed, and everyone has dental, medical, and mental healthcare.

These are just some of the things that we *should* have but that capitalism has robbed from us.

When one thinks about race and the economy, it's important to understand that economic exploitation is not primarily about the greed and racism of a few, but rather is structural, and historically grounded.

Capitalism, as designed, is *extractive*. And the extraction that led to the original accumulation of capital had a whole lot to do with what historians have called the Atlantic or triangular trade. The three vertices of the triangle were Europe (especially Great Britain), the Americas, and Africa. The way the trade worked is that Europeans would sell manufactured goods (and horses and alcohol) to (primarily) West Africans and in exchange purchase human beings. These human beings were taken in slave ships across the Atlantic to the Americas; those who survived the passage—and many did not—were enslaved principally in Brazil, the Caribbean, and the United States, and produced agricultural goods for sale in Europe (goods such as rum, sugar, cotton, tobacco, and coffee).¹

The profits from this trade were fundamental to the forming of a transnational capitalist class—and, of course, provided money that could purchase more human beings from West Africa. This human trade continued for over 200 years.



Within the United States, racial capitalism affects everyone but is especially deeply felt in Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities. At the international level, people—who are overwhelmingly of color in the Global South—are targeted with unsafe working conditions, low wages, toxic and polluting industries, displacement, and other forms of violence in the name of profit.

The amount of wealth extracted and accumulated in this manner was extraordinary. David Blight, the distinguished Yale historian, has pointed out that enslaved humans in 1860 were “the largest single financial asset in the entire U.S. economy, worth more than all manufacturing and railroads combined.”² And, to say the obvious, even though the Civil War ended slavery in the United States, structural racism has remained a constant in our economy to the present.³

A couple of years ago, during a podcast interview, Maurice BP-Weeks (a cofounder of the Action Center on Race & the Economy, where we work) highlighted the importance of this extraction. “The most important thing about the concept of wealth extraction for me is intentionality. . . . This isn’t a market inefficiency. It’s a strategic choice made by a set of actors.”⁴

The term *racial capitalism* was popularized by Cedric J. Robinson, a professor of political science and Black studies. Robinson encountered the term among scholars of apartheid South Africa in England, and adapted it for his 1983 book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, to foreground the racialized nature of global capitalism.⁵ Robinson argued that the system of capitalism emerged from and relied on the existence of an already racialized society, and thus there can be no separation between the two. To be clear, racial capitalism is not a type of capitalism that divides workers along the lines of race; rather, all existing capitalism is racial capitalism, and by using the term, today’s scholars and activists reinforce the centrality of race in the material mechanisms of our global economy.

Of course, describing our economy is one matter. Changing it is another. It is to that theme we turn below.

BUILDING A MOVEMENT AGAINST RACIAL CAPITALISM

We know what we are up against. Within the United States, racial capitalism affects everyone but is especially deeply

felt in Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities. At the international level, people—who are overwhelmingly of color in the Global South—are targeted with unsafe working conditions, low wages, toxic and polluting industries, displacement, and other forms of violence in the name of profit.

The way racial capitalism works in the United States means that exploitation occurs simultaneously along racial and class lines (and other factors, including gender). An example of this can be seen in the Paycheck Protection Program, the 2020 program approved by Congress with the stated goal of assisting businesses that were struggling to pay their workers in the wake of the COVID-19 economic shutdown. A 2021 *Reveal News* analysis of more than five million PPP loans in large metropolitan areas found that the rate of lending in majority-White neighborhoods was significantly higher than in majority-BIPOC neighborhoods.⁶ Specifically, Black-owned businesses were less likely to obtain PPP loans from banks due to the racial biases of lenders.⁷ This means that in 2020, the year of the so-called racial reckoning, “one of the largest financial [government] bailouts since the Great Depression” actually served to further the racial wealth gap.⁸

In our work, we aim to counter such tendencies as they manifest in both the policies of corporations and those of government agencies—be they federal, state, or local. Our campaigns are centered around racial economic justice. In doing so, we have always taken care to recognize the role that corporations—particularly in the finance and tech sectors—play in causing harm to communities of color. In response, we seek to devise interventions to counter that dynamic.

An example of our approach is the #StopShotSpotter campaign, which ACRE helps anchor and coordinate.⁹ ShotSpotter is an artificial-intelligence-powered gunshot-detection technology that is owned by the corporation that newly rebranded itself as SoundThinking. It is essentially a microphone that is placed in neighborhoods across cities that alerts the local police department of locations where sounds

Resistance to debt restructuring in Puerto Rico presents a second example of how interrelated campaigns challenge practices of racial capitalism. Banks targeted Puerto Rico with predatory and unsustainable debt deals because of technicalities specific to its colonial status.

that resemble gunshots are picked up. SoundThinking is a part of the growing surveillance-industrial complex that is being used to criminalize, police, and incarcerate people living in Black and people of color communities.

It is no surprise that the technology is extremely faulty and it is deployed almost exclusively in non-White neighborhoods.¹⁰ An investigation by the Associated Press found that “the system can miss live gunfire right under its microphones, or misclassify the sounds of fireworks or cars backfiring as gunshots.”¹¹ A study by the MacArthur Justice Center at Northwestern Law School in Evanston, IL, found that ShotSpotter has a false alarm rate of 89 percent.¹² The Office of the Inspector General of the City of Chicago reported, “[Chicago Police Department] responses to ShotSpotter alerts rarely produce documented evidence of a gun-related crime, rarely give rise to investigatory stops, and even less frequently lead to the recovery of gun crime-related evidence during an investigatory stop.”¹³

What ShotSpotter does do, however, is contribute to the overpolicing of Black and people of color communities, further increasing the risk of adverse police encounters. A 65-year-old Black man was thrown in jail for nearly a year after he was wrongly accused of murder based on a ShotSpotter alert.¹⁴ Adam Toledo, a 13-year-old Latino boy, was shot and killed by a Chicago police officer responding to a ShotSpotter alert in March 2021.¹⁵

Organizers in cities including Detroit, Durham, and Chicago are joining together through the #StopShotSpotter campaign to demand that their cities cancel their contracts with SoundThinking and to alert shareholders about the investment risk posed by the company’s dismal record. SoundThinking’s contracts with cities across the country turn public money into corporate profit by creating a market for a failed service targeting communities of color. SoundThinking has created a profit model based on false promises of public safety, turning the contributions of people of color to public funds against them via surveillance technologies and increased police encounters.

Racial capitalism gives us a framework for understanding why ShotSpotter exists and the intersecting mechanisms of harm that it inflicts on our communities. There isn’t anything explicitly racist, per se, about the technology behind ShotSpotter. It is a glorified microphone that is purportedly able to identify gunfire after it has already occurred. But that technology relies on racialized tropes of criminality and danger, is concentrated in poor Black and people of color urban neighborhoods, and is placed in the hands of departments staffed by racist police officers. Thus, SoundThinking’s executives and investors profit from and contribute to a racialized market.

Resistance to debt restructuring in Puerto Rico presents a second example of how interrelated campaigns challenge practices of racial capitalism. Banks targeted Puerto Rico with predatory and unsustainable debt deals¹⁶ because of technicalities specific to its colonial status.¹⁷ The deals burdened Puerto Rico with a debt load that was out of proportion to its revenues, which had suffered due to US colonialism, extraction, and climate catastrophe. When Puerto Rico was inevitably unable to pay back the debt, the hedge fund managers who owned the loans demanded that the government cut services, privatize schools, slash pensions, and lower the minimum wage so that they could profit by collecting the full value of the bonds they had purchased for “pennies on the dollar.”¹⁸ While Puerto Ricans were struggling to rebuild after the devastating Hurricane Maria, mortgage servicers owned by the private equity firms TPG Capital and the Blackstone Group were aggressively foreclosing on their homes.¹⁹

Puerto Ricans living on the island as well as those on the US mainland organized against this Wall Street profiteering. In Puerto Rico, community leaders, students, union members, and retirees banded together and held demonstrations calling for the cancellation of Puerto Rico’s predatory debt. Ultimately, the debt was reduced by more than \$25 billion.²⁰

Stateside, Puerto Ricans in New York,²¹ New Jersey,²² and Florida²³ pushed their state pension funds to refuse any new investments in private equity firms that were foreclosing on Puerto Ricans in the aftermath of the hurricane. The New Jersey

We believe one answer lies in taking on tangible fights that empower people to make a real impact on their lives *and* that have a real chance of winning. That helps build the bases of our movement organizations, while also starting a broader national conversation about the allocation of power and resources in our economy.

pension fund confirmed that no new investments were being considered and voted to urge TPG to participate in negotiations with Puerto Rican advocates.²⁴ After sustained pressure and demonstrations, the TPG-owned servicers eventually gave in to demands to implement foreclosure moratoriums.²⁵

The framework of racial capitalism helps movement activists and leaders to understand the interconnectedness of colonial extraction and racism in the treatment of Puerto Rico by the United States and US-based corporations. Anti-Blackness and White supremacy serve as the foundation upon which Puerto Rico's colonization exists; thus, when finance companies target Puerto Rico as a playground for extraction, they depend on the racialization of the state and its people to justify their actions.

DISMANTLING RACIAL CAPITALISM: TOWARD A LONG-TERM AGENDA

By running campaigns that target finance and technology corporations, we can challenge two central nodes of power in the oligarchic political-economic system that upholds and profits from racial capitalism in the United States and the world.

More broadly, campaigns aim to make the racist practices of corporations explicit, expose the corporations profiting from racism, and force public officials to stop funneling public dollars to corporations and instead direct those resources to public services that improve all communities. As Georgetown philosopher Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò smartly put it, the broader strategic issue is that “If it is true that racism and capitalism are in a mutually supporting relationship, then we should expect that any potentially effective anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles will also be mutually supporting.”²⁶ This means we must focus our aim not just on structural racism and not just on capitalism, but rather on how those two forces are interconnected and intertwined. This, for us, is the heart of the racial capitalism concept—and why we must always keep this front of mind in our work.

As one of us observed in a *Nation* interview a year ago, too often, when it comes to movement strategy, “We play

checkers, they [corporate executives] play chess. And unless we straighten that out, we're always going to be chasing results while playing their game.”²⁷

We are motivated to run the campaigns that we do because we want to live in a world where Black people and people of color can thrive. To us, this looks like improved access to healthcare, housing, and education. It looks like building not just individual, but community wealth. We know a better world is possible. Across the country, we hear of stories about emergency mental health services that don't involve calling the cops; we hear of community land trusts that are keeping rents below market and allowing residents to build equity; and so many more alternatives to our current reality.²⁸ We must find ways to support these alternatives so that they can scale.

This work, however, must be linked to a sharp analysis that also directly challenges the power centers of racial capitalism. For us, this means a range of things. In finance, for example, it involves challenging the undemocratic nature of the Federal Reserve to make it more responsive to the public and shift its focus from supporting Wall Street to financing needed public infrastructure (such as renewable energy) on the one end, while advocating for public, community-controlled banks in places like Chicago and Philadelphia to facilitate local community investment, supported by city deposits, on the other.²⁹ In the world of work, it means actively challenging the “gig economy.”³⁰ It also means supporting community-centered strategies that leverage labor union power, like Bargaining for the Common Good.³¹

In all this, we know that racial capitalism is, like the hydra, a many-headed monster. In this work, there is no one right answer—and anyone who tells you otherwise has surely not examined the nature of contemporary racial capitalism very closely. We believe one answer lies in taking on tangible fights that empower people to make a real impact on their lives *and* that have a real chance of winning. That helps build the bases of our movement organizations, while also starting a broader national conversation about the allocation of power and resources in our economy.

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Building Movement- Accountable Government

A Conversation with

Steve Dubb, Rithika Ramamurthy, and Maurice Mitchell

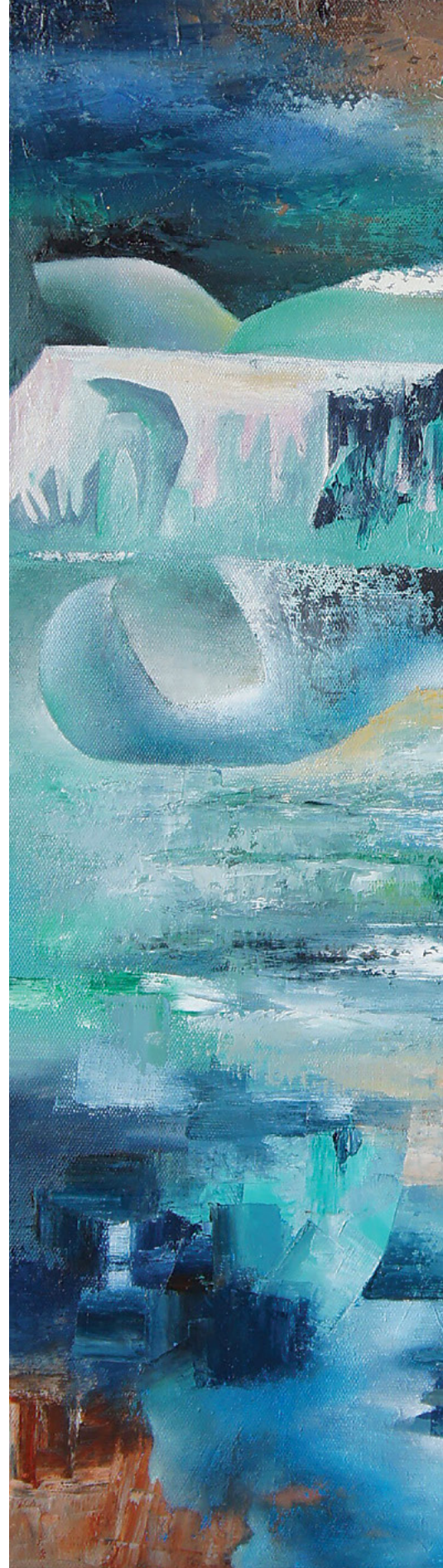
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“We need to talk about economic justice in an integrated way. It can’t be economic justice over here, and racial justice over here, and political power over here.

Otherwise, we can think about it in a competitive way, which is very unhelpful. It needs to be both/and. We need as much power as we can muster, we need as many tools as we can devise, and we need to use these tools in concert.”

This conversation with Maurice Mitchell, national director of the Working Families Party, and NPQ’s Steve Dubb and Rithika Ramamurthy, explores the connections among politics, economic justice, and social movements—building in part on Maurice Mitchell’s fall 2022 article, “Building Resilient Organizations: Toward Joy and Durable Power in a Time of Crisis.”¹

Rithika Ramamurthy: Could you talk a little bit about your background in student organizing? How did your youth organizing lead you to decide to make social movement work your career?

Maurice Mitchell: I was a middle school student, and there happened to be a youth group with one staff person that organized the regional high schools around peace and justice issues. The group organized my older brothers, and I got pulled into it. That’s how I got acclimated to the idea of being an organizer, even though the work that we were doing wasn’t necessarily very rigorous—it was more of a discussion group than anything else. Here, I also got acclimated to the themes and issues of social justice.







It was really in college that I started practicing organizing and activism in earnest, after one of my classmates was killed by the police. That was catalyzing for a lot of people on our campus. A college campus is a unique setting; it isn't like society at large. It's a place where a lot of young people with more free time than they know what to do with challenge their ideas, form their personalities, and develop sensibilities that will be with you for a lifetime. For me, it was a great setting to decide that ultimately, I wanted to make a commitment to social change. It was in those years that I made that lifelong commitment.

Steve Dubb: Your Working Families Party bio cites Hurricane Sandy, which destroyed your home in Long Island in 2012, and the murder of Michael Brown in 2014 as being two critical events in your life. How have these two events influenced your views of economic and racial justice work?

MM: Hurricane Sandy was a traumatic moment for both me and my family. We became storm refugees, and I was homeless. Dealing with both the experience of homelessness and all of the other challenges recovering from something as devastating as a superstorm like [Hurricane] Sandy had a huge impact on me.

As devastating as it was, my family and I speak English, and even though my parents are immigrants, they weren't undocumented. And I'm tech savvy, so we were able to apply for FEMA aid. As I was helping us get through it, I recognized all the institutional barriers that made it really difficult for us—and made it near impossible for others. This shaped my understanding of how climate impacts communities; how race, class, and gender intersect with climate; how climate is an economic justice issue in a real way. It lit a fire in me to want to do more organizing, even while I was homeless, so I kept going. Even though I was facing these challenges, I kept on doing the work—and I felt even more convinced.

The experience of being on the ground during Ferguson was inspirational. I feel like I learned a tremendous amount during that time. I left everything that I knew behind to embed within and support the Organization for Black Struggle, maybe a week or two after Michael Brown was killed. It was so inspiring to see all those people—mainly working-class

Black people—organizing organically, not in any “traditional” way. People across all age groups and identities working together, united around justice: justice for Mike Brown, and justice for all Black people. I felt like I saw the future when I was on the ground in Ferguson. I felt that if other people could feel just a modicum of what I felt, they would be inspired to want to carry that not just in their hearts but into their communities, and that we could spark a movement. And we did—we built a movement that became international. But it started in the hearts of the people of Ferguson, who acted with uncommon courage and gave others, people like me, permission to act.

RR: This powerful context brings us to 2018, when you made a shift from working in the Movement for Black Lives to working with the Working Families Party. Can you talk about the reasons for that shift?

MM: One of the things that I noticed in the Movement for Black Lives was that when we were protesting, we were all in *questions*. Social movements—when they're at their best—call questions and raise contradictions. When they're really at their best, those questions demand answers and those contradictions demand resolution. But who answers those questions? Who resolves those contradictions?

After Michael Brown's death, as calls for justice around Michael Brown became a national discussion, a company named Taser International [now Axon]—the number one producer of body cameras—offered their product as a solution. They lobbied city councils, mayors, state legislatures, Congress, and the White House around their product, and even at one point offered it for free.²

During the call for justice on the streets in Ferguson, working-class Black folks were calling for justice, calling the question—and the answer came from a multinational corporation. It was an alley-oop play, where capital was dunking the ball. I wanted to interrupt that. I wanted people who are accountable to our movements to be in a position to ask the question, but also to answer it. One tool that working people have is the ability to democratically elect people to public office. We don't have access to capital, but our government has the capacity to both constrain capital and to provide answers to those questions. If we build the muscle of movement-accountable governance, where our people actually govern, then we'll be in a position where movements can raise the contradictions and then governance can provide resolutions.

That's one of the reasons I went to the Working Families Party. When Trump became president, it became even more clear that we needed to build a multiracial solidarity movement to oppose White nationalism. We needed a multiracial electoral united front, and it needed to be explicit about race, class, and gender. It needed to be inviting, it needed to be bold, and I felt like I had the experiences, the tools, and the desire to build that. WFP was, at the time, and continues to be the most advanced project bringing together that multiracial, working-class electoral united front.

SD: Could you discuss how you see social movements and political parties interacting with each other? How do political parties build and maintain that accountability to the movements?

MM: There should be a healthy relationship between social movements and political parties where social movements, again, are pushing for the world we want to live in and pushing the Overton window, and political parties secure the victories to make it possible. Social movements should be in the lead, and political parties should follow, through policy and government, with the gains that social movements demand.

But there are also real differences between their roles, and I think the more understanding there is about that, the better their relationship can be. Social movements and political parties are accountable to the same politics, but elections are majoritarian. You need to get to 50 percent plus one if you want to win an election. Social movements don't need to be majoritarian to be effective. When people hit the street, you just need a lot of people. It doesn't need to be the majority of people. As long as there's a lot of people and there's intensity, then you have mobilization. Social movements are often able to call on people to make binary choices; they ask: "Which side are you on?" Elected officials do not always do that. Elected officials often bring together broad coalitions of people that disagree on a lot of things. There may be divergent and necessary sets of prerogatives for a social movement or a politician that's seeking election. What I need to do to get elected this year might be very different than what an activist might need to do in the context of an ongoing movement. Both might be necessary but different. When that lane distinction isn't clear, it can create tensions and breakdowns. Conversation and trust between movements and parties could mitigate those breakdowns.

"Governing power, worker power, organized labor, and other kinds of worker power are the various nonextractive, nonexploitative economic strategies. And these economic strategies can't be divorced from political ones. This is why we need an ecosystem approach."

RR: You've written that "we need institutions for a powerful and durable movement." What do you see as the key institutions that are needed to advance economic justice? What role do you see unions playing? What role do you see solidarity economy organizations like worker cooperatives playing?

MM: We need many different types of institutions. You could call it an ecosystem, or a team, where everyone plays a different position. But I think if you're serious about economic power, you have to be serious about governing power. Organized capital is very successful at capturing government, so we need to have a parallel governance strategy. That's why WFP exists.

But on the flip side, simply getting people elected and controlling the machinery without an economic power strategy is also very limited. We need to build both, and they need to be aligned. Governing power, worker power, organized labor, and other kinds of worker power are the various nonextractive, nonexploitative economic strategies. And these economic strategies can't be divorced from political ones. This is why we need an ecosystem approach, where the different actors intentionally talk to one another. Our elected officials and politicians, their campaigns, need resources in order to win. The corporate politicians, they have corporate lobbies and private interests. We need *our* interests. We need our economic base. We have small-dollar donations from individuals, but we need nonextractive, nonexploitative industries supporting our political projects. And our political projects should be helping the economic interests of working people.

SD: You've noted that nonprofits are, in some important respects, incompatible with power building, yet there seem

“The way that people live their lives is not in a reductionist way. People are just living their lives; they don’t decide to be Black or working class and then toggle between identities. Choosing to have an ‘intersectional practice’ is just a practical choice.”

to be few signs of movement organizations becoming more independent of philanthropy. What needs to shift to build institutions compatible with power building?

MM: Currently, most institutions that do this work are 501(c)(3) nonprofits, and a significant percentage of the income is coming from philanthropy and high-net-worth individuals. I think it’s obvious why that isn’t sustainable long term. But imagine a world with vibrant, nonextractive, nonexploitative economies that were explicitly political, saw themselves as the economic reflection of people’s organizations, and made significant investments in organizations that helped create their conditions. I get excited thinking about that. Imagine a world where all the things that our organizations invest in, all of those things, all of those vendors, they’re part of that economy. Currently, a lot of the resources that go into our organizations come from and go into an extractive economy. What if we thought critically about owning the means of political production? We try to think about that at WFP. We spend too little time thinking about nonextractive revenue generation, owning the means of production, owning the means of political production, and building economies that can support people’s organizations. We need to ensure that our organizations provide real, material benefits to the people they serve, and that a mass base of people own and direct these organizations. Dues are one way to do it, but I don’t think we can dues our way out of this. We need a multifaceted approach to funding our movements.

RR: How are movement actors talking about economic justice today, and how should they be talking about economic justice?

MM: We need to talk about economic justice in an integrated way. It can’t be economic justice over here, and racial justice

over here, and political power over here. Otherwise, we can think about it in a competitive way, which is very unhelpful. It needs to be both/and. We need as much power as we can muster, we need as many tools as we can devise, and we need to use these tools in concert. We need to nest all these strategies; we need to nest all of these tools.

SD: In the past, movements for economic justice have often underplayed the need to address structural racism. At the same time, sometimes racial justice movements fall short in addressing class inequality.

MM: That’s one of the reasons why I came to the WFP—because you need to be honest at the doors if you want to win. You have to tell no lies—and that means talking about race and class. You can’t be reductionist on either end if you want to tell a true story. It’s a completely false choice. The way that people live their lives is not in a reductionist way. People are just living their lives; they don’t decide to be Black or working class and then toggle between identities. Choosing to have an “intersectional practice” is just a practical choice; it’s choosing to live and communicate with people about the world the way they live in it. Organizing 101 says “Meet people where they’re at.” I just think a lot of these class versus race debates demonstrate a disconnection from the field. On the ground, those realities are just so present. If you’re actually on the ground in a working-class community and you have eyes and ears, you’ll see all of those contradictions—race, class, and gender—and it would be foolish not to articulate them.

SD: Where do you see opportunity to build efforts that effectively address both the class and racism aspects of racial capitalism?

MM: There’s an organization, Detroit Action, that does economic justice work in Black Detroit. It’s all about economic justice, but it also is all about racial justice. It’s just about both, and they do rigorous organizing work. The work isn’t theoretical; it is real and material in people’s lives. They are a group that wrestles with this experiment every day. They don’t make distinctions. It’s just in their DNA.

RR: You have said, “We are in a transformational moment.” Yet you have also noted that corporate and billionaire power is continuing to expand. Where do you see the economic justice organizing going, and what steps do you think are required to realize the transformational promise that you see?



MM: Corporate and billionaire power is expanding in a dialectical way. As corporate and billionaire power expands, organizing opportunities do, too. I recently met with Nwamaka Agbo of the Kataly Foundation, and she was sharing several projects. These are exciting because they attempt to wrestle with neoliberal capitalism, living in a time of intense corporate and billionaire power, and leveraging capital in a disruptive and subversive way that can lead toward liberation and new economic models. We have to figure out what that bridge is, because we don't have the model. We do know that neoliberalism as it was designed is likely in transition. And many people, including neoliberals themselves, concede that neoliberalism may be coming into an end. That presents a moment of opportunity. It doesn't mean that that corporate and billionaire power is not ascendant, but it means that there's a shift.

In that space, we could provide creative solutions and bold ideas about what a new economy could look like. Some of the work I am hearing about gives me hope—experiments around land trusts and housing, for example—because it is trying to figure out how people could live dignified lives when capital is sucking that away from us. These experiments don't have all the answers. Right now, we're in a moment where economic fictions are being exposed, the far right is trying to mount some form of fascism, and new experiments for social justice are also attempting to take root. That last thing is on us, which gives me a lot of hope. It's an emergent and possible future. We can be the protagonist in this moment, not the billionaire class.

SD: In your article, “Building Resilient Organizations: Toward Joy and Durable Power in a Time of Crisis,” you challenge many myths in the movement and build some principles for

“Some of the work I am hearing about gives me hope—experiments around land trusts and housing, for example—because it is trying to figure out how people could live dignified lives when capital is sucking that away from us.”

moving forward. Anything you want to say about the response you've gotten? And any thoughts about how to move forward given that response?

MM: The response is heartening and overwhelming. You write something and you want it to have impact, but I didn't expect it to have the level of impact that it's had so far. One thing that I've heard from people is that people were looking for a framework to have really hard conversations about what movements can be.

We're in this moment of transformation. We're in an in-between moment, an interregnum where our ideas really matter. Our ideas, identities, culture, are all constructed. The article may have reminded us that we are protagonists of history, and that despite many of the contradictions and challenges that we face that can lead us toward cynicism and frustration, we are the agents of change.

NOTES

1. Maurice Mitchell, “Building Resilient Organizations: Toward Joy and Durable Power in a Time of Crisis,” *NPQ, The Forge*, and *Convergence*, November 29, 2022, nonprofitquarterly.org/building-resilient-organizations-toward-joy-and-durable-power-in-a-time-of-crisis.
2. For more information on how Axon profited from body camera sales in the aftermath of Ferguson and the rise of Black Lives Matter, see David Gelles, “Taser International Dominates the Police Body Camera Market,” *New York Times*, July 12, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/business/taser-international-dominates-the-police-body-camera-market.html. On its use of giveaways of body cameras to further increase its market share, see Cyrus Farivar, “Taser stuns law enforcement world, offers free body cameras to all US police,” *Ars Technica*, April 5, 2017, arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2017/04/taser-announces-free-body-cameras-cloud-storage-to-all-us-cops-for-a-year. According to Farivar, between 2012 and 2016 Axon earned \$90 million in profits from its body camera sales alone.

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The Great Awakening, and Workers' Fight to Stay Woke

by Erica Smiley

Workers did their part in lighting the flame, showing us the way by calculating their power based on current conditions, organizing each other as whole people, person by person, and having the audacity to do it in the spirit of building a healthy democracy. For labor officials and nonprofit sector labor supporters, our job now is to keep standing with them.

*. . . I advise everybody, be a little careful...
best stay woke, keep their eyes open.*

—Huddie William “Lead Belly” Ledbetter, 1938,
describing the Scottsboro Boys and the
climate for Black people in Alabama¹

It's time to admit it. We were asleep. Many of us who are privileged enough to be paid to work for justice had all but given up on winning unions at multinational brands in the near term. Then, somewhere in the last two years, there was a “great awakening,” and the entire landscape for what is possible changed overnight as workers showed us how to effectively hold global corporations accountable. They modeled that investing in relational people-to-people activities that organize workers' power based on their relationship to new and changing dynamics of employment in the global economy and centering workers as whole people (recognize their motivations for taking risks and prevent employers from sowing seeds of division) was in fact the key to winning. They didn't say it would be easy, nor did they promise it would be linear or neat. But they've asked us—institutional leaders with resources and capacity—to stay with them; to stay woke. And workers asked us to do it not just for them but for all of us and our desire to live in a healthy democracy.



Power doesn't go away as the economy changes. It simply shifts, and it must be clarified in relationship to changes in the global economy to leverage it effectively.

Two terms are critical to fully understanding the significance of this assertion: *democracy* and *power*.

As Sarita Gupta and I note in our book *The Future We Need*, a healthy democracy is a system in which all people have various pathways to consult, confer with, and collectively govern themselves.² Democracy is not just a system of political practices; it must be applied to participation and decision-making in all aspects of our economic lives as well. While voting, lobbying, and all types of policy work are important forms of democratic participation, collective bargaining across multiple channels inserts much-needed democratic practice into our economic system.

Power is my more substantive focus here, as it is an oft-used but widely misunderstood word. At *Jobs With Justice*, we assert that power is organized people and organized money with the ability to control, create, and/or prevent some change. Simple enough. But without more explanation on how and where it is leveraged, power is often generalized to a “power in numbers” framework that limits our imagination for what may be possible. Here, Beverly Silver’s framework is informative. In addition to *associational power*, or the ability to change things by turning out a certain number of people to do something—say, vote or boycott—workers also have *structural power*. Silver separates these into two categories: *marketplace power* and *workplace power*.³ “‘Marketplace’ power comes from tight labour markets”—where workers control a set of skills that are in high demand and low supply. Workplace power is leveraged when a group of workers are strategically positioned to disrupt a company, industry, or sector’s ability to produce goods or otherwise function, and thus profit.⁴ This structural power exists in addition to associational power, the power in numbers noted above. Accessing the right power for the right situation is key.

Power doesn’t go away as the economy changes. It simply shifts, and it must be clarified in relationship to changes in the global economy to leverage it effectively. For example, postal work was once a highly skilled job in which employees were responsible for all levels of directly sorting, tracking, and getting mail delivered in timely ways. These workers had marketplace power. But as postal work became more automated, the power shifted. The work no longer requires workers to develop a detailed skill set to move the mail, as machines and computer algorithms now do it for them. Yet, postal workers still have power. They are strategically positioned to disrupt the now-automated systems of mail delivery

if they are so inclined.⁵ Instead of structural marketplace power, they have structural workplace power. As the postal unions began to organize their strategies around this, in addition to which they still had a set of unique skills and relationships with the broader community, they were able to survive this technological shift and still negotiate strong agreements for postal workers. Similar shifts evolve, from domestic workers’ control of a local labor market and unspecialized laborers’ ability to disrupt an assembly line to skilled electricians building out systems for heating/cooling and unspecialized laborers’ workplace power installing modular solar panels.

Today’s global economy also contains new areas of confusion over who a person’s actual employer is—either through misclassification (a business model that treats employees as if they are their own boss, despite the fact that they do not set their pay rates and/or ideal hours) or a process of fissuring (a business model, best articulated by David Weil, that creates layer upon layer of responsibility between an employee and their ultimate “boss”). Both aim to socialize the risks of operating a business while limiting the profitable rewards among a select few.⁶ Confusion about the employment relationship is often dressed up by new technology: platform apps that trick workers into thinking they have more control than they do—until it’s too late. But as workers have shown us, they still have power. It’s just changed. And how we organize must change to adapt to these new conditions.

Many labor strategists, used to operating under a previous framework or understanding of employment relationships, had to be awakened to this shift. We were still caught up in our feelings about past setbacks. We’d tried to apply old estimations of power to an economy that had changed dramatically in the last 100 years. We’d tiptoed around race, assuming the most unifying approach focused almost exclusively on wages and corporate greed. We’d tried to apply old models of organizing workers toward that power, leaning heavily on national staff to drive base-building conversations.

And after failing so many times, we all but gave up on our ability to organize workers at multinational brands until we had more money to do the same thing repeatedly at larger scale, somehow anticipating different results.

MOVEMENT MISTAKES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Mercifully, workers showed us a better way. And it'd do us good to mine the lessons that they've so generously laid out for us.

First, we often miscalculated our power. Organizing strategies at multinational brands in the last few decades were often reduced to a series of site fights, assuming we could win union recognition at each individual facility or franchise one at a time—as if power was not concentrated in a transnational C-suite. After years of unsuccessful organizing at McDonald's and other facilities around the country, fast-food workers evolved their strategy in 2022. They leveraged their status as *essential workers*, a term popularized during the COVID-19 pandemic, to successfully pass the FAST Recovery Act through the California State Legislature—reimagining pathways for franchise workers to negotiate with large multinational brands as a sector.⁷

But it's not just California where workers are making gains. Jamila Allen works at a Freddy's fast-food restaurant in Durham, North Carolina, where she has participated in successful workplace actions that led to higher wages and better working conditions, not just at her restaurant but also at 33 other restaurants across the Freddy's chain. She is now a leader of the new Union of Southern Service Workers. "The union was cofounded by over 150 retail, fast food, restaurant, and care workers who live and work throughout the South. USSW went public in November and is affiliated with the Service Employees International Union, but it has been built on a decade of prior organizing work." Allen recently spoke of the significance of workers organizing in less-union-friendly Southern states, why it's important to think outside the box when trying to position workers at multinational brands in ongoing decision-making, and why "building strategies around the intersection of economic and racial justice is critical to our success."⁸

Similar experiments have been conducted outside the United States. As a child growing up in North Carolina, I remember watching individual unionized textile mills slowly disappear from the landscape. Unbeknownst to me, textile manufac-

turing was dramatically increasing in Asia, particularly in countries like India and Bangladesh. In the 1990s and early 2000s, I watched workers in some of those factories organize their facilities into local unions. But doing so did not fully improve standards. Instead of giving up, however, they evolved their strategy and targeted the multinational brands controlling the wages available to the suppliers they worked for—launching the Asia Floor Wage Alliance,⁹ initially coanchored by Jobs With Justice India and the New Trade Union Initiative of India.¹⁰ They correctly realized that their direct employers, the suppliers, did not have the power to give them what they needed, and that their energy was better spent organizing power to get the ultimate profiteers to the table—which required a cross-border strategy.¹¹

Second, many of our efforts also failed to center workers' full identities, underestimating the motivations that lead them to risk their livelihoods to organize. Few people will name "worker" first when identifying who they are. They may say, "I am a woman," or "I am Black," or "I am Muslim." And they may be more motivated by threats to these other aspects of self than their identity as a worker. Said best by Kimberly Mitchell, a veteran Macy's retail associate in Washington, DC, "If all you see when you meet me is that I'm a worker, you're missing the entire point."¹² Employers also carry similar complexity in what moves them, often being more antagonistic in their identity as an employer than, say, as a person of faith or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Within this complexity lies opportunity.

Continuing with the case of the textile workers in South Asia, despite expanding their approach to negotiate with the global brands directly, the (mostly male) union leadership was unable to make much progress after a decade of talks and campaigning. While union leaders continued to push the brands for a stronger wage, women in the base began organizing committees around a more urgent matter—gender-based violence. Around the same time, the #MeToo movement launched in the United States,

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organizing the associational power of women workers—from A-List film stars to hotel housekeepers—against sexual harassment and assault. And the Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Labour Union, a women-led independent and majority Dalit trade union of textile workers in South India, launched the Justice for Jeyasre Campaign in honor of Jeyasre Kathiravel, a worker killed by her supervisor in an act of gender-based violence.¹³ In April 2022, these women joined others across the continent to negotiate the Dindigul Agreement to Eliminate Gender-Based Violence and Harassment,¹⁴ which includes a set of enforceable agreements with major fast-fashion brands: H&M, the Gap, and Eastman Exports—the largest garment producer in India. Covering multiple factories and two spinning mills, this agreement enshrines protections for 5,000 garment workers, including an innovative program known as “safe circles,” designed to monitor shop floors, detecting and reporting gender-based violence and harassment. And the Agreement provides a model for industry-wide change in garment and textiles.¹⁵ Said Anannya Bhattacharjee, former president of another garment workers’ union and current International Coordinator of the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, “The leadership and commitment of the Dalit women-led trade union TTCU has led to this historic agreement, which puts forth a model of how fashion brands, suppliers, and trade unions can work together to prevent and remediate GBVH in Asian garment supply chains.”¹⁶ In short, this achievement would not have occurred without centering gender.

Similar parallels can be drawn around racial identity. During the same period women in India were negotiating the Dindigul Agreement, workers at two US Amazon facilities were engaged in a tense struggle for improved conditions. Amazon workers, radicalized after the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota by former police officer Derek Chauvin, spoke out during the 2020 racial justice uprisings about the company’s mistreatment of Black employees.¹⁷ In 2021, Amazon workers in Bessemer, AL—mostly Black—called for help in their bid to form a union with the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union.¹⁸ A recent report by Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations and Michigan State University highlighted the company’s disproportionate use of off-duty police to surveil the overwhelmingly Black facility.¹⁹ Michael Foster, a worker-leader in Alabama known as Big Mike, noted back in 2021, “Bessemer is majority African American. Amazon is majority African American. . . . Somebody’s got to stand up. This, right here, is our Black Lives

Matter movement.”²⁰ Their 2022 union election is still “too close to call”—a big loss for a company that puts millions into preventing unionization.²¹ During the same week of the Bessemer election in April of 2022, workers in Staten Island—also radicalized by racial injustice after Chris Smalls and other Black workers were arrested and fired in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic for demanding better COVID protections/practices—won the first National Labor Relations Board union election at Amazon.²²

Contrast these victories with the setbacks experienced by two unions in 2017, after attempting to win union elections without centering race. Both the United Auto Workers’ attempts to organize at the predominantly Black Nissan facility in Canton, MS, and the International Association of Machinists union’s attempts to organize workers at Boeing’s North Charleston, SC, facility did little to emphasize how both companies recognized the unions their workers formed in facilities in other locations that did not employ a majority Black workforce—focusing instead on traditional issues of wages and corporate greed. And in both cases, the unions lost . . . by a lot.²³

After this, those imagining success began making multi-billion-dollar investments in staff-heavy, nationwide strategy. This leads to our third sleepy mistake—essentially, budgeting ourselves out of a chance at winning. I’ve seen too many campaign plans and proposals that lay out these billion-dollar magic bullet strategies. While more resources are needed to support worker efforts against global brands, investment in worker-to-worker organizing strategies generates a far higher rate of return than traditional centralized, highly staffed approaches. It’s not that these workers don’t need paid functionaries to support them; the question is one of emphasis, and what comes first. Sometimes, you just need a small group of workers strategically located to act. Workers

Michael Foster, a worker-leader in Alabama known as Big Mike, noted back in 2021, “Bessemer is majority African American. Amazon is majority African American. . . . Somebody’s got to stand up. This, right here, is our Black Lives Matter movement.”

at Starbucks, Amazon, Apple, Trader Joe's, and many other larger multinational brands modeled this, organizing on their own at first without the help of any international union or organization. Many unions saw the efforts as noble but ineffective, supporting them publicly but hesitant to invest significant resources. I even questioned the smallness of a strategy one of our affiliates was supporting in Ithaca, NY, at a small coffee shop as early as 2017, while we were supporting Southern workers organizing at Nissan. Alas, I had prediction regrets, as the workers' victory at Gimme Coffee catalyzed workers at nearby Starbucks to step out and start a global movement—a winning, women-led movement of unpaid worker-leaders, in fact, that achieved what few, if any, of the big-money/big-staff campaigns had achieved: union election victories in nearly 40 states.²⁴

Our last mistake as a movement was, to put it simply, giving up. When the recent upsurge began two years ago, many alt-labor institutions viewed the budding efforts as “old school,” leaning too heavily on what they viewed as an outdated NLRB process, when they *should* have been focused more on corporate campaigning and policy interventions. Again, we were overemphasizing associational power, without attempting to uncover the structural power workers have available to them—ignoring the necessary both/and. It's a subtle shift in focus that allowed many of us to maintain our sense of woke-ness, shifting energy and resources to seemingly more accessible political struggles and corporate campaigns, giving up direct employment and economic relationships as a site of struggle. This is one of the fundamental criticisms Sarita Gupta and I outline in *The Future We Need*: progressives' overemphasis on political democracy and civic life to the detriment of democratizing decision-making power in our economic lives.²⁵ And it's the reason many of us were left speechless in the June 2022 union victory of Apple workers in Towson, MD (Black-led)²⁶—all followed by an upsurge in organizing throughout the United States, with significant mobilization in the anti-union South.²⁷ They were organizing NLRB elections at multinational brands. And they were winning.

To be fair, not everyone was asleep to the growing clarity workers had about their whole person-ness and structural power. Several preexisting institutions did win important partial victories at multinational companies.²⁸ The famed Justice for Janitors campaign of the 1990s took on the ultimate profiteers of city office buildings to improve standards

To be fair, not everyone was asleep to the growing clarity workers had about their whole person-ness and structural power.

Several preexisting institutions did win important partial victories at multinational companies.

at house-cleaning contractors.²⁹ The Coalition of Immokalee Workers leveraged consumer influence to launch the historic Fair Food Program in 2011,³⁰ ultimately getting multinational brands like Subway and Whole Foods to allow the organization in the fields to build health committees and monitor conditions.³¹ In December of 2008, workers at Smithfield poultry organized with the United Food and Commercial Workers and won union recognition only after convincing workers in the slaughterhouse (mostly Black) to vote yes.³² The Fight For Fifteen movement sparked a wave of wage increases around the country and across different sectors.³³ The former organization United for Respect at Walmart or OUR Walmart, which was housed out of UFCW, partnered with local groups like Jobs With Justice to win predictable scheduling at companies and across municipalities in the early 2010s.³⁴ The Chicago Teachers Union reintroduced social movement unionism to a new generation, when they bargained for the common good in 2012.³⁵ This was the same year that eight migrant guestworkers working (and living) at CJs Seafood in Louisiana successfully won remedy by leveraging their structural power with their ultimate employer, Walmart/Sam's Club.³⁶ In 2018, teachers in West Virginia turned their legislative session into a public “contract” negotiation over healthcare and control over their personal data, launching a national Red for Ed movement around the country.³⁷ We've seen Toys “R” Us workers push back against financiers to force their way into corporate governance in 2019.³⁸ And domestic workers—the majority of whom are women of color, and who are outright excluded from the National Labor Relations Act—modeled the first labor standard setting agreement with a gig/platform company in 2021, leveraging their online market-based power to negotiate a private agreement that includes many of the things workers would seek out in union contract negotiations.³⁹ Much of this arguably led to increased interest in supporting “employee activism” among a set of business schools.⁴⁰



All these campaigns won in large measure because they took the time to assess the conditions, correctly calculated their power, and leveraged it into a campaign that organized whole people around their shared interests. They also show that workers active in today's struggle are winning because they center race, gender, and the experiences of exploitation they've experienced because of it. Still, the institutions leading the efforts noted here can be counted on two hands. And despite these incredible success stories, the overall investment of labor institutions was tacit at best before the great awakening.

But now, we're officially *woke*. The best of preexisting unions, worker organizations, and newly formed great awakening era groups must continue our awkward dance between union and nonunion formations, traditional and independent labor unions, 20th century contract negotiations versus expanded approaches to bargaining, and a slow recovery from playing in different sandboxes toward organizing around our shared values. The best of both are stepping up to the challenge to support this new distributed labor movement leadership and better understand what they've taught us about how to organize and collectively bargain in the current global economy—including how to read the shifts in power to better leverage them for our shared prosperity. Workers are imploring us not to be distracted by the messiness of building new democratic institutions nor traumatized by the aggressive counterattacks waged by global brands. For those more apt to point to the dysfunctions of some of the newer organizations and/or the corruption among the older ones, let us remember that democracy is messy. From the scandals surrounding Jimmy Hoffa in the 1960s and 1970s to the disaffiliations of various unions from the AFL-CIO in the mid-1990s, it's always been messy.⁴¹ These are regular people trying to figure out how to engage everyone in decision-making based on a vision of economic democracy. And that's not an easy task, even for the most trained diplomats among us. And yet, they persist.



Many workers have long been ready to get behind a democracy worth fighting for. But they're more complex than that strong-man-holding-a-pickaxe trope of labor history books. They're whole people, with identities and concerns that go far beyond wages. Today's workers are proving that multinational corporations can be held to account when the labor

movement as a whole—union and not-yet-union—invests in relational people-to-people activities that organize workers' power based on their relationship to new and changing dynamics of employment in the global economy. Having the appropriate calculation of power clarifies whether workers will be successful within the current framework for collective bargaining, or if a new approach is more strategic. And when they model campaigns that operate at the intersections of workers' identities—particularly race and gender—they have a greater success rate, and thus raise the floor for all workers.

The phrase “stay woke” is a call for raising someone's conscious awareness of a situation, often a dangerous one, and to proceed strategically. It was never evoked to encourage people to turn around. It has always implied the necessity of moving forward—but strategically, and prepared for whatever danger awaits. “Take it easy but take it,” as Pete Seeger and the Almanac Singers sang in their 1941 song “Talking Union,” advising workers not to let “race hatred” get in the way of joining together for better workplace standards. “Stay woke” is a call to action for people to awaken to their conditions, take agency over their future, and organize shared power to achieve a better life. And that's exactly what has happened recently. Workers are calling on us to stay with them in their great awakening—to stay woke—not because it's easy, but because it's necessary if we truly want democracy.

While there is still a ton to learn, workers throughout the country remain in active struggle. And despite their many successes, they still sometimes get crushed by multinational employers who seem to have unlimited time and money to keep unions at bay. But the potential for increasing workplace democracy in companies that New Deal unionists could have never predicted in 1935 is too great to allow these efforts to become a brief moment in history, as many executives are hoping. Workers did their part in lighting the flame, showing us the way by calculating their power based on current conditions, organizing each other as whole people—person by person—and having the audacity to do it in the spirit of building a healthy democracy. For labor officials and nonprofit sector labor supporters, our job now is to keep standing with them, accompanying them in battle by providing resources, capacity, expertise, and validation for what they are attempting to do—not just for themselves but for all of us. Workers have experienced a great awakening. In the process, they forced us to wake up, too. Now, let's keep it that way—and stay woke.

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Building a Green, Equitable Economy

A Conversation with Steve Dubb, Rithika Ramamurthy, Johanna Bozuwa, and Daniel Aldana Cohen

■
“You have to build an alternative civil society infrastructure, which is not so much about a party per se, but about a way of seeing the world, sets of relationships that people have with each other, and a narrative understanding of the crisis we’re in and its solutions.”

This conversation with Johanna Bozuwa and Daniel Aldana Cohen, executive director and co-founder of the Climate and Community Project, and NPQ’s Steve Dubb and Rithika Ramamurthy, explores the promises and challenges of building mass movements for both climate justice and economic democracy.

Steve Dubb: Could you talk a little bit about the background of the current state of Green New Deal advocacy in the US, and how the Climate and Community Project emerged from this political moment?

Johanna Bozuwa: The Green New Deal officially came onto the legislative scene in 2019. Since then, we have survived an ongoing pandemic, and now we are contending with the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act. It’s both the biggest and most polarizing climate bill to ever be passed in the United States, because it has investments in homes, retrofits, and renewable energy, but lacks investments in Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities, disadvantaged communities, and environmental justice communities, and continues to prioritize incentives rather than infrastructure. It’s all carrots, very few sticks. This was a moment of reckoning within the climate movement: environmental justice advocates were rightfully mad at the ultimate outcomes done behind closed doors at the last minute, and other folks who are far more focused on carbon reduction were lauding the bill.

But we do, in fact, have \$370 billion coming in.¹ It’s not everything that we need, but it’s an incredibly important moment to prove that climate investments change material reality for people on the ground. So, we need to be advancing visionary uses of that money at the local and state level, saying: “Now that we have retrofit money, how do we actually use that for the most comprehensive example of a transformed school that’s going to ensure that students, teachers, and communities are cared for?”



We also have to keep fighting at the federal level, especially since we don't have Democratic control of the US House. We have to show people the realities of climate change and the benefits of community investment, so that we can get more progressives in Congress and ultimately win legislation that is more transformative when the moment returns.

Daniel Aldana Cohen: The Climate and Community Project essentially emerged out of the same moment as the Democratic primary campaign, and then into the 2020 national election. Basically, a group of us got together when the pandemic began and said: "This is going to be economically devastating, it's going to be horrible for people, and we're going to need to respond economically and in a way that meets the needs of folks. At the same time, if we're going to inject a huge amount of funding into the economy, we should do it in a way that greens the economy, to protect our health and economic well-being long-term."

So, we produced a call for a green stimulus and got thousands of signatures from folks. We then formed the Climate and Community Project, which has turned into a progressive climate policy think tank that does research and works with community groups and policymakers. Our research is oriented toward shifting the frontier in terms of big, visionary policy—like the Green New Deal for Public Schools. We're also doing a lot of work on policy implementation, such as the IRA, and supporting frontline communities and environmental justice groups who don't have our research and policy expertise. It's fundamentally an effort to link cutting-edge research with progressive policymaking and community organizing nationwide.

We're in this very complicated moment for climate policy. What's happened is that a certain form of climate policy is doing very well, which is big investment in big companies that are incentivized to do decarbonization. We're shoring up the progressive end that has been left behind—without which it will not be possible to have effective decarbonization, never mind climate justice, in the years ahead.

Rithika Ramamurthy: Your mission states that you situate your work at the "climate and inequality nexus." Why is this an important framing for social movements today?

DAC: In my research on climate policy and climate politics, I've found that the most effective climate policy is equitable climate policy. You can't build a base to transform the economy with just a few renewable energy companies, some

"Our research is oriented toward shifting the frontier in terms of big, visionary policy. . . . It's fundamentally an effort to link cutting-edge research with progressive policymaking and community organizing nationwide."

very smart people working in policy schools, and some well-meaning politicians. It's just not enough to push change in American politics—which requires big, strong, solid coalitions. If you're going to make major, disruptive change, you have to bring a large number of people along with you. And to do that, you have to show them the economic benefits.

The best analogy for this is the New Deal coalition that came together in the 1930s. There were big problems with this coalition, obviously, injustices regarding gender, race, and citizenship. At the same time, we saw over the next decades that this coalition created the possibility of targeted federal policymaking. And that was the basis of, in fact, the civil rights movement, including its economic justice agenda, which was the beating heart of the civil rights agenda. The [1963] March on Washington was a march for jobs.

Our fundamental theory of change is that there is no opposition between intelligent climate policy on the one hand, and social justice on the other. In fact, those two belong together. There are going to be trillions of dollars spent on the built environment, and a justice-centric approach will make that funding popular, sustainable, and politically expansive.

JB: We also need staying power. Republicans are working very hard to roll back progressive measures. We see community investment and multiracial coalitions as the counter to that, to ensure that we have the power to stop right-wing attacks and build something better that will last as the political wind swings.

SD: One way you have described Green New Deal campaigns is "climate policy you can touch." It's a good phrase. Can you expand on what this means, both as a messaging strategy and a foundation for movement efforts?

JB: We say "climate policy you can touch" because, for decades, climate organizing has focused on molecules. This

makes climate change feel far away, but the reality is that it is hitting communities right now. It is touching their lives. People's houses are being wrecked by catastrophic hurricanes; people are unable to get to their jobs. We are looking to and focusing on the most visceral experience of the climate crisis.

Take housing, for instance—an area where so many intersecting crises come together. If we can install heat pumps to ensure that people have air conditioning on extreme high heat days and warmth during cold snaps, people will see the benefits of decarbonizing and adaptation in their homes. We want people to be able to experience positive differences in their communities as they're going to school, as they're commuting to work—making it as accessible, affordable, and as transformational as possible. By focusing on the built environment, we think we have the opportunity to be in direct relationship with communities on the ground as well.

DAC: That brings us to the political question. One of the things that's really inspired me in thinking about housing and climate policy is the record of social housing in Vienna, which is the social housing capital of the world.² It has more residents living in social housing than anywhere else. The Social Democratic Party, which is associated with social housing policy, has won every single fair election in the last 100 years—because its signature policy initiative is literally tangible. About half the city lives in social housing, and they can physically touch the most important policy of the city, which creates extremely high-quality housing—far higher quality than the vast majority of private housing construction in the United States. Another way to emphasize the benefits of decarbonization is to talk about better schools, which affects 50 million students, three million teachers, and around 50 million parents.

We emphasize things that touch everybody—like school, transit, and housing—and that they can physically touch themselves. It's not just the harms of climate change that are physically devastating; you can touch and feel the benefits of better climate policy, too. I think we've sometimes taken too much comfort in the growing popularity of climate policy, when it's often low down the list of political salience. For us, the measure of success in climate policy is when different people—working-class, Black, Indigenous, Latino, White—hear the words “green investment” and think, “That's for me.” We can win through tangible policies, which make people see that.

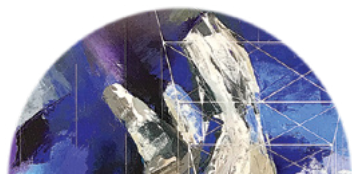
“For us, the measure of success in climate policy is when different people—working-class, Black, Indigenous, Latino, White—hear the words ‘green investment’ and think, ‘That’s for me.’”

RR: Could you talk a bit about some of the key projects that climate justice advocates you work with are spearheading—in transportation, schools, forests, housing, and elsewhere—that we touched on in our “Green New Deal on the Ground” series, published this spring?³

JB: One of the examples that we give in the series is in Boston, where Mayor Michelle Wu created a fully fare-free bus line when she took office. It not only helps people by limiting transit costs but makes commuting easier. People are experiencing transit more positively because it is easier and faster to use buses. It really speaks to the benefit of investing in our economy to make it public, accessible, and decommodified. And these benefits also have ramifications throughout the supply chain. We recently released a report, which examined different transportation horizons in the US, looking not only at decarbonization opportunities but also the material needs to make it happen.⁴ What we found is that investing in more public transit, the way that Mayor Michelle Wu did in Boston, limits lithium extraction. It both helps people commuting to work and people whose communities are degraded by lithium extraction. One city's transportation policy has a ripple effect on others.

DAC: We've talked a lot about urban issues, but one of the exciting things about housing policy is that it unites urban and rural constituencies, which is important in American politics. That's one reason we're so excited by the work done by [State] Senator Nikil Saval (D) in Pennsylvania—building an urban-rural coalition to pass progressive climate policies in a purple state. Energy insecurity levels between rural areas and inner-city Philadelphia are identical. That's very crucial for the kind of coalition we're trying to build.

Let's start in Philadelphia. Let's say you are a Black woman in your late 60s living in the city on a fixed income. You own your house, but it's in very bad repair. There are two kinds of help you would typically be offered. On the one hand, someone may try to buy your house to fix it up and flip it, which you might accept and then move to the suburbs,



because you can't cover your monthly bills in the city. On the other hand, there are federal or state incentives for retrofits, to put a solar panel on your roof or install a heat pump. But the problem is that the roof needs to be repaired, or the electrical wiring in your home can't handle the heat pump. It can't even handle an electric stove. And the electrical repair alone is almost \$7,000, which is higher than the low-income housing retrofit award you will likely get from the Weatherization Assistance Program. And if you want your roof fixed, that could be tens of thousands of dollars more.

Now there's a policy that addresses this problem from downtown Philly to rural Pennsylvania: Senator Saval's Whole-Home Repair program. The Pennsylvania government is creating a one-stop shop which will pay for all necessary repairs and retrofits, so that you can dramatically improve your house—which will lower your bills and let you stay in your habitable, comfortable home. We helped Senator Saval write his housing and climate policies when he was running for office. Now that it's a reality, I think we will be spending the next months and years analyzing and explaining how it was created, how it works, and how coalitions in other states can create their own to take advantage of IRA funding and build the kind of urban-rural coalition that Senator Saval was able to build in Pennsylvania. Both our transit and housing projects show the sprawling supply chain changes and granular, local transformations that can happen through policy diffusion and grassroots organizing.

SD: The austerity regimes of recent decades brought massive public disinvestment. Many Green New Deal efforts focus on investment in green infrastructure, such as trains and education. Why is the demand for public ownership so critical?

JB: We are at this moment where green investments could mean benefits for private interests and corporations, or for the public sector and the solidarity economy. When companies extract profits or slough off the top of green investments, they are not being used in ways that benefit the person who cannot afford housing or pay their utility bills. They are going into the pockets of CEOs and shareholders.

One of the biggest things that the IRA did is expand the tax credits for renewable energy. In the past, the tax credits have operated as a backdoor subsidy to Wall Street. To access these tax credits, you need what is called tax equity—which is hard to do whether you're a new renewable energy business that's not paying enough in taxes, a government entity, or a

nonprofit trying to put solar on top of your roof. This means that Wall Street jumps in with these complicated deals called tax equity financing to make it all work. But they're taking a cut out of that funding. With the IRA, government, local municipal utilities, and nonprofit entities can get those credits for the first time, which could open up the opportunity for unprecedented, publicly owned renewable energy.

It really is up to organizers at the state and local level to go after those incentives. That's why we're inspired by the work that's been happening in New York, where a coalition pushed the state to pass the Build Public Renewables Act, which will expand the New York Power Authority so it can build the infrastructure needed for a massive amount of renewable energy. These efforts are trying to take advantage of this new opportunity within the Inflation Reduction Act to expand public ownership in our energy system, the likes of which we haven't seen since the New Deal.

DAC: The goal is not just to expand public ownership, but also to change it and democratize it. This is not an opportunity for a handful of people in Washington, DC, to take control of a third of the economy, but to have public and nonprofit entities at every scale all across the country. That opens the door to a very different kind of economy—one in which ordinary people will have much more power.

JB: Absolutely. When we talk about public ownership or community ownership, we're talking about democratic public ownership. We have seen a lot of undemocratic public ownership in the past, but there are better models. Paris recently remunicipalized their utilities and instituted more opportunities for community involvement when doing so.⁵ They have what they call a "multistakeholder board," where they have environmental advocates, housing advocates, and others on the board. That's the type of cogovernance that we are looking for in the future of public ownership in the United States—because

"The goal is not just to expand public ownership, but also to change it and democratize it. . . . That opens the door to a very different kind of economy—one in which ordinary people will have much more power."

otherwise, we will perpetuate the inequities we've seen since the New Deal. We have a chance to reshape the future of public ownership in this country.

RR: Speaking of democracy, as you both have noted, the fossil fuel industry has a death grip on democratic systems. Ending their stranglehold on the current political system is imperative to achieving a just transition. What will it take to radically reorganize the nation's carbon infrastructure?

JB: We need to nationalize these entities. The fossil fuel industry, as you describe, is one of the major reasons why we have not been able to achieve a just transition. They are CEOs. They are stakeholders who have a vested interest in the expansion—not just continuation, but expansion—of fossil fuels. We need an actor that can come in and actually plan and manage that decline. It's incredibly imperative because what we have seen is a massive amount of unmanaged decline.

Take fossil fuel communities, for instance. If you look to many of the companies that are in West Virginia, Tennessee, or Texas, we see them skipping out on their environmental commitments and worker protections. They pocket bonuses through bankruptcy trials as they get out of paying pensions to their workers suffering from black lung. They keep operating on thinner margins—and that's not the type of transition we want. We think that public ownership both eliminates the profit imperative and benefits the folks embedded within a system that does not work anymore. It would also allow us to take these workers needed to build renewable energy systems, redirecting them into more productive parts of our economy while ensuring that if they want to retire, they get pensions. That's why we've been thinking a lot about how to strategically nationalize the fossil fuel industry and ensure that workers and communities directly affected by the environmental pollution are at the table.

DAC: Also, since the early 2000s, the fossil fuel industry has shifted from just funding the Republican Party to funding the entire infrastructure of civil society on the conservative end of politics. The most famous example, of course, is the Tea Party being funded by Koch money through Americans for Prosperity. From that same period to the present, Republican support for climate policy waned. The lesson there is that just supporting one particular party at the polls isn't sufficient to take on an industry like fossil fuels. You have to build an alternative civil society infrastructure, which is not so much

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They are CEOs. They are stakeholders who have a vested interest in the expansion—not just continuation, but expansion—of fossil fuels.”

about a party per se, but about a way of seeing the world, sets of relationships that people have with each other, and a narrative understanding of the crisis we're in and its solutions.

We're trying to build connections between grassroots groups, policymakers, and researchers to develop an alternative sense of what it means to live in this country and to face its crises. We're just one small part of that, but this project of rebuilding a progressive civil society with its own view of and plan for the crisis is essential. And if we want to understand why the fossil fuel industry is powerful, we must look beyond elections to the broader efforts to stake out influence in social life. A lot of us in progressive circles need to take on this challenge within our own narratives, our own research, our own relationships. That kind of bottom-up movement is a key part of how we get the type of policies to guide the transition.

SD: Recent analyses of climate inequality—such as *Reconsidering Reparations* by Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò—talk about how debt is a major driver of the climate crisis at the global level.⁶ How do you see debt figuring into the broader conversation around both climate and economic justice?

JB: One of our more recent reports looked at reparations and debt elimination as a key act of international solidarity for the climate.⁷ We're also looking at the debt associated with small island states, specifically the Caribbean, to understand their debt holdings and what can actually be done about them. We're speaking with folks on the ground about the millions upon millions of dollars in additional adaptive capacity small island states would have if they were able to be free of this debt, which is totally unjust—especially considering the context of the United States' ecological debt to the rest of the world. That has been a crucial component of our work, as a US-based organization trying to engage in Global South solidarity, research, and activism.

DAC: Generally, economic data is about extremely powerful financial actors controlling what other people can do in the future. Debt cancellation for Global South countries and working-class people in the United States is essential to freeing up resources to tackle the real emergencies, which are not the profit levels of banks but horrible inequalities of race, class, gender, and the climate crisis. Lessening the burdens of debt will increase our fiscal capacity to build a better world.

Our brilliant member Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò asks this question in his book *Reconsidering Reparations*: What if reparations is the project of remaking the world, physically reconstructing it to withstand the ravages of climate change and ultimately create more freedom and prosperity for the folks who've been damaged so much by the history of global racial empire?

Debt raises long-standing questions of finances, not just fiscal policy on investment, but who has power over whom. Global South debt is an expression of the enduring weight of colonialism. Interest rates are much higher in the Global South than the Global North, which is one reason why renewable energy deployment is so much lower in the Global South. This is why we need to start canceling debt and revisiting our global financial arrangements—to free up resources for other countries to take on climate change.

Reparations is about the past, the present, and the future. There absolutely needs to be compensation for historical injustice. But, as Táíwò has persuasively written many times, there's another component to it—which is world making, confronting global racial empire at scale in the same way that we can fight climate change at scale. That is a constructive project, which includes financing green investment and canceling debt, as part of a multipronged strategy of reparations.

SD: The issue's theme is “movement economies.” Climate justice movements operate on a terrain that involves many struggles. What are the possibilities and challenges for building the kind of mass movement required to act at the intersection of racial, economic, and climate justice? How do we build coalitions that reach both grassroots organizers and legislators?

DAC: One of the tragedies of the IRA is that in the passage from the Green New Deal through Build Back Better to the final version of the bill, the idea of a big, intersectional climate-plus-inequality policy push was shaved away to a large degree, until it became what was read as an energy and

electric vehicle bill. Our challenge is to rebuild that intersectional coalition, where the folks working on housing justice, racial justice, and environmental issues all see themselves in the same place. That would be made much easier by federal investment that touches all those things at once, so that you can organize jointly around programs. And we can use research, organizing, and policy advocacy to restitch that coalition together.

With big spending bills, you can bring everybody into the fold. For example, our Green New Deal for Public Schools bill is both an investment in school support staff, teachers, and maintenance workers, and an investment in school retrofits, which touches a whole different sector of labor, the trades, and a different set of concerns.⁸ Within that broad framework, we can put together a coalition—of folks in education, building, labor, and even the green building sector—and bring them all together. And folks in these various movement spaces have to make sure they understand and think about the kinds of connections that they can draw in their organizing. That's really hard work for a lot of organizations that don't have the money to do long-term, big-picture strategy. It's also our responsibility to distribute resources from better resourced groups, like environmental groups, to bring tenant rights or racial justice into their work, to invite them into a process and make sure we're putting our resources in a place where we can all use them.

JB: The other thing I want to lift up is bringing together unlikely combinations of people. This speaks to the housing work that we've discussed—bringing urban and rural communities together, seeing their shared future, and their shared benefit. It explains why we wanted to explore the futures of transportation and lithium, to bring together anti-extraction folks who have been at the foreground of climate activism, doing anti-pipeline and anti-mining work, with transportation advocates who want investment in EVs. The reality is, we are at a mid-transition moment, where the rubber is hitting the road in terms of transportation policy. We wanted to use our research to show that these two groups—clean transportation and anti-extraction—could come together and demand investments in mass transit, to both limit the extraction necessary for clean transportation and also decarbonize as rapidly as possible. Finding those moments of convergence between movements through our research and policy development is a critical piece of the puzzle as we move forward.

RR: Is there anything else you would like to add?

JB: I'll end on a positive note. I think one of the exciting parts about working at the Climate and Community Project is that our work is filled with hope. We are charting a future that communities can live in. We have built multiracial coalitions. The future of green social housing, people being able to pay their bills, are things that we get time to think and explore with our members on a daily basis. I think that there are massive possibilities when we build these types of movement coalitions and work alongside the frontlines to develop and define policy.

DAC: I'll just make a biographical reflection. I'm 40, and for the first 25 years of my life, the idea in politics was that you had people in the social sector who were trying to make society better, and then you had economists who were experts on the economy. And there was a tension between them. Beginning around Occupy Wall Street [2011], the idea began to spread that maybe there isn't just one economy to protect ourselves from—maybe social movements have a different vision of how to run the economy.

Today, that's really come to the fore with the climate movement. After decades of the conversation being about taxes and prices, we are now talking about investment. And we are

“Beginning around Occupy Wall Street [2011], the idea began to spread that maybe there isn't just one economy to protect ourselves from—maybe social movements have a different vision of how to run the economy.”



asking: What kind of investment? Is it just governments and companies doing a very narrow set of things, or is there a broader project of equitable transformation?

This feels like an auspicious time for social movements to really enter the debate about political economy and how to reshape it. It feels like we're in a moment where people on the ground are thinking hard about the political economy of climate transformation, what it should be, and what we can do to change it. We, at CCP, are trying to support that conversation. I love that we're finally at a stage now where we are having a full debate about different economic visions. And the question is: which will prevail, and which one will deliver the most for folks needing the benefits?

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Unlikely Advocates

Worker Co-ops, Grassroots Organizing, and Public Policy

by Esteban Kelly and Mo Manklang

By prioritizing structural reforms that address the root causes of systemic injustice, and by building coalitions and engaging in solidaristic movement building, we can create a society that works for everyone.... Advocacy is important not because of successes framed by those currently in power but because it represents the stories of our people informing a better, more just world.

In August 2018, the first legislation explicitly naming worker-owned cooperatives—the Main Street Employee Ownership Act—became United States federal law. Up to this point, legislation for most worker co-ops was not a priority; federal policy wasn't even a pipe dream. Most worker co-ops saw and still see themselves as embedded within a broader movement for economic justice. Public policy wasn't really a part of our culture. Until it was.

With Republicans controlling both houses of Congress, New York's junior Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and Representative Nydia Velázquez had, that summer, championed the Act across the finish line in record time and with bipartisan support.¹ While the deeper intent of the Act has yet to be realized, the worker co-op movement was nonetheless inspired by this feat. The following month, alongside our co-organizer the Democracy at Work Institute and in conjunction with the eighth biannual national worker co-op conference, the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives convened a press event to commemorate the passing of the Act, rallying our grassroots around the possibilities for scaling this field by building stronger advocacy chops. That November swept into power worker co-op supporters like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and a blue wave of additional Democratic freshmen—led by many (mostly progressive) women into power. The tides were turning.

In the ensuing years, the USFWC has been a central leader in a lean and effective advocacy coalition that has resulted in worker co-op provisions added to a handful of new laws and introduced legislation, ranging from the CARES Acts of 2020² to the CHIPS and Science Act and the WORK Act,³ the last two of which passed in 2022 despite unprecedented gridlock that has plagued Congress for over a decade.



We now see a ratcheting trend of success, with local and state initiatives both catching the attention of Congress and fueling further local and state progress, and each win being leveraged toward the next. Each win, whether federal or local, unleashed consequential benefits. With the WORK Act, tens of millions of dollars in government resources will be disbursed to employee-ownership centers around the country, fundamentally changing the playing field for worker-owners, freelancers, and cooperative innovators.

WHY PRIORITIZE PUBLIC POLICY AND ADVOCACY?

Too often in groups like the ones we come from—groups fighting for social, racial, and economic justice—we resign ourselves to structural losses without even deigning to fight in the policy arena. Owing to a healthy skepticism of a government and institutional structures that were designed to expropriate land, labor value, and even cultural capital from our communities, movement organizations are rightly set against reformist policies. Traditional reforms inherently strengthen the very state that represses us. Indeed, many movement organizations subscribe to the creed that “‘capitalism is incompatible with actual democracy’ since it prioritizes the ‘private interests of capitalists,’ meaning ‘under capitalism there can be no production of social wealth without the profits of privately owned enterprises.’”⁴

While the former is hard to contest, what’s interesting about the latter part of that stance is that cooperatives are, in fact, privately owned enterprises. Evidenced by examples in the Emilia Romagna region of Italy; in parts of Québec in Canada; historically, in African American communities from the late 19th and early 20th century; and perhaps most famously in Mondragón, in the Basque region of Spain, worker-driven cooperative economics has produced extraordinary social wealth, albeit constrained by a globalized capitalist system. What we have here is the kernel of a potent agenda for “non-reformist reforms.”⁵ This history of

Too often in groups like the ones we come from—groups fighting for social, racial, and economic justice—we resign ourselves to structural losses without even deigning to fight in the policy arena.

successful community-building economic development positions pro-solidarity economy efforts, uniquely, to engage the state in ways that materially transfer resources to grassroots communities and build worker power—and with it, our own base of economic power.⁶

Engaging in public policy advocacy is not without its dangers. As we’ve learned from other efforts to develop state-facing advocacy work, the risks of operating without rigor in our vetting and discernment informed by our long-standing relationships within the worker co-ops field are high. This is another danger that wards off changemakers from advocacy work. Politicians, including the ones that movements turn out for, routinely “sell out” movement principles once elected.⁷ Any rare legislation destined to actually pass Congress becomes loaded with advantages for the wealthy and powerful, and rarely contains any benefits for working families. The interests of billionaires and large corporations largely prevail over unions, freelancers, day laborers, minimum-wage earners, and cooperatives. In cases where bills do benefit the latter groups, those provisions are directly tied to the presence of unions, cooperatives, and other labor associations that have “connected” relationships and some sort of presence on the Hill.

That said, effective advocacy compels us to build coalitions, engage in strategic partnerships, and then leverage those in establishing relationships with decision-makers. We’re not suggesting that movements reprioritize their work; rather, certain low-hanging fruit, be it harm reduction or substantive advancement of our causes, should be pursued rather than disregarded wholesale. Wins for solidarity economy movements must necessarily be tied to deep relationships with the people holding the problems. When time and resources are limited and the priority is—as it must be—the needs in our communities, among our members, and among our people, it can be tempting to neglect the advocacy apparatus needed to move even realistically winnable initiatives. Through the lessons of our advocacy for the Main Street Employee Ownership Act, and since then, we’ve drawn lessons on how to be effective advocates—lessons that apply across movements throughout the solidarity economy space. Advocacy is a key component to achieving the long-term, lasting transformation that our grassroots movements envision.

While grassroots movements have a lot of catch-up to do in establishing even a skeletal policy arm, we are learning and iterating quickly. Until recently, what passed for the “Left

perspective” in the Beltway were almost exclusively “grass-tops” voices—well-funded, national nonprofits founded midway through the last century, bereft of deep relationships and a grassroots base beyond certain middle-class donors. The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis left grassroots activists slack-jawed at just how quickly massive economic support could burst forth from the federal government in aid of banks. What if that scale of resources flowed to our communities instead of to Wall Street? That was the premise of Occupy Wall Street and a dozen movements it helped to foment—from the Bernie Sanders presidential runs, to campaigns for basic income, to the Debt Collective, to a groundswell of interest in land trusts, public banks, and worker co-ops.⁸ The briefly viral Move Your Money (*to credit unions*) campaign led to millions of people moving their accounts from banks to credit unions.⁹ Elements of these actions inspired infrastructure that can build economic democracy, like the momentum-gaining public banking movement.¹⁰ Momentum doesn’t happen on its own; it’s a strategic balance (which is not to say ‘equal parts’) between grassroots organizing and political advocacy. It often doesn’t work out for us.

Our movements carry scars from a chronic pattern of being sold out by the very “leaders” sent to represent our interests within the halls of power. Grassroots organizations, especially those fighting for those with the least access to institutional power—poor people, youth, houseless populations, undocumented immigrants, incarcerated and oversurveilled and overpoliced communities—are routinely held up for photo-ops and campaign messages, only to have our needs cut out in the name of compromise, or otherwise bulldozed (sometimes literally) for the sake of corporate interests. The disempowering cycle of these stories is a central component to the retreat of movement groups away from policy-making. Modeling integrity, solidarity, and trust turns the tide in the other direction. Grassroots groups can and should practice transparency in their advocacy efforts while engaging their base in forming the policy agenda and offering feedback on what is and is not up for negotiation. That requires being honest when our own members disagree with one another about legislative priorities. In those cases, it’s usually better to pull back, rather than force through something opportunistic but widely unacceptable to the base.

Public policy and advocacy work, for most movement organizations, can feel like a luxury. Movements are, and should be, concerned with addressing the needs of our people first

Public policy and advocacy work, for most movement organizations, can feel like a luxury. Movements are, and should be, concerned with addressing the needs of our people first and foremost. But if we willfully exclude ourselves from Congressional processes, we leave money and resources on the table that will provide vital resources to our communities.

and foremost. But if we willfully exclude ourselves from Congressional processes, we leave money and resources on the table that will provide vital resources to our communities. We should not be naive about the resources of the government, which, like foundation endowments, are fueled by wealth that comes from our communities in the first place. Yet movements haven’t been as reticent to engage philanthropy, even when that pursuit pushes them toward funder-driven priorities and dynamics that Ruth Wilson Gilmore refers to as the “shadow state.” Dr. Gilmore locates our movements within the gargantuan field of philanthropy as a “shadow of the shadow state.”¹¹ Our self-marginalization is owed to tightly held principles that distinguish grassroots organizations from grassstops groups fueled by mainstream funding. Are we not capable of similarly sticking to our principles while considering advocacy to a minimal degree?

Smaller movement projects don’t have strong ties to philanthropy, either, and most grassroots groups practice a high amount of autonomy and self-determination as one of those principles. Over our lives, we have organized in dozens of movement groups in which we rely on ourselves for change because we exist within a framework that has willfully and systematically excluded us. But organizers are tired and are reorienting to new ways of resourcing our work. Increasingly, our leaders are recognizing the importance of putting our own people in positions of government power as one avenue of many for making change. It is inspiring to see municipalism¹² grow in popularity, putting power in the hands of people to democratize the local economy and the state. Projects like Los Angeles for All point toward collective governance, working with the current system in order to transform it to center the needs of the community.¹³ It is vital to both advocate with

The more proactive we can be in bringing stories to the front end—informing policies that build solidarity and help our people—the less energy we need to spend on the downstream mobilizations to hold electeds accountable for the failure of poor policies.

current government officials and also elect representatives who grow out of our movements who are, and will continue to be, accountable through ongoing, deep engagement.

A HOMECARE CO-OP WORKER'S STORY

It is vital to look at all the resources and skills at our disposal to build an effective advocacy strategy. The power of frontline workers telling their story—combined with a government relations team that understands the inner workings of Congress and how to bring those stories into the limelight—cannot be underestimated. Surfacing stories of homecare workers, like Yvette Beatty, who have been scraping by for decades, can only happen if we understand who, when, and where to tell those stories.¹⁴ Yvette is a part of the policy action group of Home Care Associates, a direct care service worker co-op in Philadelphia. She recently shared her history of challenges as a homecare worker, elevating (in her own words), how

We are the start of the line for care, along with family members. . . . [My co-op] is like my second family. They gave me options that I thought I would never have as a single Black woman. When they first trained me to be a home health aide, and I was nervous about the tests, they built up my confidence and had tutoring if I needed help. At times when I was struggling, they loaned me money. They taught me about managing my finances and helped me find daycare. Every [opportunity] they threw at me, I took it. And the next thing I know, the sky is the limit. I serve on the board of directors, different committees, and the policy action group.¹⁵

Bringing Yvette's story to her senator required calculated planning and an understanding of the system, broken as it may be—but stories bring life to the deadness of policy papers. Bills supporting worker cooperatives probably sound just as mundane as tax and business proposals circulating in Senate offices every week. Worker testimony infuses texture by illustrating some of the ways Yvette's co-op shored

up her financial position while simultaneously sparking skills in leadership, service, and excellence in the healthcare sector.

In resistance movements, we're routinely in the position of telling our stories after the fact: "Here's how this pipeline/debt-burden/Medicare reimbursement/prison/food desert impacted our lives." The more proactive we can be in bringing stories to the front end—informing policies that build solidarity and help our people—the less energy we need to spend on the downstream mobilizations to hold electeds accountable for the failure of poor policies. Many grassroots groups are well practiced at harvesting testimony of the impact of exploitative policies. We learned that it doesn't take that much extra work to tap into the same narrative skill set for different purposes across the political process. With our advocacy program, we use stories to raise community concern—and we also facilitate opportunities for frontline workers to speak with government staff and with issue-based coalitions, which our campaigns depend on to flip working people's challenges into solutions. What requires finesse is understanding how to stand our ground—not overlooking consequential differences while always seeking ways to turn antagonists into allies.

HOW WE WIN: LOOPS OF ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

So, what does this all look like in practice? The Main Street Employee Ownership Act rocketed through Congress in less than a year—a huge victory for us as an organization new to deep advocacy work, and who certainly leaned into partnerships to get it over the finish line. While other bills have been known to take years or even decades to pass, the employee ownership field, including worker cooperatives and employee stock ownership plans, was able to celebrate a huge win in record time—surprising even the congressional staffers who we worked alongside. Though we hailed the victory, we also recognized that there was much work to do to ensure that any advocacy initiatives are infused at every step with an ongoing, highly engaged feedback loop between the front lines and those crafting advocacy campaigns. We win by remaining tethered to the grassroots and moving in lockstep with our organizing and the programs that directly serve our communities.



We win by leveraging the relationships that have been built up over decades and the solid groundwork laid by many of our members and our own programs to make a compelling case for worker-owned business. The USFWC's Policy and Advocacy Council was created in 2015, as leaders within our space had begun to win campaigns in Berkeley,¹⁶ Philadelphia,¹⁷ and elsewhere. Like most grassroots organizing, our needs are many, and our resources, especially in 2015, were few. However, cooperativism offers one big advantage: we are accustomed to prioritizing the voices of our members, and we also hold a commitment to accountability, which is built into our organizational governance. This council served as our primary avenue for discussion, education, and mobilization about advocacy efforts. That space paved a path toward meaningful engagement to articulate the priorities of worker co-ops for government relations. We work in partnership with organizations that span the spectrum of relevant stakeholders: the National Cooperative Business Association,¹⁸ ESOP associations, local Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs), financial institutions, and service providers. This coalition shared a goal of calling for the Small Business Administration to share information about worker co-ops and employee ownership via the SBA's substantial service and communication resources throughout the small business community. By putting to use the array of small business supports already in place across the country, we can strive for more commonplace awareness of the cooperative model, which remains largely unfamiliar to most workers, unions, and business owners. Spotting the opportunity to tap into such vast and already existing infrastructure was vital to our programs' success. We then leveraged that knowledge to create even more resources to benefit worker-owned small businesses.

Eventually the USFWC devoted time to foster relationships on the Hill. We were blown away by how quickly our vision for worker buyouts and cooperative development gained traction. Our 2019 Hike the Hill provided the vehicle for longtime cooperators like B. Anthony Holley from Detroit to meet with the office of his representative, Rashida Tlaib. After hearing from her constituent, the congresswoman joined the Congressional Co-op Business Caucus the very next day. That trip laid the groundwork for other supportive relationships that continue to this day. Taking the time to go deep in explaining the principles, impact, and business model of worker co-ops to Representative Jamaal Bowman of New

York ensured we would build something more long-standing than a one-time meeting. We won another true advocate in Congress by speaking about our model in our own voice, something wholly different than dryly producing metrics in a white paper. Eighteen months after our first meeting, Bowman went on to infuse worker cooperative provisions throughout the CHIPS and Science Act. In both cases, in order to build those relationships we relied on and supported co-op members in our base—leaders we have cultivated for years, without necessarily bearing advocacy in mind. Building leadership through education and training is always a worthwhile investment in advancing social change. It also happens to be a core cooperative principle. When compared to corporate and other national organizations, staffers in government often express how much more meaningful our visits to their offices are because we bring in leaders from our communities to tell their own stories.

We win by staying connected to the grassroots. In 2017, we were approached by then-Representative Keith Ellison,¹⁹ who served Minnesota's 5th congressional district from 2007 to 2019 prior to becoming state attorney general. Inspired by the rich ecosystem of cooperatives in Minneapolis, Ellison saw the promise of worker cooperatives and asked the USFWC for our "dream list" of what support our movement needed from Congress. Thus began the process that we continue to this day: listening to members and co-op partners to understand the biggest needs and possible legislative solutions. Cooperators are accustomed to democratic governance and highly engaged discussion; however, taking that feedback and turning it into action items for the government was an entirely new experience—one we continue to iterate on each year. Deep connections to our base are vital. As a membership organization that prides itself on being highly accountable and tuned-in to its constituency, the USFWC is in constant contact with the worker co-ops, cooperative developers, institutions that finance cooperatives, and service providers that collectively make up our membership. Our advocacy agenda is primarily informed by the challenges we see on the ground. For state-level policy, we regularly engage with groups like the Worker-Owned Recovery California (WORC) Coalition and the New York State Community Equity Agenda. This allows us to fill an advisory role and act as connective tissue between diverse on-the-ground movements. The USFWC dovetails regional programs and organizing strategies with advocacy work. This creates some efficiency, ensuring that the heart of the

worker co-op movement, which beats throughout our technical assistance, community building, political education, and leadership development spaces, also echoes through our advocacy initiatives.

Each year we discover more depth in how our programs are intermingled with co-op policy priorities. One example is our work running the USFWC Co-op Clinic. The Co-op Clinic is a peer technical assistance program for cooperative businesses. It keeps us attuned to the challenges of both emerging and experienced worker co-ops. Through this program our staff and peer technical assistance advisers have built a running list of the primary constraints of co-op startups, legal hurdles, financial burdens for worker-buy-outs, and other business struggles particular to different industries. Likewise, by administering our own USFWC Worker Benefits Program, we have a clear sense of what workers and their families need to persevere, despite the failings of the US healthcare system to attend to nontraditional families, undocumented workers, and people with chronic health conditions and disabilities. As with other organizing efforts, advocacy is most effective when it is constantly informed by the work on the ground.

We win by being of service to intersectional movements, not just ourselves. Cooperatives have historically been one of the most powerful tools in the toolbox of movements seeking to elevate dispossessed communities. In their vision for building wealth for Black communities, the Movement for Black Lives encoded worker-owned and community-controlled cooperatives into their policy platform. Our connection to the M4BL platform organizing work ensured that the long history of successful Black cooperatives²⁰ unlocked the power of the Black Lives Matter movement to become ambassadors for the cooperative business model. The Alliance for a Just Philadelphia, a coalition of 27 grassroots organizations in Philadelphia, brought the Philadelphia Area Cooperative Alliance into the fold in order to resource the coalition with education on transformational cooperative business solutions. Rhode Island organizers launched Reclaim RI, which shares a similar organizing model to an Alliance for a Just Philadelphia member, Reclaim Philadelphia.²¹ The Rhode Island group fought for and won licenses for worker-owned cannabis cooperatives to ensure that a significant share of the marijuana industry in Rhode Island would be owned by workers,²² including formerly incarcerated ones, rather than by corporate cannabis multi-state operators (MSOs).

We win by being present throughout government processes.

Due to the necessary logistics of engaging the state, some movement campaigns have always attended to legislative and federal agency practices. DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), immigrant justice, and disability rights organizations are recent examples of grassroots efforts that have continued to monitor executive actions, Congress, and the judicial system—up to and including the Supreme Court. Many agricultural and food policy groups engage with policy in a similar, though limited, fashion. For much of the past 40 years, movements for racial and economic justice have been behind when it comes to successfully engaging in advocacy, even when considering the notable presence of established labor unions. It is heartening that the trend is moving in a new direction.

In 2019, the year after the Main Street Employee Ownership Act's passage, the New Economy Coalition engaged in deep conversation and organizing to create the Pathways to a People's Economy policy vision.²³ When they initiated that project, much of the engagement came from worker cooperative circles, where leaders had established more comfort with collective input, discussion, and engaging with the people closest to the problems. Even when platforms like these are drafted, too often they lack the time and resources to translate those calls for change into real legislative action or to plant seeds of systemic change within achievable government acts. All too often, once legislation is passed, our groups lack the infrastructure or information to know how new programs will be implemented or who will be eligible to access new resources. By failing to build up that muscle, we enable corporate lobbyists to shape the policy terrain and create more front lines in the battles we need to take on in our communities, in our lives, and in the streets.

We win by building leadership and support pipelines. Over the 20-year history of the USFWC, we have invested increasing energy in training leaders from the worker co-op ecosystem to be ambassadors outside of it. In the policy realm, we need to build the infrastructure to educate and empower advocates and co-op storytellers. Through our Worker Ownership State Advocacy Fellowship, a program we set up in 2021, worker-owners participate in a six-month process of learning about advocacy strategies, networking with each other, and developing tools.²⁴ Fellows emerge with skills and relationships they can tap into. The 2022-2023 cohort included fellows like Mavery Davis, who worked with a state

representative to introduce new co-op legislation in West Virginia;²⁵ now, midway through this fellowship program, Mavery joined the board of the USFWC and serves as our treasurer. Small but intentional investments build strong leaders and can yield tremendous results. We have learned that sustained wins stem only from sustained, long-term strategies that invest in our people.

Leadership isn't just an organizational value. When we envision a future, democratized economy, we know that a suite of professionals trained at navigating state structures in law and finance is essential in the transition of worker co-ops becoming mainstream. One of the gaps in our field that has dogged us is a dearth of lawyers, accountants—and underwriters in financial institutions—who deeply understand cooperative models. As we gain more familiarity with city, state, and federal policies that affect cooperative businesses, we're more cognizant of the role of certain professionals in scaling the solidarity economy. Any policy wins that we achieve are only valuable if we are ready to capture those wins, bringing funding, resources, and support to the hands of the people who called for change in the first place. Emerging networks like the Cooperative Professionals Guild seek to build community, create and share resources, and engage in professional development for our field. With advocacy, the real "win" is not the mere passage of a bill but rather the material change in the working lives of our members. Historically, we have been locked out of—and therefore ignorant of—the best ways to follow the money all the way to the end. That is part of what must change.

A TOOL FOR BUILDING THE FUTURE

For groups like us, policy is never paramount. It's just one piece of a full strategy for social transformation. Real change requires internal political education, enabling a deep understanding of the root causes of systemic inequality alongside an ongoing commitment to challenging existing power structures. With a few wins in the books and with implementation for those wins on the horizon, the USFWC now looks toward moving firmly from being primarily responsive to Congress to being proactive on the issues that matter most to the worker co-op community. Like many movement organizations—intentionally or not—the USFWC had been centered on responding to crises. As our organization becomes more knowledgeable about the inner workings of the government, we're pressured to grow our own sophistication in creating pathways for our members to lead

For groups like us, policy is never paramount. It's just one piece of a full strategy for social transformation.

from the grassroots, rather than having our federation chasing congressional calendars.

We can only break down the system if we understand it, clearly articulate our vision for changes to that system, and lay down tracks to get there. It is incumbent on movement organizations that seek to build a new world by mobilizing against the existing political economic structures to chart out an expansive agenda—one much bolder than simply drafting policy solutions to specific problems. Movement scholars call the policy aspect of that agenda a set of non-reformist reforms. The framework of non-reformist reforms, amplified by scholars like Dr. Gilmore, traces back to Austrian-French theorist André Gorz.²⁶ Its contemporary application is well articulated by Ohio State law professor Amna A. Akbar, who offers:

Because the end goal is building power rather than identifying a policy fix, non-reformist reforms can only be effective when pursued in relation to a broader array of strategies and tactics for political, economic, social transformation.²⁷

Whether it is gig work, food service, care work, or manufacturing, non-reformist reforms hold immense significance for grassroots organizations exploring legislative and executive advocacy strategies. Taking the time to step back and analyze opportunities from different angles can unlock unexpected portals toward more transformative wins. To truly take hold, such efforts must be buttressed by a broader movement-building strategy that engages and mobilizes a wide range of stakeholders. This includes deep organizing, political education, and leadership development, as well as narrative and media work, public outreach, strikes, protests, mutual aid, and the expansion of institutions that are themselves part of the solidarity economy. Indeed, grassroots organizations understand that such projects and practices are more important in the long run. As we've stated, different communities and issues require internal deliberation, tailoring their advocacy efforts to advance their specific needs and strategies. All of this presents another channel to practice democracy within our organizations, but also to build new local, cross-issue, base-building formations.



Taking the time to step back and analyze opportunities from different angles can unlock unexpected portals toward more transformative wins. To truly take hold, such efforts must be buttressed by a broader movement-building strategy that engages and mobilizes a wide range of stakeholders.

Ultimately, non-reformist reforms offer a powerful tool for grassroots organizations to challenge existing power

structures and build a more equitable and just society. As we understand our position on any particular issue, we are able to proactively seek and advocate for the programs we want to see rather than center our work around ideas originating outside our movements. By prioritizing structural reforms that address the root causes of systemic injustice, and by building coalitions and engaging in solidaristic movement building, we can create a society that works for everyone. It is up to all of us to do the hard work of building a better world, applying strategies and approaches that usher in real and lasting change. Advocacy is important not because of successes framed by those currently in power but because it represents the stories of our people informing a better, more just world.

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Stories of Organizational Transformation

Moving toward System Change *and a* Solidarity Economy

*by Emily Kawano, Lori Stern, Adoma Addo,
and Kelley Dennings¹*

These stories of our three organizations give us cause to be optimistic that the time is now to develop a solid, well-resourced, comprehensive strategy to connect the atomized imaginal cells of the solidarity economy and give birth to a more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

The convergent crises we face today—the climate crisis, ecological destruction, a growing economic divide, increasingly virulent racist and anti-immigrant violence, a drift toward fascism—are driving a reckoning. In the United States, a 2021 Pew Research Center survey found that 66 percent of the respondents believe that we need a major or complete overhaul of our economic system.²

This is reflected in the work of movement organizations—a growing number of which are making the journey to embrace systemic change that seeks to move us beyond capitalism and have embraced the solidarity economy as their North Star. The solidarity economy is a global movement that offers a framework to connect practices that are aligned with the values of solidarity, democracy, equity, sustainability, and pluralism (not a one-size-fits-all approach), all of which articulate a post-capitalist system that puts the welfare of people and planet front and center.

This article profiles three organizations from which we hail—the Center for Biological Diversity, Marbleseed (formerly the Midwest Organic Sustainable Education Service), and Wellspring Cooperative—that have grown to focus on addressing the many social, political, economic, and environmental ills that are a direct outcome of capitalism. These organizations had each approached their work either on a single-issue basis or had been working on reforms within a



In 2022, the Center's Population and Sustainability program looked at the environmental threats that are putting reproductive health and justice at risk.

capitalist framework. Over time, however, these organizations have more explicitly come to see the limits of working to reform capitalism, whether piecemeal or as a system, and have moved toward a view that restructuring the entire economy (broadly defined) is core to their work. This is a big deal in the United States, where many movement groups have long shied away from explicit acknowledgement of the need to move beyond the capitalist framework to achieve their vision and objectives.

Our organizations are a microcosm of a shift that is occurring across hundreds of movement organizations nationwide. For example, the New Economy Coalition (a national network comprising over 200 member organizations, many of them leading national economic justice groups), which was once reluctant to fully embrace the solidarity economy as an overarching framework, now fully endorses it.³

Below, we share each of our organizational stories.

THE CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY: LEARNING THE LIMITS OF REFORM STRATEGIES

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national nonprofit conservation organization that believes that the welfare of human beings is deeply linked to nature and to a vast diversity of wild animals and plants. The Center works with a combination of science, law, activism, and creative media to protect the lands, waters, and climate that people, wildlife, and all types of communities and ecosystems need to survive.

The Center's Population and Sustainability program works to decrease consumption of climate-intensive energy, food, and goods in the Global North. "The US has 5% of the world's population but consumes 30% of the world's resources and creates 30% of the world's waste."⁴ It also emits 15 percent of the world's carbon emissions. The average US resident has an environmental footprint that is 60 percent larger than that of most Europeans,⁵ and nearly 700 percent larger than the average person in most African countries.

The Center's conscious consumption work is guided by the reality that consumption—like the harms caused by

production—isn't equitable. Access to sustainable options and systems varies greatly. While many people need to consume less, some need to consume differently, and some folks—even in the United States—need to consume more.

Research led the Center to its current solidarity economy work. In 2019, we conducted an initial design-thinking ideation session with a diverse group of professionals, during which capitalism was identified as a major driver of consumption and endless growth. That same year, we conducted additional, separate, qualitative research in which we used focus groups to study zero waste, extended producer responsibility, conscious consumption, and the experiential economy. Capitalism hadn't specifically been a core topic of the research, but it came up regularly in the conversations. For example, one participant mentioned that if capitalism worked the way it's "supposed" to—by creating products needed by individuals and markets meeting that demand—it wouldn't drive overconsumption; other participants noted that manufacturers market in a predatory way that leads to excessive consumption.

In 2022, the Center's Population and Sustainability program looked at the environmental threats that are putting reproductive health and justice at risk. This includes toxic chemicals found in everyday products, used in pesticides, and released as pollution into the environment from energy extraction and industrial processes. It also includes climate-crisis-related threats such as more extreme droughts, fires, flooding, tornadoes, and related weather disasters. The study also examined the knock-on effects of those weather events, such as increased losses of crops and livestock and the impact of the growing climate crisis on emotional wellbeing.

From this research that Center staff conducted in both 2019 and 2022, a common underlying issue became clear: the US economy is built on capitalist values that prioritize wealth accumulation and concentration, endless growth, and private markets—regardless of the harm these cause to people and the planet. More fundamentally, Center staff came to appreciate that it was unlikely that simply pushing for reforms within the system would effectively address these harms. The burden of fixing bodily and environmental harm has fallen on individuals, but individual actions alone cannot solve these problems. Meanwhile, the corporations and governments that bear the lion's share of responsibility for the climate crisis have not been held accountable.

While the Center had long recognized the role of capitalism in driving the climate and extinction crises, both these

examples and other research made it clear that we needed to engage in post-capitalism work ourselves directly. If growth, an inherent feature of capitalism, continues to be held up as the primary measure of economic health, humans and nature will continue to be exploited to generate private profit at the expense of health, justice, and the future of our planet.

The logic of capitalism, Center staff have come to understand, drives poor environmental regulation, our culture of consumption, and the minimal social supports that perpetuate harm to human and nonhuman communities. Recognizing this, the Center is now working ardently to transition away from a capitalist system grounded in exploitation, endless growth, and unsustainable patterns of consumption, and to advocate for a solidarity economy that centers environmental, health, and social welfare.

To build on this, Center staff began to work on economic transformation with a review of alternative economies and post-capitalist frameworks to better understand the existing work being done by environmental and activist groups. The solidarity economy framework stood out with its commitment to sustainability, equity, social welfare, democracy, and pluralism.

Another aspect of this work is to engage with other groups working in larger social, economic, and political transformations, such as the US Solidarity Economy Network, which is working to raise awareness of the need to create new economic models.

This work also involves building coalitions with other environmental and social justice groups organizing around the question: What would supporting a just ecological transition toward a post-capitalist and post-consumerist future look like?

Currently, the Center is gauging the knowledge and perspectives of the public at large through a nationwide survey about solidarity economy practices, which aspects of the solidarity economy framework appeal most to people, and in which solidarity economy behaviors people are most willing to engage. The idea behind the national survey is to generate clearer insights into the public's desire for systemic change and guidance for groups ready to get involved. To identify which strategies will best enable us to fully implement the solidarity economy vision that the Center has developed across the organization, people are being polled specifically on solidarity economy practices, starting with areas that already have broad resonance among members.

The origin story of Marbleseed includes a group of farmers committed to the regeneration of earth's resources and nonchemical farming.

Insights from the national survey will also provide the quantitative foundation of the post-capitalism website in development. The Center hopes to lead the way for other environmental, health, and activist groups to engage with systems transformation work—with the ultimate objective of disrupting the culture of overconsumption and supporting community-driven alternative economic solutions.

MARBLESEED: LEARNING WHY ORGANIC AGRICULTURE REQUIRES SYSTEM CHANGE

The origin story of Marbleseed includes a group of farmers committed to the regeneration of earth's resources and nonchemical farming. What we now know as the successful brand of the green-and-white USDA Organic label began as a movement that had coalesced to fight the chemical-industrial-agricultural complex that was taking hold in the United States. But these farmers were also fighting to preserve human-scale, diverse farms, where they could earn a living wage. When the Organic Foods Production Act became law in the 1990 Farm Bill,⁶ farmers across the country could join a movement that had federal backing; in the subsequent decade, organic sales climbed from under \$1 billion to \$7.8 billion and grew even faster after federal regulations were promulgated in 2002.⁷ Set against the backdrop of the loss of so many small farms that at the time accounted for almost half of food production in the United States, these first certified organic farmers saw a national label as a way to protect the planet and the rural communities where their small farm businesses were located.

Organizations like Marbleseed formed to educate farmers about these new standards and business models that took them directly to consumers who were willing to pay for higher-quality, local, fresh food. And there was a lot to learn. To farm organically is to think systemically. You feed the soil, which feeds the plants and animals and makes them more resistant to pests and disease.

Fast-forward 33 years, and that USDA Organic label has become a large market. According to the Organic Trade Association, "Organic is the fastest growing sector of the U.S. food industry."⁸ This has led to corporate interest in the label and a dilution of the standards farmers fought hard to create.



And despite the presence of the organic label, the loss of small farms continues. “Small farms . . . accounted for just a quarter of food production in 2017” and “just 10 percent of” dairy specifically.⁹

Lori Stern (a coauthor of this article) took the helm at Marbleseed amid the pandemic. At the time, the impact of a consolidated, industrial approach to agriculture was being vividly illustrated by the supply chain disruptions of the pandemic, which are still present, and the COVID outbreaks in large food-manufacturing facilities that resulted in the deaths of over 250 workers in meatpacking alone.¹⁰ Farmers were dumping milk destined for institutional markets and euthanizing animals. Rural land prices in the Midwest were soaring due to low mortgage interest rates and folks leaving crowded cities, working from home, and feeling safer in socially distanced spaces. Land in the Midwest is getting snapped up by big agribusiness, as it seeks to move operations away from the climate change disruptions on the West Coast.

Furthermore, we were then—and continue to be—in the midst of a racial reckoning. Disparities in death rates from COVID, along with the murder of George Floyd, put inequities in our current systems in full view. Organic farmers on small, diverse operations already knew that the agricultural system was rigged. The time was past due for statements of solidarity, which, when they came, galvanized reflection on where we started as a movement and if we had lost our way.

At the time, Marbleseed was the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service, founded in 1995 to educate and empower farmers in an organic and sustainable system of agriculture. This education was still needed, but was the organization setting up beginning farmers and farmers transitioning to organic to fail? Was it acknowledging that farmers were engaged in farming and growing crops that are adaptations of Indigenous knowledge that has been evolving across the globe since the beginning of agriculture? Did Marbleseed feel connected to peasant movements and other small farms that continue to feed the world? Was Marbleseed truly still farmer led, and if so, by which farmers?

Marbleseed jumped into strategic planning in the fall of 2020, and by the spring of 2021 had reaffirmed core values in a meeting that brought together both the board of directors and staff. Farmer education was still important, but the group also wanted to go back to our roots as a movement of radicals that saw the injustices in the agricultural system. This meant a

recommitment to stand in solidarity with, and make space for, Indigenous farmers and farmers of color who had been intentionally marginalized and dispossessed of their land.

The solidarity economy framework provided a language and touchpoints that had a strong history in communities of farmers. There were already thriving examples of cooperatives and collective efforts. Fair trade and value chains were other examples of how solidarity economy principles were already operating in our community. Organic farmers were centering their efforts on stewardship of the land and climate.

Organic systems thrive on diversity. As an organization, it was critical to prioritize farmer voices and concerns, ensuring that the group was truly inclusive. This meant being sure to put systems in place to create programs and educational offerings based on farmer input. Organic farmers understand that there are many right ways, and along with building healthy soils, there is a constant striving to improve practices and reciprocity on their farms and in their communities.

And this thinking contributed to the organization’s new name. Marbleseed was selected as a strong statement against the co-opting of the language of sustainability and regeneration, along with methods that define organic agricultural practice. The name *Marbleseed* refers to a plant native to the Midwest with a deep taproot and a role in restoration and regeneration of prairies. As Marbleseed, the organizational vision is to be of service to an ecosystem of farmers and allied organizations. Funding opportunities and program development are assessed against organizational values that are grounded in solidarity economy principles. This means actively working toward food and agricultural systemic change.

In 2022, in partnership with others—including the FairShare CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) Coalition and the Organic Farmers Association—Marbleseed soft-launched the online Ag Solidarity Network to operationalize this vision of farmer self-organizing. The platform enables self-identified groups to form but also to connect with others. Already folks are convening on the platform around production types (vegetables, grains, grazing, and dairy) as well as around cross-cutting issues of wellness, land access, and anti-racism work. The Ag Solidarity Network makes space for education as needed but also for connection and movement building.

Bringing forward an alternative to the immensely powerful and consolidated corporate food system will take a movement that is much larger than the current organic community. It

requires maintaining a spirit of abundance rather than scarcity, as the group moves along this path. As the organic food and farming landscape continues to evolve and grow, Marbleseed remains committed to the roots of the organic farming movement: care for the planet, nourishment for communities, and support for regenerative and organic farmers who are working in relationship with the ecosystems that sustain us.

WELLSPRING COOPERATIVE: FROM BUILDING BUSINESSES TO BUILDING A SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

Wellspring Cooperative is based in Springfield, the third-largest city in the state of Massachusetts and a typical deindustrialized city struggling with high rates of poverty and unemployment. Wellspring was incorporated as a nonprofit in 2014 to build a network of mutually supportive worker-owned cooperative businesses in the underserved communities of Greater Springfield.

The Wellspring Cooperative Network currently has 10 member cooperatives, and there are more in the pipeline. The network provides a wide array of support for our members: co-op management training, conflict resolution, bridge loans, marketing and materials, customer acquisition, hiring, grant applications, connections to the broader co-op movement across the state, and facilitating peer-to-peer support between the co-ops.

As a founder and current codirector of Wellspring, article coauthor Emily Kawano brought her own commitment to a solidarity economy framework. Her own personal motivation was not to develop co-ops for co-ops' sake but rather because they are an important piece of the solidarity economy. However, Wellspring's original mission was quite narrowly focused on worker co-op development.

The solidarity economy perspective and a core value of equity informed Wellspring's choice to locate its work in the Greater Springfield area, in the lower Pioneer Valley. The Pioneer Valley comprises Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden counties in western Massachusetts. There are more than 25 worker co-ops in the Pioneer Valley, making it one of the most worker-co-op-dense regions in the country on a per capita basis. At the time that Wellspring was founded, virtually all these co-ops were based in the upper Valley. The upper and lower Pioneer Valley are delineated by the Mount Holyoke Range, sometimes affectionately known as the "tofu curtain," which is a reference to the progressive, alternative culture and

We celebrate the abundance of co-ops in the upper Valley, but we understood that for co-ops to serve their mission they have to be relevant not just to relatively affluent, well-educated, and White communities but also to struggling, more diverse, working-class communities.

lifestyles of the upper Valley, undoubtedly influenced by the presence of the Five Colleges (University of Massachusetts and Amherst, Smith, Mount Holyoke, and Hampshire Colleges). The lower Valley is where the large postindustrial cities such as Springfield and Holyoke are located, with typically high concentrations of immigrants, people of color, and low-income communities. We celebrate the abundance of co-ops in the upper Valley, but we understood that for co-ops to serve their mission they have to be relevant not just to relatively affluent, well-educated, and White communities but also to struggling, more diverse, working-class communities.

Wellspring initially built on an anchor institution model, which is a top-down approach that develops cooperative businesses to meet the procurement needs of anchor institutions, primarily hospitals and colleges that are anchored in place. Wellspring found that all the diverse actors that it brought together—community, labor, future worker-owners, support organizations, and anchor institutions—were open to the idea of co-ops and supported the idea of creating jobs where worker ownership, wealth building, and economic democracy are baked in. In response, Wellspring broadened its strategies of co-op development far beyond this anchor model. These days, Wellspring employs a bottom-up approach that supports people interested in starting up their own co-ops through both a 14-week Co-op Boot Camp and direct technical assistance. Wellspring's conversion strategy provides support for conventional businesses to transition to a worker ownership model.

Today, the 10 co-ops in Wellspring's network provide around 70 jobs, a modest number and indicative of the fact that co-op development, especially in struggling communities, is long, hard, and slow work.

Over time, Wellspring has moved from a singular focus on worker co-ops to embracing the solidarity economy. Wellspring joined the board of the US Solidarity Economy Network in 2018, engaged in spreading awareness of the role of co-ops in the solidarity economy, and became a founder of

In addition to the importance of a job, people and communities knit their livelihoods together by helping each other out—organizing home or car repair, providing transportation, sharing various skills and knowledge, caring for children or the elderly, and so forth.

the Massachusetts Solidarity Economy Network and its sister organization, the Coalition for Worker Ownership and Power. In 2021, Wellspring broadened its mission to include “collective well-being,” which translates into supporting the growth of solidarity economy practices and the movement in Springfield and Holyoke.

This shift from a single-issue focus on worker co-ops to a broader mission to engage in solidarity economy work was driven by realities on the ground. Wellspring found that given its focus on working in communities that are on the forefront of struggle, there’s often a need to create a supportive ecosystem for the workers in the network beyond co-op business support. Many of the workers, along with their families, live on the edge of precarity and have needed help with housing, child-care, transportation, mental health issues, funeral expenses, and gifts or loans to get them through some emergency.

Wellspring realized that while a job is important, it is just one of the pieces necessary to move out of economic precarity and build economic security. Wellspring’s leadership began to think more broadly about livelihoods—how people, families, and communities provide for themselves. In addition to the importance of a job, people and communities knit their livelihoods together by helping each other out—organizing home or car repair, providing transportation, sharing various skills and knowledge, caring for children or the elderly, and so forth. This is especially true for low-income communities, where people cannot afford to buy everything that they need to get by. There are various ways in which these exchanges are mediated, ranging from gifting, reciprocity, barter, or monetary compensation.

In addition to supporting co-op business development, Wellspring realized that providing other on-ramps to cooperative strategies for supporting people’s livelihoods could serve two purposes: First, these kinds of cooperative initiatives can help to build a base of people who may be more interested in and prepared to either start up their own co-op or to become a co-op worker. Second, they offer far more ways for people

to get involved in collective efforts to meet their own needs, such as community gardening, skill shares, time banking, and mutual aid. Wellspring is now also exploring the development of a community land trust, part of its broader mission to build local solidarity economy ecosystems—including affordable housing, regenerative agriculture, co-op businesses, community production, and space for community/culture building and education.



The Center for Biological Diversity, Marbleseed, and Wellspring Cooperative provide three examples, from the environmental, agricultural, and worker co-op sectors, of organizations that have shifted over the past few years from single-issue and/or reformist work within the context of capitalism, to embracing a post-capitalist framework of the solidarity economy. The process of grappling with theories of change and social/political/economic analysis and strategies is necessarily ongoing.

As noted above, this is part of a broader trend, in which an increasing number of organizations are making this shift. The notion of a solidarity economy, once highly niche in the United States, continues to spread through different sectors, including housing, finance, and even philanthropy.¹¹

When the US Solidarity Economy Network was founded in 2007,¹² the term *solidarity economy* was basically unheard of in the United States. Over the past 16 years, the solidarity economy movement has succeeded in mainstreaming its recognition, at least within progressive circles. Given where solidarity economy activists started, it made sense to build this foundation organically—gradually building awareness, buy-in, engagement, and connections between various pieces, or imaginal cells, of the solidarity economy.¹³

The solidarity economy movement is now at an inflection point where enough of a foundation has been laid to launch a more deliberate and strategic effort to *scale out* the solidarity economy. By this we mean that the emphasis is to forge stronger linkages among the existing and emergent imaginal cells of the solidarity economy, not simply try to grow each practice ever larger.

These stories of our three organizations give us cause to be optimistic that the time is *now* to develop a solid, well-resourced, comprehensive strategy to connect the atomized imaginal cells of the solidarity economy and give birth to a more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

NOTES

1. This article is a collective product, but different authors took lead responsibility for their own organizational sections. The lead author for the introduction, conclusion, and the case of Wellspring Cooperative is Emily Kawano. The lead authors for the section on the Center for Biological Diversity are Adoma Addo and Kelley Dennings. The lead author for the section on Marbleseed is Lori Stern.
2. Richard Wike et al., “Citizens in Advanced Economies Want Significant Changes to Their Political Systems,” Pew Research Center, October 21, 2021, www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/10/21/citizens-in-advanced-economies-want-significant-changes-to-their-political-systems.
3. To understand the shift in framing, compare the New Economy Coalition’s 2020 “Platform for the People” toolkit—which avoids the use of solidarity economic messaging (even if it supports solidarity economy practices)—with the organization’s current, more direct messaging. See also “Introducing NEC’s Policy Toolkit: Pathways to a People’s Economy,” New Economy Coalition, February 13, 2020, neweconomy.net/introducing-necs-policy-toolkit-pathways-to-a-peoples-economy/; and “What Is the Solidarity Economy?,” New Economy Coalition, accessed May 26, 2023, neweconomy.net/solidarity-economy.
4. Annie Leonard, “Facts from *The Story of Stuff*,” The Story of Stuff Project, 2020, www.storyofstuff.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/StoryofStuff_FactSheet.pdf.
5. “Data and Methodology,” Global Footprint Network, accessed May 26, 2023, www.footprintnetwork.org/resources/data/.
6. “What is the Organic Foods Production Act?,” National Organic Coalition, accessed May 26, 2023, www.nationalorganiccoalition.org/ofpa-nosb.
7. Hannah Broadus, “The Explosive Growth of Natural & Organic,” Centra Foods,” April 3, 2017, www.centrafoods.com/blog/the-explosive-growth-of-natural-organic; see also Carolyn Dimitri and Catherine Greene, “Recent Growth Patterns in the U.S. Organic Foods Market,” *Agricultural Information Bulletin 777* (Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, September 2002).
8. “Organic Hotspots,” Organic Trade Association, accessed May 26, 2023, www.ota.com/hotspots.
9. Alana Semuels, “‘They’re Trying to Wipe Us Off the Map.’ Small American Farmers Are Nearing Extinction,” *TIME*, November 27, 2019, time.com/5736789/small-american-farmers-debt-crisis-extinction/.
10. “Understanding the Economic Crisis Family Farms are Facing,” Farm Aid, September 14, 2020, www.farmaid.org/blog/fact-sheet/understanding-economic-crisis-family-farms-are-facing/.
11. For example, Nwamaka Agbo, CEO of the Kataly Foundation, has advocated for the strongly related concept of restorative economics. See Nwamaka Agbo, “Restorative Economics for People and the Planet,” accessed May 27, 2023, www.nwamakaagbo.com. See also Nwamaka Agbo, “Restorative Economics: A Values-Based Roadmap to a Just Economy,” *NPQ*, November 3, 2021, nonprofitquarterly.org/restorative-economics-a-values-based-roadmap-to-a-just-economy.
12. “About US Solidarity Economy Network,” U.S. Solidarity Economy Network, accessed May 26, 2023, ussen.org/about-ussen.
13. Emily Kawano, “Imaginal Cells of the Solidarity Economy,” *Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 48–55.

EMILY KAWANO is a founder and co-coordinator of the US Solidarity Economy Network and has served on the board of RIPESS (the Intercontinental Network for the Social Solidarity Economy) for almost a decade. She is codirector of the Wellspring Cooperative, which is developing a network of worker cooperatives and solidarity economy initiatives in Springfield, MA. Previously, Kawano was director of the Center for Popular Economics, has taught economics at Smith College, and has worked as the national economic justice representative for the American Friends Service Committee. **LORI STERN** is executive director of Marbleseed, formerly the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service. She has worked in community and environmental health, social justice, and food access. From 2014 to 2020, she brought all those things into focus through her farm-to-table restaurant, Cow & Quince, a community-supported restaurant in New Glarus, WI. She lives with her wife, LeAnn, on a small farm near Monticello, WI, where they grow vegetables and raise chickens and goats. **ADOMA ADDO** (she/her) is a population and sustainability associate assistant at the Center for Biological Diversity. In her work, Addo supports Center research and campaigns on waste prevention, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the systemic injustices associated with unequal environmental burdens and unequal access to health services. **KELLEY DENNINGS** (she/her) is a population and sustainability campaigner at the Center for Biological Diversity. In her work, Dennings develops and executes advocacy and outreach initiatives addressing the connections among reproductive health, gender equity, endless growth, inequitable consumption, and the climate and extinction crises. Prior to the Center, she worked in waste reduction and forest conservation. She is a family-planning counselor and certified in public health, social marketing, and project management.

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Building the Mutual Economy

A Conversation with Steve Dubb, Rithika Ramamurthy, and Manuel Pastor

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“How do we bring a spirit of mutuality to addressing our planet and our climate? Even when people of goodwill talk about addressing climate change, it’s almost as though the planet is something separate from us. So, how do we take this broader vision of solidarity and talk about solidarity with our planet, as well as solidarity with each other, and forge a more inclusive and sustainable future?”

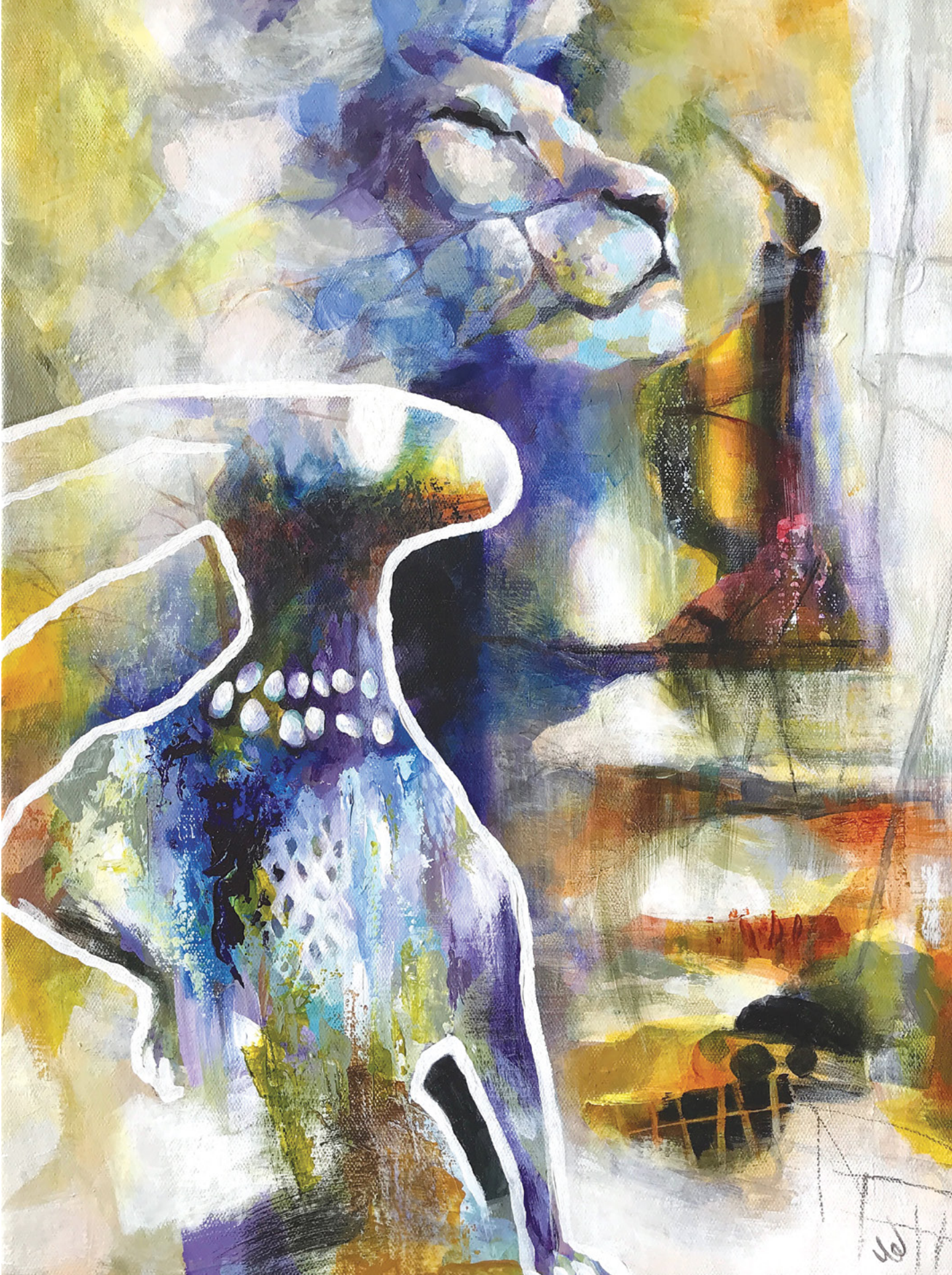
*This conversation with Manuel Pastor, distinguished professor of sociology and American studies & ethnicity at the University of Southern California, and NPQ’s Steve Dubb and Rithika Ramamurthy, explores themes regarding social movements and economics that Manuel Pastor writes about in *Solidarity Economics: Why Mutuality and Movements Matter*, coauthored by Chris Benner and published in 2021.¹*

Steve Dubb: Could you talk about your background and how you came to focus on the study of social movements and economics?

Manuel Pastor: I graduated from the University of California, Santa Cruz, with two degrees—one in creative writing and one in economics. And I couldn’t figure out which path would be the most powerful for changing the world. A good story, a good novel, a good narrative can really reframe things. So that was one path that was available.

The second was economics. I chose economics because I come from a working-class Latino family. I’d always been motivated around social justice and social change, and I found that when I was taking economics, economists consistently said, “Well, that’s a nice thing that you might believe in justice, but it’s probably bad for the economy.” And I thought, “Well, either they’re right and my whole life has no meaning, or they’re wrong and I might be able to help forge a different kind of economics that would be closer to the lived experience and aspirations of working-class communities, communities of color, communities that are often marginalized.

So, with great aplomb, I went and got a PhD at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, a radical political economy program, because I thought learning Marxist economics is always a path to financial success. While there, I was part of the Center for Popular Economics, which does popular economics education with trade union folks and community members.



**“When we say ‘our economy,’
we see ourselves in it and we see
ourselves as rule makers within it,
rather than being subjugated by it.”**

I went from there to teach at Occidental College. And in the latter part of the 1980s, I got involved in a campaign in California to raise the minimum wage. I was asked to come in and do a little bit of research about why raising the minimum wage would not be bad for the economy, which is what most economists at the time were saying. A kind of profound learning happened for me along the way. We won the increase,² and I would like to think that my research, long before Card and Krueger’s *Myth and Measurement*,³ actually helped to win the day.

But what really helped win the day was that local leaders, after hearing a little bit about what happened when you raised the minimum wage, decided that what they ought to do was to hit the barricades and persuade parts of the business community—particularly places where low-income workers would spend their money—to support an increase in the minimum wage. They organized a very interesting shop-in at a store that was owned by the head of the grocery store association.

He wouldn’t come out in favor of an increase in the minimum wage, and they said, “Okay, well, we’re going to shop at your store tomorrow.” And he said, “Well, why is that a threat?” And the next day—people still remember this who are organizers in South Los Angeles and of a certain age—people showed up at the store, and they shopped with pennies. If you’ve ever seen anybody shop with pennies, it’s a guaranteed strategy to completely tie up all the lines and freeze the business. And quite quickly, the head of the grocery store association came out in favor of an increase to the minimum wage. And what I profoundly realized at that moment was that if the best research in the world is not coupled with community organizing and community power building, it will never change the world.

Rithika Ramamurthy: One theme from your book is that movement actors should talk about our economy rather than the economy. What do you see as the cost of movements failing to do so and treating the economy as an externalized other?

MP: One of the things that I think helps get at that question has to do with the origins of the book. And the origins don’t come from the intellectual meanderings of either coauthor. The book really came out of a set of conversations with movement actors in 2018. That was a gubernatorial election year in California, and it seemed to us that California had an opportunity to define an economic agenda that would be more progressive.

So, Chris Benner, my coauthor, and I convened a set of four conversations with movement actors to ask the question: If there was a progressive economic program that could come out and become part of the debate during the campaign, what should that look like? The thing we heard was that our movement allies were tired of showing up with a laundry list of issues rather than a coherent story that would tie all their issues together into a narrative, a frame, a policy package that could better capture people’s imagination. So, this book is really a response to what movement actors wanted to see, which was a much simpler and compelling narrative.

Too often the Left sounds like it’s offering the sort of laundry list these organizers sought to go beyond. Van Jones once remarked that when Martin Luther King gave a speech during the March on Washington, it was not titled, “I Have a Bunch of Issues.” It was titled, “I Have a Dream.”⁴ A dream can motivate people, a frame can motivate people, in a way that individual issues don’t. So, I think one shortcoming is that often, on the progressive side, we do not have a full story.

Another shortcoming is that we are so steeped ourselves in looking at exploitation that we often buy into the capitalist myth that exploitation is actually the route to economic growth. Our own research has demonstrated to us that those places that are more unequal, more racially segregated, more fragmented, aren’t able to sustain employment growth over time. And you also know in your bones that if you’re part of an organization that exploits people and creates tension, that that organization is not going to thrive.

If hyperexploitation of people and the environment was the recipe to success, Haiti would be the richest country on the planet Earth. And it’s not. So, we need ourselves to shake the equity/prosperity trade-off that the Right has laid out so firmly and that sometimes we buy into.

So why the focus on “our economy”? When we say “the economy,” it makes it sound like a set of rules given out there by God or nature or “the market,” rather than rules we make. When we say “our economy,” we see ourselves in it and we see ourselves as rule makers within it, rather than being subjugated by it.

“[W]e’ve created a system that focuses so much on self-interest, it doesn’t figure out how to reward mutuality.”

The book also has a couple of related big messages. Take mutuality. Mutuality is really a key part of our economy. Indeed, even the most successful businesses are built on treating their customers, employees, and suppliers decently to be able to survive in the long run. We have to claim that as a central guiding principle and organize our economy around equity and mutuality.

A third observation is, some people do benefit from the current economic arrangements. And to change that, we need to have strong, healthy, intersectoral social movements that can tip the balance of power. Just as markets make us selfish, movements make us mutual. They teach us the habits of building bridges, they teach us the habits of seeing the other, and they teach us the habits of seeing the “us.”

SD: I want to follow up on the mutuality piece you were just talking about. You’ve written many books, but I feel like your focus on economics rooted in mutuality and solidarity is new. So, could you share more on the thought process behind lifting that up? Also, one of the things you talk about concerns the limits of government and how just having the state be the solution isn’t always the best course. So, please elaborate on that a little bit.

MP: If you ask questions of conservatives, the answer is always the market. Not enough housing? Let the market do it. Racial discrimination? The market will compete it away. Even with greenhouse gas emissions, which is clearly a market failure, conservatives will say the best approach is to do cap-and-trade and let the market take care of it.

It’s remarkably ideologically consistent despite—for example, on the topic of racial discrimination—400 to 500 years of structural racism might’ve convinced you the market’s not working that well. But it’s remarkably consistent.

Too often, the Left’s answer is “the government” to those questions. And there’s a role for the government in tackling housing, certainly in dealing with the environment, and certainly ending or trying to end racial discrimination in labor, housing markets, and other means of exchange.

What we’re trying to talk about in the book is that, really, the answer each time should be that we need to rely on us. We need to rely on the community that we build together.

Now, part of the reason for that is—particularly for communities of color—while promises of the market ring hollow, so too do promises of the government. This is the same government

that built a Social Security system that left out Black and Latinx folks by excluding domestic and farm workers.⁵ Housing assistance was targeted toward middle-class White homeowners rather than renters of color, et cetera.⁶ And the clearest manifestation of this pattern of racial targeting and racial exclusion is through the way many people directly experience the government—policing. So, just saying the government is going to take care of it, we think, rings a little bit hollow.

So, we propose this idea of turning toward each other. What can we build together in terms of alternative enterprises? Like co-ops.

How do we turn to each other to build alternatives? How do we turn to each other to build movements? And I think, perhaps a little bit controversially in our case, we’re saying that actually there are a number of capitalist enterprises that are built far more on mutuality than anyone recognizes—including those firms themselves. And so, we try to lift that up. I think that’s part of the journey.

The other part of the journey was realizing, if you go back to the fundamental roots of most economics, it’s assumed really that people are self-interested, and that life is nasty, brutish, and short. And in this Hobbesian world, conservatives think that the market will help to coordinate that self-interest to a blissful outcome. Folks more on the liberal or progressive side often think that the state needs to restrain those selfish impulses. And our third position is: Actually, people act out of mutuality as much as they act out of self-interest, but we’ve created a system that focuses so much on self-interest, it doesn’t figure out how to reward mutuality. You can reward mutuality by supporting alternative enterprises, community land trusts, worker co-ops, and other solidarity economy activities—and through supporting community labor organizing to assert workers’ rights. Though, obviously, the government is one instrument of our mutuality. We’re not antigovernment. We’re just saying that that’s the means, not the end.

And a final thing is, how do we reward, particularly in the short or medium run, those businesses that are doing a little bit better, that are more on a high road? And how do we use our

“One of the things I think about is that there’s a lot of thought about how the politics of alternatives, the politics of resistance, and the politics of governing power are somehow counterposed, instead of seeing how all those three things relate together to make a change.”

power as consumers and as organizers to steer our dollars in the direction of what we need?

RR: In your book, you wrote that, “we have reached a point where our fundamental structures are driving unprecedented inequality, social divisions, and ecological destruction.”⁷ And you add that movements are not building the political narratives, policy alternatives, and organizing vehicles needed to meet the moment. Could you elaborate on what steps movements can and should take to close this gap?

MP: I will speak from my own experience with the caution that, far be it for me to be the one full of pronouncements in a world in which there are tremendous, healthy debates about what shape our movements should take.

But I’ve been talking a lot with my colleague, Angela Glover Blackwell, with whom I wrote a book, too.⁸ And one thing that we’ve been landing on—mostly her thoughts, credit where credit is due—is that the United States is facing three simultaneous crises.

One is a crisis of democracy, really illustrated by the January 6 attack on the Capitol. But behind that is the changing demography of the country and the racist reaction to the possibility of becoming a true multiracial democracy. So, that’s one crisis; it’s a crisis of democratic institutions, but beneath it is a crisis of structural racism and its appeal as the country changes.

The second is the economic crisis, in a couple of dimensions. This includes the stark inequalities that continue to be exacerbated over time. These both feed into the fears of the changing demography of the country but also lead us to not tackle the underlying balance of power that’s causing this inequality and our economic dysfunction.

The third is the state of our social movements and whether they’re sufficiently strong, and at scale, to tackle the political

crisis of democracy and the economic crisis of inequality. I don’t want to diss our movements; they’ve taken a long time to get built and they are doing amazing things. But we are having all sorts of divisions within our own movements.

I’m going to spend a moment talking about that. During the Great Depression and the sort of New Deal readjustment of relationships in the United States, a strong labor movement was critical to that. During the tackling of American apartheid—much of which persists, but it was in its worst form in the ’50s and ’60s—it was a strong and vibrant civil rights movement that tackled the fundamental issues of democracy and was turning its attention to big issues of economic inequality.

So, I think experience suggests that to really achieve change, we need to be thinking about movements at scale. The other thing that I would say—and again, I feel like I’m a bit of an intellectual sponge, borrowing from people, in this case from a young colleague named Ashley Thomas⁹: Within our movements, there are different North Stars. One is the formation of alternatives. So, how do we create in this economic space co-ops, community land trusts, collaborations of co-ops? What a lot of people refer to as the solidarity economy. That’s one North Star.

Another North Star is simply disruption and resistance. That is, that the system is broken, that it needs to be challenged by things like the Occupy movement, which didn’t really have a plan but definitely put a monkey wrench into what was going on at the time and raised consciousness around the 99 percent.

And then there is a third North Star, which is governing power. And governing power is about how do you build strong enough coalitions—popular fronts, narratives, policy packages—that allow you to get enough of the power that exists in our society to be able to make meaningful change in people’s lives and deliver relief in a time frame of, say, five to twenty years?

If you think about the crisis of climate change, unless we turn the ship right now, in the next ten to twenty years, we’re heading towards disaster. One of the things I think about is that there’s a lot of thought about how the politics of alternatives, the politics of resistance, and the politics of governing power are somehow counterposed, instead of seeing how all those three things relate together to make a change. So, I think part of creating healthy movements is being unafraid of scale and understanding that there’s not just one path.



SD: What do you see as key pathways to build on the achievements of folks in the solidarity economy movement, while broadening the scope of the movement to achieve the necessary scale for transformation?

MP: I'm struck by the work of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, which has supported cooperatives of domestic workers, which has supported organizing people to increase their wages, which has tried also to change government policy, and which has also just tried to highlight which employers might be doing it a little bit better, to try to drive economic action to them. So, I think those are ways in which these things can and should be combined.

I think one of the challenges, however, is the immediacy of the issues and the need for scale. Take a concrete problem that's affecting so many of our urban communities: housing affordability, gentrification, and displacement. We need community land trusts. We need tenants' unions and organizing for their rights. We need communities organizing for a right to stay and not be displaced, either as renters or as owners. We need government to be creative about tenant protections. We just put into place in Los Angeles a lot of COVID-era protections that are now being made more permanent.

So, we need government action, and government assistance to build more housing. But if you think about the scale of the problem, we're not going to get there in the next five to ten years without some of the housing developers that know how to do affordable housing. So, how do you make sure that they're somehow in the game as well? And I think that's the mix. I realize that that's not a mix that's everyone's political cup of tea, but it's a mix we're trying to put into the progressive toolkit.

One last piece involves corporations. Firms spend a lot of time thinking about how to divide workers against workers, communities against communities. And we spend a lot less time thinking about how to divide business against business and create openings for alternatives. If you think about the mechanism that a lot of communities have used—community benefits agreements—these basically say you can get a faster track on developing if you guarantee affordable housing, permanent jobs, job training programs, parks, and so on. At least those community benefits agreements that come out of genuine community organizing wind up getting some benefit and dividing some businesses against other businesses.

RR: It seems clear that neoliberalism isn't working. It's been the dominant economic policy paradigm in the past 40 years, and it's fraying, but what will replace it remains uncertain. In your book, you write about how establishing a new paradigm requires making a head case of facts, a heart case of feelings, and a social movement or force. Where are our movements today in these three areas?

MP: We do talk about facts, feelings, and force. I'm one of a lot of economists who sort of gave up on the economics profession because it felt like they were ignoring facts around basic matters like the impact of raising the minimum wage. Or think about neoliberal financial theory, which suggests that markets can perfectly anticipate the future and build that into price signals.

Now, how you can sustain that viewpoint after a global debt crisis, a savings and loan crisis, and a financial meltdown in 2008? You have to be ideologically marooned to have facts not move you. But that's been a lot of the economics profession. One interesting development is there's a younger generation of economists who are much more tied to the facts and what they actually tell us about inequality, the minimum wage, and financial systems. And I think that's a big opening. There's a younger generation, too, that's far more concerned with inequality generally. And racial and gender inequality. That's a big opening. Facts are important.

Feelings is what the book is mostly about, which is: What's the narrative? And I always say when I speak about this book, if after hearing us speak, you never say "the economy" again, I've done my work. Because I just want us to own our economy. We are in it. It should serve us. The rules should benefit all of us. If I convince people when they make an argument for equity, they should talk about it not just in terms of fairness and inclusion but in terms of prosperity and productivity, I feel like I've more than won the argument.

I also hope we convince well-meaning technocrats who believe that "if we put out another white paper criticizing inequality, maybe the world will change." It's obvious that there are lots of good ideas that never happen because they're not tied to movements. And there are lots of bad ideas that become public policy because they're tied to power. If I could convince those people that we should never think of economics apart from political economy, we should never think about policy change separate from thinking about movement building, my task will be done.

“If you ignore race and racism, it’s going to come back up. Because it’s in the air, in the country’s DNA, and it will become part of what divides groups.”

SD: In the past, as you write about in the book, movements for economic justice have often underplayed the need to address structural racism. And at the same time, sometimes racial justice movements have fallen short in addressing class inequality. Where do you see opportunity to effectively address both the class and racism aspects of racial capitalism?

MP: So, an anecdote from the book process: If you recall, the book came out of a set of conversations with movement leaders. So, when we completed our first draft, we sent it to two places: our publisher and a bunch of movement people. And the movement people raised a lot of interesting concerns. By the way, the biggest concern that they raised was that we should be more critical of social movements. They said we were being kind of celebratory, but there were really lots of shortcomings, and we should try to bring them more into the book and into the conversation for an honest examination. Interesting observation.

One of the big observations that came back from our editor at the press was, “Wow, you guys are talking way too much about race for a book that’s about the economy, and you should downplay it a little bit more.” So, Chris and I decided that rather than downplaying it, we would amp it up. Because, clearly, if the editor hadn’t been able to get why structural racism was such an important part of the story, we hadn’t been writing about it effectively enough.

So, the book is even more injected with a racial justice analysis than its first draft was. Now, why do we think that’s important? Because this capitalist economy has so much of its origins in the theft of land and labor to amass capital. And those were justified by, sometimes driven by, racism. So how do you tell the story of the emergence of a capitalist economy without that?

Also, if you’re trying to address inequality, it has multiple dimensions. Racial and gender inequality—inequality by ability or disability as well—are things that should be given more of a central place. This has changed, but in the past, many people working on economic justice issues would worry that if you raised issues of racial inequality, you’re going to derail the unity that’s needed to move forward on economic justice.

But our view is different, which is that you can take two paths. You can choose to ignore, or you can choose to inoculate. If you ignore race and racism, it’s going to come back up. Because it’s in the air, in the country’s DNA, and it will become part of what divides groups and prevents them from working on economic common ground. On the other hand, talking about racism explicitly helps develop the muscles where people feel comfortable talking about structural racism—understanding the differences in communities, generational persistence of inequality, and that equity is not about equality but about providing the tools that people need to succeed in a society where they’ve been left behind and kept behind.

So, we just think that you can prevent this by *not* dancing around it. As I said earlier, I grew up as a working-class Latino. And growing up that way, there certainly were parts of my life that were structured by the fact that I was Latino and the discrimination that my parents or I faced. But a whole lot of our life was formed by the fact that we were working class and disenfranchised for those reasons too. We often think about race as a lived experience, but we forget about class as a lived experience.

For me, being working class, as a cultural experience, meant that I grew up putting a value on work and working hard, putting a value on craft, doing well at your job, and understanding that being a good janitor or a good electrician or a good nurse or a good teacher, it’s all about craft.

And so, in addition to hard work and commitment to craft, a third working-class value is solidarity—that you’re supposed to hang with the other people when they need you. Taking the lived experience of working-class life seriously is, I think, really important to organizing around economic justice.

So, it’s not an either/or situation where you focus on class or race. And it’s also not a *kumbaya* situation where you give a little lip service to each and hope that conflicts go away. This is a difficult space to work in. It ought to be. If it was easy, someone else would have solved it before us.

SD: You’ve talked often about how social movement organizing in Los Angeles can be traced back, much of it, to the 1992 uprising after the Rodney King verdict. Could you talk about the process, and if there are any specific lessons you would take from that microcosm of Los Angeles that might be applicable in the present?

MP: I would take a lot from that. I’ll lift up three things. The first is that one of the things that the Los Angeles uprisings

did as they pointed out the shortcomings of neoliberal urban policy, the shortcomings of deindustrialization, which hit Black Los Angeles harder and earlier than the rest of Los Angeles. As much as the uprisings were an indictment of policing, they were also an indictment of the Left. Because if you have a city that is pissed off enough about its police department and income inequality to burn itself down, and you have not been able to channel that into social change, you can blame everyone else, but you ought to spend a little bit of time looking at your own organizing, and seeing what you need to do differently. I think that the Los Angeles uprising brought a kind of humility to progressive organizers.

Too often on the Left we feel like we've got great ideas, but we lament, "How did we wind up with Biden? Why was Obama so timid?" instead of saying, "Maybe we need to do more organizing, maybe we haven't broken through." We should ask ourselves why—in a country that is so upset about income inequality, in which there is so much dissatisfaction with racial inequality, in which there's so much generational anger about the climate disaster—why can't we do more? So, the first lesson I would take away is a kind of humility and self-examination.

The second lesson is that the unrest was immediately followed by an attack on immigrants with Proposition 187 [passed in 1994] and the attack on affirmative action [codified in Proposition 209, passed in 1996]. And a lot of people got tired of losing and understood what the consequences of losing those ballot measures were. We who are progressives can sometimes feel somewhat righteous about our losses: "At least we were firm in our beliefs and we put up a glorious fight." And I think one thing that happened in California is that people were like, "Ain't got the time to lose any longer. Our communities are being devastated. They're under threat. How do we organize to win? And how do we organize for governing power?"

The third thing I would take away from the Los Angeles experience and, more broadly, the California experience is: How do you scale? And what's the strategy for scaling over time? A lot of people who are part of the post-unrest discussions, and a lot of groups around the state, are now part of a configuration called the Million Voters Project, which every election helps mobilize nearly a million new and occasional voters, largely of color. That's enough to swing lots of different ballot issues and other campaigns. That was a really ambitious idea about getting to that scale. I've been very

impressed by what's happening in California, but it's happening in other states as well. I think this local and statewide organizing is very important.

SD: Is there anything else you would like to add?

MP: The only thing I'll add is that we didn't speak a lot about climate. And I think that one thing that we are trying to shift in the book as well is: How do we bring a spirit of mutuality to addressing our planet and our climate? Even when people of goodwill talk about addressing climate change, it's almost as though the planet is something separate from us. So, how do we take this broader vision of solidarity and talk about solidarity with our planet, as well as solidarity with each other, and forge a more inclusive and sustainable future?

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Experiments in Community Ownership Taking Charge of Commercial Real Estate

by Rudy Espinoza

■
As a field, we have to find solace in the fact that many people are like us: trying to change the world without a playbook and without the “experience” needed to get it done. *We already have what we need.* We work with and for community members who get up every day to care for their families without much certainty at all—they simply have their mission, their work ethic, and their persistence.

In 2016, activists in the Eastside neighborhood of Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, a historically diverse and predominantly Latinx community, were organizing against gentrification that was encroaching on their community. Activists directly confronted new art galleries with protests and headline-grabbing disputes over who has the right to live and work in a community that has been the center of Mexican-American history and culture for generations.¹

During this time, nonprofit organizations like Inclusive Action for the City, which I cofounded in 2008, had to do our own soul-searching. Was our advocacy for community members, including the most marginalized—such as immigrant entrepreneurs—enough? Were our microloans an adequate tool to help community residents build wealth? What levers could we pull to combat gentrification, prevent displacement, and protect impacted community members and small businesses?

These questions led us to take on a new venture at Inclusive Action: an effort to acquire land and property in neighborhoods experiencing gentrification. This venture would require our team of advocates, urban planners, and microlenders to stretch our capacity and build new skill sets. If investors were coming into a community to buy land, we thought, why couldn't we assemble a new approach to take properties off the speculative market first? Early on, we set our sights on supporting one of the most visible victims of gentrification: small businesses.

MISSION-DRIVEN LAND ACQUISITION

In communities all over the country, commercial corridors are lined with small mom-and-pop establishments that provide communities with food and services but also hire locally and act as ambassadors for culture. Long-time small business



Small business owners love their businesses, but they don't often envision building a massive money-making empire; they simply want to do what they love that pays them, their employees, and their families a decent wage.

owners are often the unofficial historians of a community, helping to make a neighborhood truly a neighborhood. Despite the American romance with such entrepreneurialism, however, many small business owners in communities like ours are simply trying to make ends meet. Small business owners love their businesses, but they don't often envision building a massive money-making empire; they simply want to do what they love that pays them, their employees, and their families a decent wage. For many immigrants, entrepreneurialism is the sole way to make a decent living in the United States due to the structures designed to lock them out of the job market.

Unfortunately, gentrifying market forces don't empathize with the goals of entrepreneurs in our communities. And without commercial protections, small businesses in California are the first to be displaced when a neighborhood begins to change. Strong policies to curtail displacement are necessary, but we need to think about other tools that can support small business preservation, especially legacy businesses, BIPOC entrepreneurs, and other critical enterprises that maintain the cultural fabric of a community.

At Inclusive Action, we believe that one tool to preserve small businesses is *mission-driven land acquisition*. If small businesses can have a share in the property they activate, they will have much more power to stave off gentrification and stay in their community. If you own, you have more agency to choose whether you'd like to stay in a community or leave. When you rent, your ability to stay depends on the goodwill of your landlord and the clarity of your lease (if you have one).

With this in mind, we created Community Owned Real Estate—a unique, collaborative project to acquire commercial buildings on the Eastside of Los Angeles. The project is led by three local, mission-driven organizations: Inclusive Action, East LA Community Corporation, and Little Tokyo Service Center.² CORE's goal is to preserve local communities and culture by offering affordable spaces to small businesses and community-serving nonprofits.

In 2019, we worked together to acquire five commercial buildings that today are home to 21 businesses and nonprofits. The vision is to keep these properties off the speculative

market and create ownership opportunities for long-term tenants in the future.

The journey since then has been an adventure, offering important lessons for us that I believe are valuable for the community development field. We encountered five challenges along the way:

Patchwork fundraising. In most real estate transactions, a buyer needs to have cash to contribute to its capital stack: the money you will use to buy the property in question. In our case, we worked to piece together funding from four different philanthropic sources to contribute \$1.2 million to a capital stack that consisted of a \$10 million New Markets Tax Credit Program allocation. I'm proud of how our partnership group worked together, and it's amazing that we were able to raise these resources in about a year. We wrote grants together, went on site visits together, and made compelling cases about the effectiveness of our collaboration, the trust we had with each other, and how we would implement this project. But the process should have been easier. Even the dynamic of a trio of organizations working together required foundations to stretch beyond what they're used to. Some philanthropic allies had to advocate internally to give us a chance, and others deferred serious review of our requests until we got the project off the ground and proved our concept. (I know, you're thinking, How can anyone expect you to get a project off the ground without money? Some do!)

Traditional views of "risk." Our project was catalyzed by Genesis LA, a Community Development Financial Institution that was willing to bet on our idea. Early on, many friends and advisors couldn't believe that Genesis LA would dedicate precious New Markets Tax Credits to a collaborative that included novice real estate stewards like Inclusive Action. The project also consisted of multiple properties, a zany idea of transferring ownership to tenants in the future, and no other lenders at the table. As many shared concerns about the project's viability, we kept going, and Genesis LA remained steadfast. To this day, I don't think our project would have gotten off the ground without them. Too often, our field adopts the same definition of "risk" as do large banks that never wanted to lend to our communities to begin with. If we truly

Dedicating the time to clarify your intentions and designing systems that won't rely on you are major challenges for leaders who are hustling to launch a project without much support.

want to fight gentrification or, better yet, address the racial wealth gap, we'll need to invest in bold projects that aspire to move the needle, not keep things the same. This type of investment will require a new definition of what "risk" is.

Designing systems that last beyond you. When CORE was just beginning, the late Dean Matsubayashi, then the executive director of Little Tokyo Service Center, told me that we needed to institutionalize the vision of CORE in its founding documents and clearly define our roles and responsibilities. "We can't assume we'll always be around," he shared. He was right. Since acquisition, our world not only lost Dean to a tragic illness, but our project team also has gone through a number of personnel changes. On several occasions, we've had to revisit our founding documents, reeducate new staff on the project, and make course corrections to stay aligned with our mission.

Dedicating the time to clarify your intentions and designing systems that won't rely on you are major challenges for leaders who are hustling to launch a project without much support. If you are working in a trust-filled group, few people want to be the person who calls for the tedious work of writing down everyone's responsibilities along with the accountability measures if someone fails to do their part. And fewer people consider a succession plan early on in a project. We won't be here forever, and when it comes to real estate, we must remember that we are simply temporary stewards.

Navigating bureaucracy. All of us have heard the rhetoric of government largesse and inefficiency. We see news headlines of businesses moving to other states with fewer taxes and less bureaucracy. Before CORE, I chalked up these comments as political tropes meant to cause division and disinvestment in our public sector. But through this project, I've learned that the experiences at the source of these comments are valid. Three out of the five buildings we acquired needed tenant improvements. The improvements we forecasted were relatively simple and tenant-serving, including bathroom renovations, installing new HVAC systems, and even a new roof on one building. Our budgets included thoughtful forecasts of what each of these improvements would cost and how much time they would take. What we didn't account for were the nearly insurmountable costs due

to inspector delays. Inspectors from public departments like building and safety, fire, and local utilities cost us thousands of dollars, mostly due to poor communication, missed meetings, and lack of communication among personnel. It was commonplace for inspectors to miss appointments, provide conflicting work orders, and send inspectors who each interpret the local codes in different ways. As I write this, we are reeling from a long list of new project requirements for our fifth building that were given to us at the *final* inspection: requirements that were never communicated to us or were never part of the plan. And yes, we've been renovating our small portfolio for three years, double the time we forecasted due to bureaucracy and public officials who don't realize that each day you are delayed is another day when your project can't earn income.

Learning that it's not "rocket science." The staff at Inclusive Action didn't know much about real estate when we began, but what we quickly realized is that it isn't "rocket science." Over the years, we've interviewed venture capitalists, private equity investors, real estate developers, and other "experts" in large-scale development and the movement of capital. On their most impactful projects, they didn't really know what they were doing, either.

Question: "So how did you figure that out?"

Answer: "We asked other people how they did it."

Question: "Where did you get the capital?"

Answer: "We just called people in our network to help us."

Over and over again, we see people in the private sector put together massive proposals and get funding, but when you look under the hood, they may not have the experience that risk-averse people in our own community development field may assume. What they may have are great communication skills, effective problem-solving abilities, and unshakable persistence. What's more, they don't take no for an answer. These observations were empowering to our team: If these folks can figure it out, why can't we? Too often, our field is paralyzed by what we perceive to be too many unknowns. If we're willing to put in the work, we can figure it out, too.

Scaling this work also requires that we move beyond crafting beautiful visions and dive into the nuts and bolts of implementation. This means doing the less glamorous work of organizing with each other—without egos, clarifying our commitments in writing, and building systems that are meant to last way beyond us.

CORE REFLECTIONS

We've learned a tremendous amount over the last five years due to CORE. We're laser focused on making sure we can retain ownership of our properties and get on track to build a mechanism to share ownership with our tenants. (Pray that we get our permits, so our tenants can occupy their spaces!) But we're also keeping an eye on how we can scale this work.

To do this, we believe mission-driven people need to consider how we'll identify a steady stream of resources that will provide the capital needed to quickly acquire properties in vulnerable communities. Why can't we have a mission-driven Blackstone that moves quickly to acquire assets? If they can do it, so can we, right? If philanthropy is too risk averse, we'll have to consider the role of the public sector in moving major capital to invest in priorities like small business preservation and antigentrification efforts. In Los Angeles, a legendary group of organizations came together to pass Measure ULA, a "mansion tax" that aims to raise \$1 billion every year for affordable housing. I believe that we should set our sights on moving capital at this volume. Piecing together a number of small grants for one project is too slow—and frankly, we're running out of time.

Scaling this work also requires that we move beyond crafting beautiful visions and dive into the nuts and bolts of implementation. This means doing the less glamorous work of

organizing with each other—without egos, clarifying our commitments in writing, and building systems that are meant to last way beyond us.

As we center the mission, we'll also have to let go of our fear of the unknown. Inclusive Action is an economic justice organization that began its work as an advocate and became a CDFI-certified microlender because street vendors were noting the lack of low-interest lenders who would help them purchase equipment for their business. *Our foray into real estate emerged in response to community activism and the experiences of our loan clients who were worried about displacement.* Are we experts in real estate acquisition and development? No. But we are listening to the needs of community members, and we're willing to work hard to figure out solutions.

As a field, we have to find solace in the fact that many people are like us: trying to change the world without a playbook and without the "experience" needed to get it done. *We already have what we need.* We work with and for community members who get up every day to care for their families without much certainty at all—they simply have their mission, their work ethic, and their persistence. Talk to a street vendor who lost a day of work because of a rainstorm—they are actively trying to figure out how to get back to work. We should approach our work in the same way.

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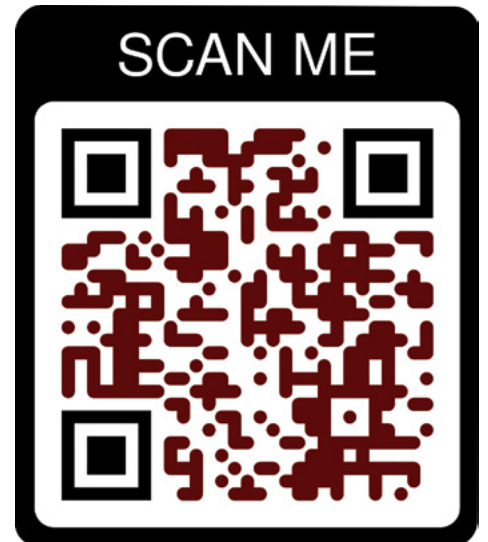
RUDY ESPINOZA is the executive director of Inclusive Action for the City, a community development financial institution that works toward economic justice for low-income communities through advocacy and transformative economic development. Under his leadership, Inclusive Action helped legalize street vending in LA, passed statewide legislation to support street food vendors in California, deployed over \$4,000,000 in microloans and grants to underserved entrepreneurs, and cocreated a commercial real estate initiative that preserves small businesses in gentrifying neighborhoods. Espinoza serves on the board of UNIDOS US, the United Way of Greater LA, the Center for Nonprofit Management, and Abode Community Housing.

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The Eldests

Stories of Economies

by *A-dae Romero-Briones*

■ This is the essence of an Indigenous economy: relationship and community—not just human community—to function in balance.... Indigenous economy is humbleness, frugality, and it protects limits. The lessons in Indigenous storytelling, as in Indigenous economies, are clear, important, and practiced: the pauses, the silence, and the stillness are also part of the story; it is the dark stillness that precedes emergence.

SKY WOMAN

Long before the world was created, there was an island in the sky inhabited by sky people. One day a pregnant sky woman drops through a hole created by an uprooted tree and begins to fall for what seems like eternity. Coming out of the darkness, she eventually sees oceans. The animals from this world congregate, trying to understand what they see in the sky. A flock of birds is sent to help her. The birds catch her and gently guide her down onto the back of Great Turtle. The water animals like otter and beaver have prepared a place for her on Turtle's back. They bring mud from the bottom of the ocean and place it on Turtle's back until solid earth begins to form and increase in size. Turtle's back becomes Sky Woman's home, and the plants she's brought down with her from Skyworld, including tobacco and strawberries, are her medicine. She makes a life for herself and becomes the mother of Haudenosaunee life, as we know it today.¹







W

e all begin with a story. It is through story that we are connected, not only to each other, but also to our homes, to our lands, to our communities, to our people, to our past, and to our future grandchildren. It is the collection of stories that we are able to hear and witness that will make the whole of our lives and define the shape and character of our community, but also, through the stories, we share and tell and retell what will shape the whole of our future. We organize our worldviews on the patterns of storytelling. The way we tell our stories sets our expectations and influences how we view our lives in relation to our world. Whether our characters are data points or monetary values represented by numbers or by animals and stars, the story is one of management and redistribution of resources, or, as many Indigenous people say, “life sources.” Stories help conceptualize what is possible.

When we talk about economies, we are still telling a story. In mainstream storytelling paradigms, there is always a need for a hero, usually one, and the idea that we can live happily ever after. The villains are named as the ones who set limits or barriers that should and will be overcome by heroes. In capitalism, land, plants, animal beings, people, places are replaced with numerical symbols that create a system of relationships that can be deciphered by understanding the numerical values and often the predetermined rules of engagement. Even further complicated, these systems of numbers are then used to predict future stories using equations, interest rates, but all focused on continued growth, overcoming limitations and barriers. We see this facet of Western storytelling reinforced in iconic stories like the American Dream—and even more stark, in current news reports of new billionaires and the ever epic quest for oil. The message: “There is always more.” In mainstream capitalist storytelling and economy, there is an endlessness that captivates and encourages dreaming, even when this leads to extinction of species, destruction of environments, and separation of community and people into more valuable and less valuable. The less valuable become areas of sacrifice. Entire neighborhoods and communities have become environmental waste zones in the quest for more wealth, space, and money.

There is a place for absence. For nothing. To not consume. For frugality. This part of the story is just as important, because it establishes limits, ends, and the concept of exhaustion as part of natural and recurring cycles.

Overconsumption, hyperconsumption, and, more recently, continued extraction despite constant calls for slowed development dominate conversations about global, national, regional, and even local economies. The constant need to drill or frack for more oil and find or colonize lands that remain “underdeveloped” are a result of this fundamental focus on continued growth. *No growth* and *absence* are the barriers or limits that mark failure and failed economies.

As society continues operating under the cultural understanding of limitless growth, we are destroying the very sources that maintain life. Even more alarming, rather than hinder growth, we find ways to separate and continue consumption: people, life, communities have to become less valuable in order to extract from them. In our mainstream economic equations, we are in constant search to increase the low values and find ever more creative ways to extract value to continue building. Mainstream economies avoid pauses or halts, because those are iconic markers of failure. The mainstream panics at the sign of failure. In more recent discourse around mainstream economies, there is a call for change reflected in conversations around “circular economies” or “responsive economies” or any number of callouts for a changed version of how mainstream society understands economy.

But before we change the equations at the base of mainstream economies, change the idea of limitless growth, we will need to change how we tell, and even listen to, stories. We will need to recognize the importance of, and embrace, absence that is followed by the practice of absence.

Many, if not all, Tribal creation stories recognize the importance of “absence.” This is often referred to as a “darkness” or “nothingness.” It is because of absence that emergence occurs. While Western economies focus on the light, the continued growth, “the absence” is critical in Indigenous understandings on how we manage economies. There is a place for absence. For nothing. To not consume. For frugality. This part of the story is just as important, because it establishes limits, ends, and the concept of exhaustion as part of natural and recurring cycles. Life sources or resources, if we not are not mindful, can be exhausted.



A HOPI STORY

The Creator gathered all of Creation and said:

“I want to hide something from the humans until they are ready for it. It is the realization that they create their own reality.”

The eagle said, “Give it to me, I will take it to the moon.”

The Creator said, “No. One day they will go there and find it.”

The salmon said, “I will bury it on the bottom of the ocean.”

“No. They will go there too.”

The buffalo said, “I will bury it on the Great Plains.”

The Creator said, “They will cut into the skin of the Earth and find it even there.”

Grandmother Mole, who lives in the breast of Mother Earth, and who has no physical eyes but sees with spiritual eyes, said, “Put it inside of them.”

And the Creator said, “It is done.”²

In the Hopi story, as with the Indigenous economies, there is recognition that we, presently, are part of the story—we are the economy. In mainstream economies, the economy is an external system that is controlled by markets, policy, and institutions outside of community, family, and individuals.

In mainstream Western traditions, we are subject to the economy like we are subject to the weather. Yet in Indigenous stories, collectively, we are the story—we are the economy. We influence the world, including life sources, all around us.

In mainstream Western traditions, we are subject to the economy like we are subject to the weather. Yet in Indigenous stories, collectively, we are the story—we are the economy. We influence the world, including life sources, all around us, because we are part of the equation as active participants in economic systems. Essentially, our collective actions, presence, and practice are a form of communication that influences the world around us—including economy, including weather.

In her article “The Pendulum of Climate: A Hopi Story,” Monica Nuvamsa explains:

Farming families work hard to prepare corn for storage for later use, and we are taught to keep at least four years of corn harvests in storage in case of drought or to prepare for major life events such as marriages, births, and ceremony. My household has not had a harvest in nearly three years. I follow the teachings I’ve learned and set aside seed for the next planting cycle, but in the past two years I’ve reduced my portion of seed each year, because the risk of loss in my community heirloom seed stock is too great for me. . . . It is in these times that the teachings come forth and I begin to fully understand why we do this: why we save, why we work hard to have good storage for future years, and why we anticipate the years that may not produce a good harvest.³

Nuvamsa is describing the practice of absence that influences how their life sources—seeds—are managed. Nuvamsa is a reflection of Hopi, Hopi people, and their stories. The Hopi stories center conversations, relationships, unique gifts that contribute to the whole, and more important, recognize *places* as important understandings—lessons with stories in and of themselves, places as opportunities to learn about our collective experience in that particular spot. Places are characters in our stories *in their own right*. Humans are not manipulators of economic or spiritual equation, but are only a small part of the dynamic interactions that occur around humans and the natural world. We humans are only part of the story. As told in both “Sky Woman” and “A Hopi Story,” humans are actually the least aware and gifted of life beings.

Additionally, there is a recognition that “the absence,” “the frugality,” contains lessons, learnings, and behaviors that cultivate and protect life. There is a clear understanding that life has limits, not limits that should be overcome but rather recognized, acknowledged, and accounted for. This fundamental understanding is the key difference between an Indigenous economy and Western capitalist economies. Moreover, when you have many dynamic Indigenous economies interacting and engaging under the same understanding of limitations as strengths and *not* limitations as deficits, this is emergence and the creation of symbiotic ideas and environments. Connections among Indigenous communities are valuable not just because they are economically beneficial but also because there is an accountability of shared protection of limits and recognition that each community is responsible for spatial and regional limitations. These connections and understandings are so strong that even through decades after what Anishinaabe scholar Kyle Whyte calls “*industrial settler campaigns*”⁴ that intentionally weakened Indigenous economy, self-governance, and self-determination, there are visible intense material, cultural, and social connections that continue to connect communities. Indigenous trade routes are invisible connections forged over generations, leaving rivulets in the earth between Tribal communities that still very much exist today. We were economic pollinators that have left their evidence in cultural practice in the present. These connections and practices are subtle reminders of our responsibilities to each other, our Tribal communities, and the trade items that found their way from village to village, region to region, and continent to continent.

This is the essence of an Indigenous economy: relationship and community—not just human community—to function in balance. It is community, relationship, and emergence that have value. Ironically, it is community, relationships, and emergence that are rare and much harder to numerically quantify in Western capitalism. Indigenous economy is humbleness, frugality, and it protects limits. The lessons in Indigenous storytelling, as in Indigenous economies, are clear, important, and practiced: the pauses, the silence, and the stillness are also part of the story; it is the dark stillness that precedes emergence.



NOTES

1. “Sky Woman,” by Shelley Niro, Kanien’kehaka, 1999; Keller George, Oneida Haudenosaunee, 2001; Alan Brant, Tyendinaga, 2001. There are many variations of this story, and sources differ.
2. “A Hopi Story.” There are many variations of this story, and sources differ.
3. Monica Nuvamsa, “The Pendulum of Climate: A Hopi Story,” *Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2022): 14–18.
4. I use the term *campaigns* because these waves of settlement are sustained, strategic, and militaristic. These campaigns include both warlike violence and the tactics for suppressing populations that are used alongside belligerence, from assimilative institutions (for example, boarding schools) to containment practices (for example, reservations) to the creation of dependency (for example, commodity foods). See Kyle Powys Whyte, “Our Ancestors’ Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, ed. Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann (New York: Routledge, 2017), 206.

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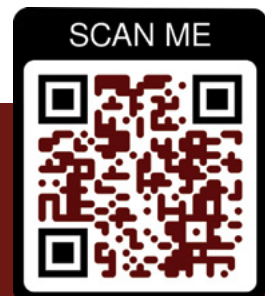
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Public Dollars for Public Good

by Carmen Rojas

There is a real opportunity here for philanthropy to support efforts that advocate for fair, transparent, and equitable budget appropriations and government grant processes; to develop infrastructure required to apply for and implement federally funded projects; to raise private funding to unlock public dollars; and to advise on the development of policies and practices that increase the flow of public dollars to marginalized communities.

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hat do community organizing calls for police abolition and recent federal public investments like the American Rescue Plan Act (more popularly known as ARPA) have in common? On their face, they might be seen as wildly different approaches to safety, well-being, and economic security in the United States. In reality, they are two sides of the same coin: both involve the use of state power. Public dollars can be used for good or ill; across the country, community organizers are calling to block the misuse of public dollars that generate harm in order to free up public dollars to achieve public good. The calls for police abolition make visible the ways our public dollars are often weaponized against us by using our dollars for increased police militarization and settling lawsuits for police misconduct. Public investments like ARPA have reawakened a commitment by politicians to use our dollars to improve access to quality housing, schools, and jobs.

At the Marguerite Casey Foundation, we believe this moment provides an opening for movements to shift public dollars to support the public goods our nation so desperately needs and to ensure that our dollars, in the public sector, are used to realize our dreams.¹



Over the course of the last two and a half years, Marguerite Casey Foundation has supported efforts across the country to reimagine safety, increase access to public dollars, and seed in everyday people’s imagination the belief that our government dollars should be used to improve their lives.

PHILANTHROPY’S CONFLICTING COMMITMENTS

Philanthropy has had a complicated relationship with the government. Even many equity-oriented donors and foundations have at times worked at cross-purposes with the public sector. In housing, many of us in philanthropy have tried to make deals and pay for change by funding an anemic affordable housing industry, as opposed to supporting the necessary community organizing to push federal, state, and local politicians to invest in the development of more public housing that is socialized and available to everyone who wants it. In education, many philanthropists have invested in the creation of a parallel learning infrastructure in the form of charter schools and voucher programs, instead of supporting parents and students organizing to fight educational segregation and school closures. In seeking solutions to the ever-present threats of climate change, philanthropy has prioritized market mechanisms that emphasize incentives, rather than community organizing that pushes for regulations motivated by a fundamental belief that corporations should not be allowed to pollute our water, air, and food. We should heed a few lessons from this past work.

First, philanthropy does not have enough money to replace the functions of government that meet the needs of everyday people for safe and affordable housing, quality schools, and a clean environment. Next, philanthropy cannot claim to want equity, justice, or liberation without bolstering people’s ability to engage in organizing for public resources. And finally, philanthropy’s best role is to support community members to come together and fight to ensure our dollars are being used to realize our dreams.

A DIFFERENT PHILANTHROPIC PATH

Over the course of the last two and a half years, Marguerite Casey Foundation has supported efforts across the country to reimagine safety, increase access to public dollars, and seed in everyday people’s imagination the belief that our government dollars should be used to improve their lives. We have also convened a group of scholars, organizers, funders, policy makers, and advocates to help us sharpen

our articulation of the opportunity available to communities in this moment, as well as define the three unique roles philanthropy can play in this work:

1. Supporting movements to unlock federal dollars for people who have been excluded from accessing them. Billions of dollars are currently available for working-class communities through federal agencies each year, and trillions more are being disbursed in the coming years through ARPA, the Inflation Reduction Act (also known as IRA), and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. However, skilled insiders and corporate lobbyists harbor significant power to influence the regulations that determine how these resources are deployed. Additionally, significant organizational infrastructure is required to apply for and manage federal funding. These barriers, along with often-required match funding, make it nearly impossible for all but a select group to access these resources. Compounding these challenges, some states refuse to use federal dollars on vital public institutions and instead seek to reject or return them.

There is a real opportunity here for philanthropy to support efforts that advocate for fair, transparent, and equitable budget appropriations and government grant processes; to develop infrastructure required to apply for and implement federally funded projects; to raise private funding to unlock public dollars; and to advise on the development of policies and practices that increase the flow of public dollars to marginalized communities.

2. Shifting the use of public dollars for the public good through community organizing. City and county budgets remain ripe terrains for contestation, and with unprecedented federal investments flowing to state and local agencies, the need and opportunity for intervention are clear. Organizers across the country are leading public budget-related activities to ensure that these dollars are used for investments in child care, education, public housing, and so on—the range of services that actually help people thrive.

We know that people don’t need philanthropy to come together and fight for a better future; instead, philanthropy

Supporting local grassroots organizations requires broader support that extends far beyond accessing federal resources. Helping organizations build campaigns to access state and local dollars is also extremely impactful.

can play an important role by creating a more even terrain for communities in these fights. There is a real opportunity in this moment to organize people to inform and influence local budgets that divest from policing, disincentivize the corporate control of our public resources, and invest in services and goods that regular people require to live healthy lives. There is also a critical opportunity to do this work in rural communities that are disproportionately impacted by recalcitrant political leaders who have weaponized federal dollars.

3. Increasing people's expectations and demands for public goods and public options. As Heather McGhee, among other authors, has amply demonstrated, we all benefit from the investment of public resources into our communities: public schools and colleges, public parks, public libraries, roads and bridges, and safe drinking water, for example. Unfortunately, decades of well-funded and organized efforts, often with the express goal to limit civil rights movement gains, have sown seeds of distrust in government to deliver services, eroding public expectations in the responsibility of the state to ensure that people have what they need to live healthy lives. These same forces have simultaneously conceived a project to outsource and privatize enterprises that could be more effectively delivered publicly. The story of the power and potential of public goods is one that needs to be amplified to help reset our collective expectations of government.²

Marguerite Casey Foundation plans to fund experiments across these three areas while leveraging the successes and lessons learned from these projects to help tell the story of public dollars for the public good. There are already powerful examples of what this looks like.

Native Americans in Philanthropy helped establish an Office of Strategic Initiatives at the U.S. Department of the Interior—and is working to move more federal dollars to Indian Country. Through its Tribal Nations Initiative, NAP helped Native communities secure over \$27 million out of nearly \$90 million in federal funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.³ This unprecedented sum was more than triple the amount set aside for tribal communities. NAP

seeks to replicate this model across conservation, education, and infrastructure funding streams to deepen the investments in tribal communities.

The Southern Economic Advancement Project developed a suite of tools for advocates, organizations, and politicians to fight for an equitable implementation of ARPA. Across the country, organizations used those tools to get resolutions in front of their local legislatures that centered the public's priorities for ARPA dollars. And now, as ARPA is winding down, SEAP is expanding that effort to incorporate other funding streams such as IRA and the infrastructure bill. Now SEAP is launching Our Dollars, Our Dreams, a project that will scale and coordinate "equity in budgeting" campaigns across the South in response to ARPA, IRA, and other massive federal investments.

Supporting local grassroots organizations requires broader support that extends far beyond accessing federal resources. Helping organizations build campaigns to access state and local dollars is also extremely impactful. For example, the grassroots organization Kansas City Tenants developed a vision for municipal social housing that included divesting from policing and gentrification. They mobilized low-income renters who wrote and helped pass a ballot measure for a \$50 million People's Housing Trust Fund to provide affordable housing to residents of Kansas City.⁴ This bond is the largest commitment to housing in the city's history, and a win for the building- and neighborhood-wide unions that organized toward it.

Support for local independent journalism, too, is part of building this vision. For instance, *Mississippi Today* is a progressive media outlet that launched a Follow the Money project to help community members track \$6 billion in ARPA funds flowing into the state. This coincided with the build-out of new digital engagement tools to help Black and Latinx community members identify opportunities for local advocacy. Through their reporting, a *Mississippi Today* journalist wondered why, as the poorest state in the nation, Mississippi was approving less than two percent of welfare benefit requests.⁵ The journalist discovered \$77 million in welfare funding that was

Done right, philanthropy can play a critical role supporting the power-building and organizing that are necessary to wrest control of public funds away from wealthy elites and large corporations, return the power of the purse to the general public, and fuel local and national movements to abolish poverty through significant and sustained investments in public institutions.

misspent by the former governor, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funding that state welfare officials allegedly conspired to steal.⁶



These examples and approaches to supporting communities that have long been excluded from enjoying the rewards that result when they are informed, engaged, and empowered to use public dollars for their wellbeing are just the beginning. Across the country, organizations are advocating for the movement of these dollars to communities that are on the front lines of economic inequality, racial injustice, and environmental degradation.

The sad truth is that philanthropy has often opposed—or at least declined to support—these efforts. In this critical moment, those of us who could consider ourselves in the social justice philanthropy sector must act differently. Done right, philanthropy can play a critical role supporting the power-building and organizing that are necessary to wrest control of public funds away from wealthy elites and large corporations, return the power of the purse to the general public, and fuel local and national movements to abolish poverty through significant and sustained investments in public institutions. I encourage more foundations to join us in supporting the growing movement to align public institutions and public dollars with public good.

NOTES

1. See Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).
2. See Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021).
3. National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, “NFWF, Federal Agencies and Private Partners Announce \$91 Million in Grants from America the Beautiful Challenge,” press release, November 10, 2022, www.nfwf.org/media-center/press-releases/nfwf-federal-agencies-and-private-partners-announce-91-million-grants-america-beautiful-challenge.
4. Dre Bradley, “KCMO City Council approves \$50 million affordable housing bond funding,” KSHB, October 13, 2022, www.kshb.com/news/local-news/kcmo-city-council-approves-50-million-affordable-housing-bond-funding.
5. Anna Wolfe, “Mississippi Today investigation exposes new evidence of Phil Bryant’s role in welfare scandal,” *Mississippi Today*, April 3, 2022, mississippitoday.org/2022/04/03/phil-bryant-mississippi-welfare-scandal-investigation/.
6. Anna Wolfe, “Phil Bryant had his sights on a payout as welfare funds flowed To Brett Favre,” *Mississippi Today*, April 4, 2022, mississippitoday.org/2022/04/04/phil-bryant-brett-favre-welfare-scandal-payout/. See also Cyndi Suarez, “Puerto Rico: The Critical Role of Information and the Nonprofit Sector in Disaster Living,” *NPQ*, November 3, 2022, nonprofitquarterly.org/puerto-rico-the-critical-role-of-information-and-the-nonprofit-sector-in-disaster-living/.

DR. CARMEN ROJAS is the president and CEO of the Marguerite Casey Foundation. Prior to joining the foundation, Dr. Rojas was the cofounder and former CEO of The Workers Lab, an innovation lab that supports workers’ flourishing and success. For more than 20 years, she has worked with foundations, financial institutions, and nonprofits to improve the lives of working people across the country. Dr. Rojas currently sits on the boards of Blue Ridge Labs, Children’s Defense Fund, the San Francisco Federal Reserve’s Community Advisory Council, Confluence’s Racial Equity Initiative Advisory Committee, and *NPQ*. Dr. Rojas holds a PhD in City & Regional Planning from UC Berkeley, and was a Fulbright Scholar in 2007.

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About the Artist: Yuet-Lam Tsang



Yuet-Lam Tsang is an artist based in Hong Kong. For a decade, most of her artistic pursuit was connected to graphic and seasonal product design, and was self-taught, while she was studying Western painting at the Chinese University of Hong Kong's School of Continuing and Professional Studies. As the artist describes her work:

My art is meant to capture the subjective imagery that is inspired by observation of the environment. It shows the many interesting images that are hidden in our daily lives. They derive from the arrangement of objects and the projection of light. What we see depends our state of mind.

One can see the face of nature, or cities, debris, patterns, different characters, random color blocks. We create the connection when our mind or attention is raised.

Normally, these connections are based on certain inherent concepts. From the moment we are born, the environments and adults around us give us the descriptions of the world. This helps us to integrate into the living environment but limits our perception, wiping out the inherent forms and definitions of specific things.

Looking at mountains is not mountains; looking at water is not water. Mountains and water can be anything. What you see with your eyes or apprehend with other senses is just a bunch of shapes, feelings, sounds—even chaos.

The result of what we apprehend depends on one's soul.

When the inherent concept of matter is cut off, the restructured things can only be "seen" inwardly. This process connects my inner worlds with outer worlds.

When I wipe away the inherent definition of things and follow my subjectivity, some thoughts or feelings that I may not have paid attention to emerges in my creation.

Like mirrors, this work reflects ideas hidden in my deepest heart.



Economic Justice

Nonprofit Leaders Speak Out

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What would a nonprofit sector that pursued economic justice look like? Too often, it is assumed that nonprofits are automatically leaders in the economic justice movement. The reality is more complicated.



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hat would a nonprofit sector that pursued economic justice look like? Too often, it is assumed that nonprofits are automatically leaders in the economic justice movement. The reality is more complicated. Sometimes, nonprofits advance economic justice; sometimes, they are part of the problem. Often, the very same nonprofit that is advocating for social justice policy may pay its own workers poverty-level wages.



In this issue on *movement economies*, we invited seven field leaders to answer the above question and consider how nonprofit practice might better align with stated economic justice goals.

Two of them—Dr. Nelson Colón of the Puerto Rico Community Foundation, and Clara Miller, president emerita of the Heron Foundation—come from philanthropy. The other five work for nonprofit intermediary organizations. These are: Seema Agnani of the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development; Marla Bilonick of the National Association of Latino Community Asset Builders; Gary Cunningham, CEO of Prosperity Now from 2019 to 2023; Jon Pratt, the now-retired founding director of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits; and Dr. Akilah Watkins of Independent Sector.

In their contributions, the authors grapple with how best to face the challenges inherent in the struggle for economic and racial justice. Whether analyzing the accounting plumbing of our economy, highlighting the role of advocacy, or looking at the intersections of nonprofits, community, and movement groups, one message is clear: the nonprofit sector, when it comes to economic justice, is falling short. To do better, the contributors contend, requires vision, advocacy, clear-eyed analysis, and a willingness to challenge barriers that hold the sector back.

MORALLY CENTERING OUR ECONOMIC JUSTICE VISION

by Akilah Watkins

Economic justice demands economic and financial systems of fairness be demonstrated publicly and discerningly for the most vulnerable in society. Achieving such an important and morally centered vision requires nonprofits to have a heart-to-heart about the flow of resources and how we incentivize behaviors that align with our vision of economic justice.

For example, corporate and philanthropic dollars don't always flow toward economic justice movements for a variety of reasons, which include everything from a lack of understanding of new leadership and organizational structures to grappling with supporting leaders of color dismantling systems of economic and social oppression. Black Lives Matter or Pride Month marketing campaigns might lead us to believe these movements are attracting all the funding they need, but they are not. This isn't a criticism of anyone, but rather a healthy dose of reality.

If our sector was truly aligned with the moral imperative of economic justice, it would look like starting the conversation at institutions with power and resources. How do these influential institutions drive concepts of economic justice with their grantees? Some questions these institutions should consider are the following:

- Are we covering the real cost of this work at the nonprofits we support? If not, why not?
- What would it take to fully fund the human capital, governance, and advocacy costs of nonprofits?
- Are we considering all the elements necessary to drive a healthy nonprofit sector?



Another piece of this painting would look like a landscape of advocacy and policy change institutions that prioritize racial and economic justice to level the playing field. Nonprofits would have the bandwidth to play ball against well-funded lobbyists and trade organizations without the burden of limited budgets. Nonprofits would be trusted to hire the right consultants and form partnerships that are collaborative and generative toward their racial and economic justice goals.

Lastly, a sector in pursuit of economic justice would look like a constellation of organizations that have struggled through, grappled with, and found their racial equity commitments. Independent Sector, the organization I lead, has used all its levers in one way or another to work in service of economic justice. We advocate for parity between the business and non-

profit sectors. We pay our diverse network of speakers and facilitators for their time and contributions in our community-building events and leadership programs. We build community and coalition with others. But we still have work to do. None of these levers were created overnight. None are perfect. We, like so many other organizations, continue to get smarter and better. It takes an iterative approach to achieve economic justice, and it starts with small steps.

In many ways, I imagine a nonprofit sector committed to economic justice looking like a sector where the suggestions we made as we braced for the brunt of COVID are universal norms.¹ But until we get there, let's not forget the everyday solutions that we can bring today. This means supporting the economic justice movements that power social change, the nonprofit efforts that help to increase the scale and impact of economic justice work, and the millions of individuals and families in the United States still striving to thrive.

DR. AKILAH WATKINS is president and CEO of Independent Sector. A 25-year national thought leader, conference speaker, and nonprofit executive, Dr. Watkins began to work at the age of 14 when she led efforts to convert a vacant lot and abandoned home into a community center in Roosevelt, NY. Since then, she's served as an executive leader for nonprofits and community development initiatives, which include work with the Obama administration, Center for Community Progress, NeighborWorks America, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Center for the Study of Social Policy. Dr. Watkins is an alumna of the University of Illinois at Chicago where she received her doctor of philosophy in sociology. Dr. Watkins serves on multiple national boards of directors, including Grounded Solutions Network, Up for Growth Action, National Housing Conference, and Common Future.

NONPROFITS AND THE PURSUIT OF ECONOMIC JUSTICE IN PUERTO RICO

by *Nelson I. Colón*

The nonprofit sector carries the torch of economic justice in Puerto Rico. Under the overarching theme of social and solidarity economy, three major movements—co-ops, labor unions, and nonpartisan political coalitions—embody the aspiration of fair distribution of wealth focused on the full realization of human beings.

The social and solidarity economy offers a liberatory vision that pursues collective wellness that amplifies personal progress. As persuasively described by Ruben Antonio Colón Morales, a professor at the Cooperativism Institute (Instituto de Cooperativismo) at the University of Puerto Rico, a democratic economy recognizes that we are endowed with the same human dignity, share the

same rights, and deserve the same opportunities. It prioritizes building personal, social, emotional, and cultural capacities of human beings—instead of irrational consumption. The main goal is to empower workers and consumers and improve the quality of community life. In short, a social and solidarity economy is ruled by an ethic of care and a commitment to protect and amplify life on this planet.



The beacon of light of the just economy is at the heart of the co-op movement, guided by seven principles: (1) voluntary and open membership; (2) democratic control by members; (3) members' economic participation; (4) autonomy and independence; (5) education, training, and information; (6) cooperation among cooperatives; and (7) concern for community. The co-op movement in Puerto Rico comprises a range of credit unions, youth co-ops, and co-ops in many other sectors, including farming, trade, manufacturing, services, transportation, and housing. More than 1.1 million Puerto Ricans, for example, are members of credit unions—more than a third of the entire country's population.² Co-ops are by far the largest sector in the just economy movement.

The co-op movement has not effectively penetrated other sectors of society, however. It remains encapsulated in a rigid legal straitjacket that limits its ability to react with agility to meet pressing social and economic needs and opportunities, such as the upcoming wave of solar energy development. Worker-owned co-ops and benefit corporations are additional public policy frameworks for a just economy.

VAMOS, (which means “let's go” in Spanish), a nonpartisan political movement that has arisen in Puerto Rico, is a nonprofit organization that articulates progressive organizations' efforts toward people's well-being. Although still nascent, VAMOS postulates in its platform that the social and solidarity economy is its key economic framework.

These movements are growing in the dry soil of Puerto Rico's economy. Since 2008, the economy has been spiraling down toward economic stagnation. Unable to grow at any consistent pace, gains, when they occur, are mostly due to disaster-related federal funding.

In the context of the history of Puerto Rico's economy, the social and solidarity economy offers a critical path forward. Labor unions, co-ops, and VAMOS are all key building blocks for a movement centered on a just and democratic economy. Coalescing these distinct social forces offers the possibility of a new dawn for Puerto Rico's community and economic development.

DR. NELSON I. COLÓN is the president and CEO of the Puerto Rico Community Foundation (Fundación Comunitaria de Puerto Rico), a philanthropic institution with a 35-year trajectory, working with communities in Puerto Rico and sharing its knowledge internationally. He holds a doctorate degree in education from Harvard University, an MA in cultural anthropology from SUNY Binghamton, and a BA in sociology from the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). Dr. Colón joined the foundation in the early 1980s as program director and became president and CEO in 2000. Under his leadership, several initiatives aimed at building equity in Puerto Rican communities have been launched, in the areas of education, housing, community, economic development, and—after Hurricane María—renewable energy; water, racial, and gender equity; and sustainable development goals. Also, after the 2020 earthquakes and the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Colón led the design and implementation of the foundation's philanthropic response to both emergencies, focusing on promoting and strengthening community action. The foundation has centered its strategy on building community capital from the ground up: human, social, physical, financial, environmental, and cultural.

HOW A COLLECTIVE NONPROFIT AGENDA COULD ADVANCE ECONOMIC JUSTICE

by *Jon Pratt*

The US nonprofit sector is inspired to action with good intentions, which is commendable, but it needs to mobilize and behave politically as an industry group to advance united positions on the functioning of the economy, not unlike the consolidated fiscal advocacy of the business lobby.

The structure of the overall economy, and government responses or inaction to these conditions, are at the heart of why most nonprofit organizations were formed—to ameliorate the effects of market failure. The current market economy fails to effectively distribute goods and services to large segments of the population, resulting in poverty and maldistribution of food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and education. In a massive charitable response, vast networks of locally supported food pantries, coat drives, homeless shelters, community clinics, and free schools have been launched and sustained. While some of these organizations dream about “working our way out of a job” when their services will no longer be necessary, dogged US poverty levels and trends tend to give this dream the lie.

We know that thousands of nonprofit contributors, volunteers, board members, and employees are sympathetic to the ends of economic justice. These supporters sincerely believe their good works are improving the conditions of the



poor and countering racial injustice, each in their own way.

However, philanthropic and community organizations need to openly concede that it is not possible for charitable projects to re-tilt the US economy and reduce poverty by their own expenditures.

Obviously, the only entity with the assets and power structure to move this needle is the national government.

Influencing the economic levers of the federal government is undoubtedly a massive task, but this is where the strengths of the nonprofit sector come into play: the power of numbers, community connections, and grassroots legitimacy by virtue of local delivery. A keener and simultaneous role for this set of organizations is to build political power and the public will to leverage other resources, including government funds and regulation, to address structural inequality. While smaller and less endowed than business lobbies, these organizations, by combining their networks, can exert power on national economic decision-making through local education and advocacy.

Leveraging the power of numbers and mobilizing collective action are long-standing applications of the nonprofit form to exert influence, especially through associations and membership organizations. These entities exist throughout the nonprofit sector.

Today, nonprofit groups engage in advocacy largely by addressing their focus areas. For example, housing organizations lobby for housing funding, food pantries lobby for food programs, and so on. There is an incentive for nonprofit lobbies to concentrate on their own revenue, which can be seen as both self-serving and mission related. By contrast, on the corporate side, we have seen many industries line up together to lower corporate taxes—a mature campaign to reduce tax and regulation championed by chambers of commerce.

The tendency of most nonprofits to stick to discrete subject areas misses out on a collective opportunity. If the masses of nonprofit organizations seeking to reduce poverty and “work themselves out of a job” could organize around a specific economic justice strategy, they could multiply their impact. If together the nonprofit sector and its supporters would agree and meaningfully campaign for significant increases in the value of just three policies—for example, earned income tax credit, minimum wage, and childcare subsidies—poverty would decline, and many nonprofits would better achieve their missions.

JON PRATT is a senior research fellow at the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, an association of 2,300 organizations that sponsors research, training, lobbying, and negotiated discounts to strengthen Minnesota’s nonprofit sector. From 1987 until 2021, he served as the organization’s executive director. He is also codirector of GrantAdvisor.org, and a former contributing editor to *NPQ*.

RECONNECTING ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

by *Marla Bilonick*

As someone who has dedicated her career to furthering initiatives that help residents and entrepreneurs in underinvested communities gain upward economic mobility, it will come as no surprise that I view economic justice as a key mechanism to unlock meaningful equity in our society. Economic justice and economic development have typically been detached and considered separate from other nonprofit areas of focus. Yet economic injustice is one of the most pervasive and subtle forms of discrimination that persists, hidden in plain sight in America.

There is not one area of nonprofit focus that can unbuckle itself from issues around economic justice (or injustice). Health inequities, crime levels, and immigration are all intrinsically linked to financial inequities, as are the failings of our criminal justice system. Access to quality mental health services is seemingly reserved for mid- to high-income individuals. The women’s rights movement still has much unfinished business around women and (un)equal pay. The drug epidemic has devastated our most poverty-stricken communities. Environmental pollution and degradation impact low-income communities disproportionately.



BIPOC communities and women have been *and continue to be* paid lower wages. Their personal and business loan requests are routinely rejected (or they are offered loans for lower amounts than their original requests and at higher rates and shorter repayment terms), stifling their ability to launch and grow businesses that create jobs. And BIPOC communities live in the shadow of years of discriminatory policies—most notably the redlining of the early 20th century that has left so many with a life sentence of lower household incomes, lower home values, and deteriorating housing stock. Low-income communities have also regularly been made targets for predatory financial service providers such as check cashers, loan sharks, payday lenders, and others.

Even with this short list of issue areas, unbuckling economic injustice from any nonprofit mission is

impossible. A nonprofit sector that pursued economic justice would recognize the interconnectedness between economic injustices

and a litany of linked issues for which nonprofits are seeking solutions.

Financial security should be viewed as a basic human right that is attainable for all. Financial instability is a trigger for so many other struggles that individuals and families face. Anyone who has lived under financial instability, even temporarily, understands how a precarious financial position infiltrates every aspect of life.

Kimberly Jones, an activist and author who writes about economic inequality in her book, *How We Can Win: Race, History and Changing the Money Game That's Rigged*, was interviewed in 2022 on CBS's *Morning Show*. She said, "A person should be able to 'just be' and be able to take care of their family."³

This statement is at the core of how an economic-justice-centered nonprofit sector could achieve significant impact—on the ability of everyone to have financial stability, the opportunity to create and pass down generational wealth, and to live in peace.

MARLA BILONICK is the National Association of Latino Community Asset Builders president and CEO. She is also the CEO of NALCAB's subsidiary asset management company, Escalera Community Investments. A seasoned veteran in the arena of economic and community development, she has over 20 years of expertise in small business development, community-based financial services, and international aid with an emphasis on Latin America and the US Latino population. She is also a board member of the Opportunity Finance Network, National Housing Trust, Self Help Ventures Fund, and Smart Growth America. She also serves on Capital One's and PNC Banks' respective community advisory councils.

In 2021, Bilonick was appointed by President Biden to serve on the US Department of the Treasury CDFI Fund Community Development Advisory Board, becoming the first Latina (or Latino) to be elected chair of that board and only the second female to chair the board in its 27-year history.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE IS ACCOUNTING JUSTICE

by Clara Miller

During my career in social sector finance, I coined a slogan: "Accounting is destiny." I thought it was funny and cute, but I could see that it annoyed my colleagues and friends, especially campaigners for social and economic justice. One leader in movement politics said, "If accounting is destiny, I'm going to get out on the ledge. How depressing!"

Admittedly, my slogan doesn't stir hearts and minds (and doesn't get many laughs, either). Accountants are not typically renowned heroic exemplars. Accounting seems detached from causes such as fighting racism, resetting unjust laws, or upending false cultural narratives. So, I'll put it another way: Accounting, broadly construed, maintains justice—and just as reliably, undermines justice. If we ignore it, all the marching, training, speaking out, changing of narratives, and passing of legislation will falter.

Economic justice is inseparable from the standards, reporting conventions, accounting rules, contracting terms, tax regulation, bank transaction boxes, algorithms, administrative rules, corporate profitability hurdles, business models,



and similar silent, gray, boring appurtenances of finance and law. These are the guts of the system, the architecture, wiring, and plumbing of the economy, through which money and power flow or are blocked. They routinely uphold or undercut integrity and fair dealing all day every day. Justice—as well as its opposite—is in these roots. Yet we rarely see them and routinely disregard them.

We do have well-known, visible accounting rules. We understand, for example, how points are scored and counted in a game; how long a playing field or court is; what's considered fair and not. The rules, rulings, and points may be contested, but they're generally understood and transparent. They manifest the system of the game, the commonly understood language by which fairness, value, and quantity are measured, contested, adjudicated, and improved. Accounting comprises agreed-upon measures of value—and provides a structure for their evolution as society and its needs change. But that's not always the way things work. Bad actors change the “plumbing”—the rules of commerce—to suit themselves, thereby extracting value from others without their knowledge or consent.

One example comes from my own experience. In 1975, I was an economic development planner in New York's Southern Tier, which includes the northernmost counties of the Appalachian region. The economic base was in decline. Farms, especially small farms, were failing.

A colleague's family was struggling to hold on to their farm. They couldn't get credit to buy a tractor. The rhetoric of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, not to mention public opinion, supported programs and services that would preserve small farms. Every member of Congress cherished small farms. But my colleague's family couldn't get help that seemed to be more widely available to larger farms. Why not?

Evidently, the USDA had changed the way they classified economically viable farmland. Based on the new guidelines, her family's farmland was too small and steep, putting their farm outside the credit box for a guarantee. A silent injustice: without legislation, without debate, and probably as a result of a complex calculus involving overall expense to the government, lobbying muscle, demand, and other factors.

Yet it took property from small farmers and gave it to large farms with the stroke of a pen. Despite the slogans, the soaring speeches, and bipartisan support for small farmers, the invisible measurement conventions and rule changes drove the opposite outcome.

Multiply this one instance by years, and the myriad of other blatant and damaging versions: redlining, racially prejudicial credit screens, bank charges for smaller depositors, and deceptive and discriminatory marketing algorithms, to name just a few. The system recounted in Caitlin Rosenthal's *Accounting for Slavery* lays out the cold calculus underpinning a savage US institution and its persistence in our systems, long after slavery has ostensibly been banned.⁴

“Justice” is a soaring, aspirational, and often abstract ideal. Calls for “system change” lead to head-nodding but also some blank stares. Taken together, the economy and justice require a both/and proposition if we are to move beyond false dichotomies and hopeful slogans. As W. Edwards Deming put it, “A bad system will beat a good person every time.”⁵

CLARA MILLER lectures, writes, and advises clients on social sector finance. She is president emerita of the Heron Foundation, which she led from 2011 to 2017, and advises, writes, and speaks on investing and enterprise finance. Prior to that, Miller founded and was CEO of Nonprofit Finance Fund from 1984 to 2011. Miller is an advisory board member of the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board, the U.S. Impact Investing Alliance, the Song Cave, the Impact Management Project and Open Road Alliance. She is a incorporator of Walden Mutual Bank and a member of the investment committee of Upstart CoLab. Miller, as a Clinton appointee, chaired the U.S. Department of the Treasury's first Community Development Advisory Board and served on the Community Advisory Committee of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. She was a board member and chair of Opportunity Finance Network, a member of the inaugural nonprofit advisory committee at the Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB) and an early board member of the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB).

ECONOMIC JUSTICE AS LIVING WITH DIGNITY

by Seema Agnani

I have been an executive director of nonprofit organizations multiple times now and pretty much all of my career has been in this sector. I chose this path because (as an old boss at Citizens Committee for New York City always reminded me) it is “not-for-profit.” For me, there was never a question of which path to follow—knowing my family and I had some level of financial security, I felt it was my duty (dharma) to ensure everyone was able to live a good life in dignity.

Unfortunately, leaders of not-for-profit organizations spend much of our time trying to raise funds, report on outcomes, ensure donations are managed ethically, and, of course, support and manage the people who make up our organizations. If public dollars are secured and you perform well, that can help. However, within the constraints of many publicly funded programs, it is nearly impossible to implement creative solutions in communities.

So, organizations are left with the options of going to scale, using predetermined program models that don't quite fit the local or community context, or continuing with the existing structure that leaves very little time for our core purpose and mission. As a result of these systemic challenges, many organizations give up on the solutions that are defined by community need and ultimately prioritize scale over true impact.

In my previous work in Queens, NY, we were trying to find solutions for individuals and families who could not afford the rent, let alone to buy anywhere in the community where they felt a sense of belonging. Solutions that might have allowed them to stay, and also build generational wealth (such as limited equity co-ops or accessory dwelling units), were met with much resistance. The attorneys said it was too difficult to structure financially; the private sector said it was too risky; and public sector leaders were either stuck in impossible political climates or prioritizing strategies that would bring more immediate results. It took years to raise sufficient funds to advance this work substantively.

The good news is that today, with shifts in the political landscape, these efforts are moving again. If successful, they will ensure greater economic justice for generations to come. The role mutual aid funds played during the COVID-19 pandemic taught us that in times

of crisis, it is important to be able to support communities in developing their own solutions.

Indeed, despite the challenges I named above, many community-based organizations are innovating on the ground and advancing economic justice. The rise in communities that are working to shift land ownership to community trusts across the country, for example, is putting the future of these communities in the hands of local residents. Also, models such as limited equity cooperatives, commonly used in the past, are being revived today. Community savings models such as chit funds or susus (savings circles, where funds are regularly pooled by a group and redistributed on a regular basis) are another example of where the nonprofit sector can build bridges and support models that are driven by communities.

If the not-for-profit sector were to truly facilitate the movement for economic justice, it would prioritize and support community-led models, while employing a multigenerational, community-focused lens. It would enable the public sector to adapt and adopt models that are flexible enough to be tailored by local communities, rather than acquiesce in forcing models on communities that have been negotiated down in the halls of Congress.

If the not-for-profit sector can continue down this path and make more room for models of economic justice that center benefits for communities and not just the individual, we might just transform the economy to work for those that are fueling it in the first place.

SEEMA AGNANI (she/hers) serves as executive director of National CAPACD (pronounced “capacity”), a coalition of more than 100 community-based organizations that advocate for and organize in low-income Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities. She has more than 25 years of experience in community development, capacity building, and immigrant rights. Agnani was a founder and executive director of Chhaya CDC, working in the South Asian community of New York City, leading the organization during the great recession and the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11. At Asian Americans for Equality in New York City, she managed affordable housing and economic development projects and neighborhood planning. She previously served as a member of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s Community Advisory Board. Agnani is originally from the Chicago metro area, to which her parents emigrated from India.



FORGING A NEW AMERICAN NARRATIVE

by Gary L. Cunningham

A nonprofit sector that pursued economic justice would recognize that powerful elites have rigged the system, capturing government and the market. In their greed, they are hollowing out the middle class, stifling economic prosperity, limiting the mobility of current and future generations, and endangering our democracy.



We need a new approach, founded on the following principles: people first, and for each other.

People first—corporations, the market, and government should serve people, and not the other way around.

People for each other—we owe each other a duty of care and respect, and to see ourselves in others.⁶

Many of us have toiled for years to build a just economy that works for everyone. We have marched; we have protested; we have picketed. We've been jailed, kicked, and bitten by police dogs. So many have given their lives to fight for the American dream.

Yet today, many of us are shut out and left out of a dream meant for all of us. In 1968, the Kerner Commission report identified many of the same issues that we are grappling with today.⁷ Many of us discovered the game was rigged even when we played by the rules. A significant proportion of Black people have given up on whether this country can live up to the American dream.

According to a 2022 Pew Research Center national poll, most Black people are skeptical that change will happen in their lifetimes. However, despite despair, we have witnessed significant and inspiring change in this country.⁸ Let's consider some significant gains we've made as a nation: emancipation from enslavers, women's suffrage, labor organizing, American Indian Movement, civil and human rights movements, farmworkers' struggles, and Black Lives Matter.

We witnessed these movements transform our country. Each represents a step toward justice and economic security for all Americans.

I would assert that our country has not made significant economic, political, or social progress without a movement of people. It's not a program. It's not an initiative. Those things are essential, but if we're going to make real progress in America, we need to build a multiracial/multiethnic movement of people focused on economic justice for all.

Today we have reached what is known as a Nash equilibrium in America.⁹ Unless the broader society sees a benefit to itself for improving the conditions of BIPOC communities, the allocation of resources and opportunity will remain unchanged. However, the Nash equilibrium also suggests that groups that build enough social cohesion to negotiate a common agenda improve their chances of transforming the playing field and changing the entire game.

Movement building boosts the power and the social cohesion necessary to disrupt the current system.

Manuel Pastor eloquently frames movement building when he states, "Movements are about a dream, about a vision, about a narrative that's deeply rooted in values, but helps to frame people's understanding."¹⁰

We need to create systems and structures to include everyone at the same time and target resources based on how people are situated to opportunity. We must move away from zero-sum approaches that leave some groups out of the circle of human concern and privilege others. Targeted universalism is a vision to build the narrative for this moment.¹¹

It's time to change the old patterns that have wasted so much human potential. It's time for a new narrative that spells out how we can move forward together.

GARY L. CUNNINGHAM, from 2019 to 2023, was president and CEO of Prosperity Now, a DC-based national nonprofit focused on creating an economy that works for everyone. Under his leadership, the organization has shifted its strategic focus from simply mitigating the effects of a broken racist system to transforming that system by testing, investing, and scaling systems-level solutions. Gary's experience has earned him national recognition as an expert on entrepreneurship, job creation, and racial wealth equity. Cunningham grew up in both North and South Minneapolis to a single mother. He was 10 years old during the protests and riots of 1967, which were spurred by long-standing grievances in the Black community over lack of access to adequate housing, education, and healthcare. Before moving to Washington, DC, to lead Prosperity Now, Cunningham served as the top leader of philanthropic, healthcare, public policy, and educational organizations. He held the roles of president and CEO of the Metropolitan Economic Development Association, vice president of programs at the Northwest Area Foundation, and CEO and director of primary care at NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center, a community health and dental clinic and social services agency in North Minneapolis. Cunningham has also served as assistant superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools and the deputy director of the Civil Rights Department for the City of Minneapolis. He holds a bachelor of arts degree in public policy from Metropolitan State University, located in the Minneapolis–St. Paul metro area, and a master of public administration degree from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

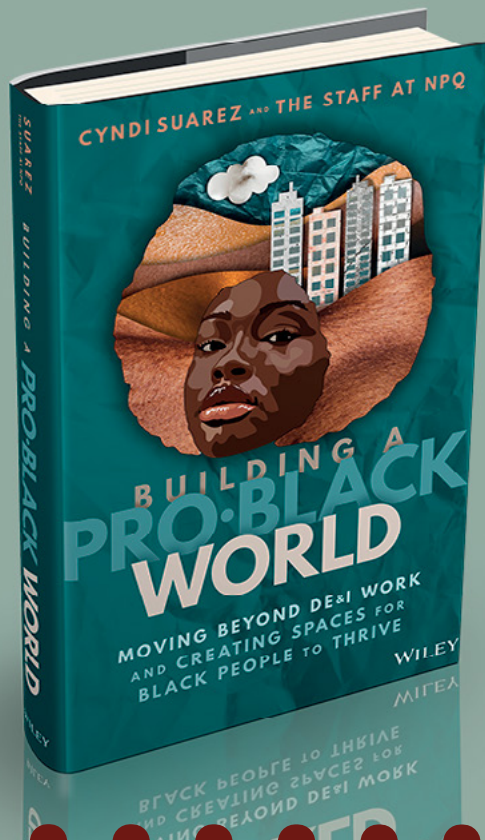
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