



Campaign Academy: Coaching and Leading Winning Campaigns



Pre Academy Package

The Campaign Lab is a system of Affiliate Staff, Members, and Leaders networked to build power to win on issues that matter most by building a culture for organizing. A culture for organizing and continually campaigning includes a shared analysis of how to win, issue identification, goal setting, strategic actions, distributed leadership, and data that informs progress. This NEA Center for Organizing training is designed to build skills around coaching all aspects of a campaign cycle.

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Welcome to Campaign Academy

Welcome to the first convening of NEA's Campaign Academy. We are going to be focused on **Why** we need the Campaign Lab and **How** we are working in the Campaign Lab. As outlined in your registration, It is required that you participate in all aspects of the event and this included the pre-academy session.

Why Pre-Academy Assignments? The resources compiled here are relevant and intended to help you shift from the day-to-day cognitive load of work to the thinking you will use as a learner at the academy. It should take no longer than 2 hours to complete the entire package.

Please download and complete the following Before Arriving.

Pre-Academy Assignments (Approximate time to Complete -2 Hours Total)

As you navigate this course, there are several modules. Prior to attending you will need to complete Pre- Academy Assignments and the Modules listed below.

1. Community Agreements (Estimated Time to Complete 15 Minutes) – Please complete this module prior to attending. It is a stand-alone module called Community Agreements outside of Pre-Academy Assignments. We will be doing an activity on day one that requires your prior reading of these. Please download, save, and complete the form in this module called, Community Agreements, and complete the questions at the end prior to our meeting.

2. Reading and Reflection on HOW (Estimated Time to Complete 60 Minutes)

Ella Baker's Legacy is summary of one of the most important and underreported organizers in the American social justice movement history. Her premise for leadership outlines one of the core cultural shifts within the NEA that the Campaign Lab is poised to support and develop. The authors say,

"Baker represented a different leadership tradition altogether. She combined the generic concept of leadership— "a process of social influence in which a person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task"—and a confidence in the wisdom of ordinary people to define their problems and imagine solutions. Baker helped everyday people channel and congeal their collective power to resist oppression and fight for sustainable, transformative change... That collective effort required leaders who were accountable to one another and were not singular. There were many organizers in groups such as SNCC who modeled Baker's brand of what sociologist Charles Payne has called "group-centered leadership."

Rather than someone with a fancy title standing at a podium speaking for or to the people, group-centered leaders are at the center of many concentric circles. They strengthen the group, forge consensus and negotiate a way forward. That kind of leadership is impactful, democratic, and, I would argue, more radical and sustainable, than the alternatives.”

How can your role in the Campaign Lab, (Team Lead, Coach, Mentor) promote this sort of cultural shift within our affiliate and local systems?

We are asking that you read only pgs. 17 and 22 of the **NEA’s Bargaining for the Common Good Racial Justice Guide**, the rest is a valuable resource that you will want likely want to return to when the time is right in your campaigns. One iterative question that you will be asked in your role (Team Lead, Coach, Mentor Coach) in the Campaign Lab is, “How are you centering equity in every aspect of this campaign?” Why this is part of the NEA Campaign Lab experience is answered in the forward of this document,

“Since the 17th Century, our nation’s system of public education has been the undisputed foundation of an inclusive democracy, economy, and society. Public school classrooms are where our students first learn how democratic systems of government work, and where they develop an understanding of the principles and practices that will allow them to participate in the operation of the U.S. government.

Unfortunately, when they should be working to strengthen our democracy, some far-right politicians, policymakers and pundits are actively working to dismantle it. Their weapon? Escalated attacks against public education. From attempting to whitewash the nation’s history to eliminating the contributions and lived experiences of Black people and communities of color, to maligning and marginalizing LGBTQ+ students and educators, these attacks are only intended to fulfill the self-serving desires of the attackers and their wealthy donors. Their efforts are rooted in the fertile ground of this sad truth: Inequity is sewn into every social system in our nation. These inequities make

their presence known at every schoolhouse door, and in every other element of far too many communities...

We will continue to follow the North Star of our shared vision: to unite not just our members, but the nation to reclaim public education as a common good, as the foundation of our democracy, and then transform it into something it was never designed to be - a racially and socially just and equitable system that prepares every student, every one, to succeed in this diverse and interdependent world."

As you read Pgs. 17 and 22 how are you already beginning to think about centering equity?

What are the specific ways you can use your role (Team Lead, Coach, Mentor Coach) to amplify how equity is included in all aspects of campaigns within the Campaign Lab system?

Please read the full article **Three Theories of Change**. The author writes,

"To organize is to build mass support and strength among ordinary people. Organizing draws its power from working people's biggest strength: our numbers. Working people may or may not see themselves as activists or politically active or even in political agreement, but through organizing, they come together to act in common cause. The work of organizing is systematic and rigorous: It requires connecting with every single

worker in a shop, every educator in a building, every building in a district. At its core, it asks people to understand their own agency and to make choices about how they will exercise it. The work of organizing is difficult; ordinary people are seldom confronted by their own agency nor asked to make choices that recognize their own power.”

The final page of the article is a table with Advocacy, Mobilizing, Organizing across the top and “indicators” under each of these theories. In your role (Team Lead, Coach, Mentor Coach) in the Campaign Lab, consider one campaign you are working with. As you consider that campaign, place a check mark next to the indicators that sound most like the “theory” that local is working within.

Take a few minutes and reflect on how you think they might use their campaign lab work to shift.

We ask that you read the full **Chapter 6.2 of Practical Radicals – Base Building**. This focuses on the tensions and strengths of combining structure based (Alinksy style) organizing and more democratic, leaderful, and transformational organizing strategies. The author writes,

“Unions rely on various forms of power and use many of the strategy models ... we focus on their base-building work because all of their other strategies must be built on a solid foundation of member organization. A strike won’t work if members don’t stick together. Base-building starts with the theory that union power is predicated on people power. Unions derive strength and influence when the majority of workers are members of the union and when those members participate in union meetings and activities. Power comes from workers’ ability to act together.

Most union growth does not happen incrementally, plant by plant, workplace by workplace. As union organizer Mark Meinster writes, “The problem is that even great tactics can’t overcome the social, political, and economic forces of capitalism, which combine to make organizing a gigantic challenge . . . Employers are under intense competitive pressure to resist workers’ demands—there’s no generous ‘high road’ for them to take; they won’t willingly give in to a union drive. And employers are compelled to come together as a class to exert power over the government, passing laws and using

the courts to challenge unions on all fronts.” Instead, union growth comes in “upsurges”—periods where workers rise up more broadly. In the United States, these upsurges took place at the turn of the twentieth century, in the 1930s, and in the late 1960s/early 1970s. There are signs we may be in the beginning of another upsurge as we write this book...

This suggests that the steady, slow work of building unions worker by worker (base building) must be paired with other strategies, especially given the added obstacles unions face—intense employer opposition and weak labor laws.”

In your role in the Campaign Lab (Team Lead, Coach, Mentor Coach) how do you foster strong base building actions AND work towards the inclusion of other strategies?

How would you categorize the plans of the teams that you are currently working with now in relationship to what the authors of this chapter have laid out?

3. Reading and Reflecting about About WHY (Estimated Time to Complete 45 Minutes)

Please read the full article, **Justice for All, Road Tested Strategies for Building a Bigger Movement**. In this, the author begins with:

“Most activists sense the dense web of connections linking social, economic and climate justice issues, yet stick largely to their own anchor points. It’s time to come unstuck. To

make progress at a pace that matches the urgency of our problems, we must widen the circles of activism and invite everyone in.”

The Campaign Lab is a network of locals who want to make change in their locals and be connected more broadly to the [NEA Campaign to Promote, Protect, and Strengthen Public Schools](#) . In your role, (Team Lead, Coach, Mentor Coach) how might you be able to use the Campaign Lab to meet the challenges of this moment in your local, community, state, or more broadly?

The authors lay out four strategies that they say are critical to building a larger movement. How would these strategies help you strengthen the work you are doing? Now and into the future?

We ask that you read the full article, **Plan 2028: Bringing Labor and Social Movements Together**, the author sets the context by starting with,

“Plan 2028 isn't just another general strike call-it's a strategic, long-term push to unite labor and social movements in a coordinated fight against rising authoritarianism.”

She goes on to add,

“Plan 2028 could look more like a series of escalating actions over the next several years, including engagement in the 2026 elections and coordinated fights against the implementation of Project 2025. Those actions could build up to a month or several months of national protests in early 2028; that could include big strikes, rallies, protests, and legislative campaigns. Disruptions may take other forms beyond a strike workplace actions like slow-downs, sit-downs and walk-outs, or the

kinds of community boycotts and direct action seen in the Civil Rights movement. Any real disruption will still involve risks arrest, harassment, and surveillance for example-and, whether strikes or otherwise, disruptions must come with careful planning and collective care.”

How could your work in your current Campaign Lab role (Team Lead, Coach, Mentor Coach) be connected to and contributing to Plan 2028?

What would be the challenges for you? What would be the opportunities for you?

The Taking Stock Report – For this meeting we ask that you read pgs. 3-7 and 53-54. The rest is optional for now. The authors lay out the following vision:

“In order to generate the power needed to rise to the occasion, labor unions and community organizations will need to come together in partnership. The union movement is one of the few forces capable of mobilizing working families en masse to prevent the US from succumbing to MAGA authoritarianism. Education unions are uniquely positioned because they already have a workplace presence in most neighborhoods across the country. Organized communities have ears to the ground on how to build power at the local level and mobilize communities across different neighborhoods. Together they can build power to not only protect, but to strengthen our democracy for future generations.”

How can my participation in the Campaign Lab, in the role that I am in now (Lead, Coach, Mentor Coach) contribute to this vision?

What would be the challenges for you? What would be the opportunities for you?

Community Agreements for Our Time

Awareness and Self-Knowledge

This requires self-knowledge and self-awareness. Self-knowledge allows you to see what causes you pain and conflict and enables you to embrace your contradictions and inconsistencies. It allows the space to work on things about yourself that you are not happy with. In turn, self-knowledge helps to prevent you from projecting your negative aspects onto other people. Bringing your best self also requires that you have a positive attitude, are willing to deeply explore your perspectives and remain open to the perspectives and experiences of others.

Listening for Understanding

Be an active listener. Active listening involves paying full and careful attention to the other person, looking them in the eye, avoiding interruptions, reflecting your understanding, clarifying information, summarizing the other person's perspectives and sharing your own. This does not mean re-explaining or reinterpreting another's words for others in the room. Remember that most people need time to open up and might not be willing to immediately share their personal stories, hopes, fears and/or concerns.

Being Gracious

Being kind is a vital way of bringing meaning to our own lives, as well as the lives of others. Kindness is about caring genuinely for others around you, wanting the best for them and recognizing in them the same wants, needs, aspirations and even fears that you may have. Being kind and generous allows us to communicate better with others, to be more self-compassionate and to be a positive force in other people's lives. We are gracious when we accept and genuinely work to use the pronouns that others ask us to use. Being gracious includes utilizing your sick leave when ill for in-person events and not putting the health of the learning community at risk. Being direct and precise about your needs and thoughts is also kindness.

Staying Engaged

Staying engaged requires you to be morally, emotionally, intellectually, and socially involved in the conversation. Staying engaged means that you are listening with curiosity and willing to deepen your understanding. Staying engaged might also require you to sustain the conversation even when it gets uncomfortable or diverted. This means a commitment to keeping your electronic communications to a minimum with folks not present in this learning community. This also means being present for all portions of the learning agenda.

Being Open and Suspending Judgment

Listening with an open mind includes being receptive to the influence of others. You can suspend judgment by becoming aware of your preconceived notions and listening to everything someone has to say before jumping to conclusions. It requires some vulnerability, but not to the point of jeopardizing your personal safety. Suspending judgment also means listening to what the speaker has to say for understanding, not just to determine whether the speaker is right or wrong. This means that we recognize each of us will make mistakes and that we have the capacity to grow. We should expect imperfections.

Saying "I" - tell your truth

Speaking your truth in authentic and courageous conversations about race, class, gender, and other issues where experiences/perspectives may differ widely from yours requires a willingness to take risks. It means that you will be absolutely honest and candid about your own thoughts, feelings, experiences and opinions and not just saying what you perceive others want to hear. Speaking your truth will require you to speak from the "first person" and use "I" statements.

Seeking Discomfort

Leaning in to discomfort will require you to let go of understandings and stereotypes that you may be holding onto in order to move forward. Leaning in means that you will avoid pre-judgment and be open to the kernel of wisdom in each individual's experiences. Leaning in to discomfort will require you to sit through moments of embarrassment, confusion, anxiety, and/or fear.

Reaching Empathy

Empathy and compassion allow you to understand the other person's point of view. When you are empathetic, you are more understanding, patient and kind. Expanding your capacity to feel empathy will also allow others to enter your circle of human concern. Sharing, using, and respecting pronouns is a very simple form of empathy.

Expecting Non-Resolution and Non-Closure

Expect and accept that there may not be closure. It is not likely that you will resolve your personal understanding about race or another person's racial experience in a single conversation. The more you talk about race or other issues with another person, the more you learn and the more they will learn. Authentic and productive conversations about race and other issues where experiences/perspectives may differ widely from yours are continuous and always evolving. This means that sometimes we will have unfinished, unexplored, and shortened conversations about some concepts.

**Adapted from "Embracing equity and inclusion", Annie E. Casey Foundation*

What questions do you want to ask about any of the ideas in these agreements?

What additional agreements do you need in order to be a fully participating member of our learning community?

Can you commit to these agreements? IF not, what would it take for you to be able to commit?

Ella Baker's Legacy: A Different Model of Leadership

As a community organizer, Ella Baker brought a different style of leadership to the civil rights movement—one that contrasted with the traditional model that celebrated a few charismatic individuals. Baker believed in deemphasizing top organizational figureheads and instead cultivating the abilities of everyday people to collectively join together and take action. She upheld the idea that organizations should be run by those most impacted by the problems the organization is trying to solve.

In a June 12, 2015 article in Colorlines, Barbara Ransby discussed Baker's approach to leadership:

Although she objected to the top-down, predominately male leadership structures that were typical of groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the NAACP in the 1950s and '60s, she realized the necessity for grounded, community-based leader-organizers such as sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer and Cleveland, Mississippi-based local organizer Amzie Moore. Baker was not against leadership. She was opposed to hierarchical leadership that disempowered the masses and further privileged the already privileged.

When Oprah Winfrey complained that recent protests against police violence lack leadership, she was describing [Martin Luther King's] style of leading, or at least the way in which the King legacy has been most widely branded: the reverend as the strong, all-knowing, slightly imperfect but still not-like-us type of leader.

Baker represented a different leadership tradition altogether. She combined the generic concept of leadership—“a process of social influence in which a person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task”—and a confidence in the wisdom of ordinary people to define their problems and imagine solutions. Baker helped everyday people channel and congeal their collective power to resist oppression and fight for sustainable, transformative change....

That collective effort required leaders who were accountable to one another and were not singular. There were many organizers in groups such as SNCC who modeled Baker's brand of what sociologist Charles Payne has called “group-centered leadership.”

Rather than someone with a fancy title standing at a podium speaking for or to the people, group-centered leaders are at the center of many concentric circles. They strengthen the group, forge consensus and negotiate a way forward. That kind of leadership is impactful, democratic, and, I would argue, more radical and sustainable, than the alternatives.

<https://www.colorlines.com/articles/ella-taught-me-shattering-myth-leaderless-movement>

Another way in which Baker's leadership style contrasted with the norm within many civil rights organizations was her emphasis on valuing the contributions of women. Baker was opinionated and outspoken, even when social norms held that women should be quiet and deferential. At both the SCLC

and NAACP, she protested the fact that formal power rested in the hands of men, who almost exclusively were given top offices, while women were relegated to support roles.

Congressperson John Lewis, himself a prominent civil rights activist, wrote in his memoir *Walking with the Wind*: “Long before people began using the term ‘male chauvinism,’ Ella Baker was describing it and denouncing it in the civil rights movement, and she was right. There were very, very few women getting credit for their work, and even fewer emerged into leadership positions.”

In a January 16, 2017 article for *Time* magazine, journalist Julie Scelfo notes that the prevalence of sexism, even within the movement, may be one reason that Baker is less well-known today than she might be otherwise:

Despite her level of experience and proven track record, [Martin Luther King, Jr.] had difficulty allowing a woman’s decisions to trump his own, and her idea was that the organization should devote its resources more to promoting and enabling its overall mission rather than celebrating a charismatic leader. Wyatt Tee Walker, an early SCLC board member, told the filmmaker Joanne Grant that the ministers’ refusal to follow Baker’s advice was in practice with the era’s norms. “This was before the days of women’s liberation,” he says in the 1981 film [Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker....](#)

Despite Baker’s gifts for leadership and oratory, the SCLC pastors, intent on preserving their patriarchal hierarchy, refused to allow her to share in their prestige.

<https://time.com/4633460/mlk-day-ella-baker/>

Scelfo goes on to discuss another reason why Ella Baker may be less well-known and widely celebrated today than some other civil rights activists:

Baker spent years of her life performing the essential—but far from glamorous—act of listening, a crucial first step in helping beleaguered Blacks develop enough self-worth to demand being treated with dignity in an environment where they had every reason to fear brutality and economic reprisal from their white neighbors. She also understood group dynamics and how to empower people to join forces, a delicate task that involves responding to a wide array of human feelings.

A narrative about this kind of work is inherently less dramatic and far more complicated than, say, the tale of a discreet act of bravery on a bus. But great leaders have recognized for centuries that high emotional intelligence, or the ability to recognize and respond to other people’s feelings, is central to successfully influencing them.

<https://time.com/4633460/mlk-day-ella-baker/>

Baker possessed this type of intelligence and infused it into her approach to organizing. In doing so, she paved the way for many young people and women to grow in their own leadership.

Today, her legacy can be seen in organizations like Black Lives Matter, which promote a “leaderful” and feminist style of organizing. Because of this, Baker not only helped change the world, she changed how people went about changing the world.

**BARGAINING
FOR THE
COMMON GOOD
RACIAL
JUSTICE GUIDE**

NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

The National Education Association is the nation's largest professional employee organization, representing more than 3 million elementary and secondary school teachers, higher education faculty, education support professionals, school administrators, retired educators, and students preparing to become teachers.

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NEA would like to thank the Center for Innovation in Worker Organization/BCG at Rutgers for contributing to the development of this guide. We also want to thank our affiliates, who provided us with many inspiring stories of Bargaining for the Common Good for racial justice demands.

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FOREWORD

Since the 17th Century, our nation's system of public education has been the undisputed foundation of an inclusive democracy, economy, and society. Public school classrooms are where our students first learn how democratic systems of government work, and where they develop an understanding of the principles and practices that will allow them to participate in the operation of the U.S. government.

Unfortunately, when they should be working to strengthen our democracy, some far-right politicians, policymakers and pundits are actively working to dismantle it. Their weapon? Escalated attacks against public education. From attempting to whitewash the nation's history to eliminating the contributions and lived experiences of Black people and communities of color, to maligning and marginalizing LGBTQ+ students and educators, these attacks are only intended to fulfill the self-serving desires of the attackers and their wealthy donors.

Their efforts are rooted in the fertile ground of this sad truth: Inequity is sewn into every social system in our nation. These inequities make their presence known at every schoolhouse door, and in every other element of far too many communities.

With 3 million members, NEA is the nation's largest labor union. As education professionals devoted to ensuring that the nation's 50 million public school students receive the support, access, and opportunities they all need and deserve, we have not—and we will never—allow these unfounded and harmful attacks to go unanswered. We will continue to follow the North Star of our shared vision: to unite not just our members, but the nation to reclaim public education as a common good, as the foundation of our democracy, and then transform it into something it was never designed to be—a racially and socially just and equitable system that prepares every student, every one, to succeed in this diverse and interdependent world.

This Bargaining for the Common Good Racial Justice Guide represents a critical step toward the achievement of that vision.

The principles of Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG) are fastened to the belief that just as inequity is woven through the fabric of many communities, the collective bargaining process must have woven through it the unique needs and aspirations of the community that encircles the educators and students whose needs are represented at the bargaining table.

In addition to examples of how NEA state affiliates have bargained for the common good in schools and communities nationwide, this guide contains a roadmap for creating campaigns built from intentional, long-term partnerships between unions and community organizations. It also provides information about how those relationships can help to facilitate bargaining proposals designed to end the systemic patterns of racial inequity and injustice that hamper the progress of far too many students, educators, and public schools.

As parents, educators, and communities, we have a shared responsibility to ensure that every student—Black, White, Brown, Indigenous, or AAPI; students from underserved neighborhoods, LGBTQ+ students, and students who are disabled—all of our students—have the joy, justice and excellence they all need and deserve. Through bargaining for the common good, NEA is transforming that desire into a reality for students, educators, and communities across our nation.



Rebecca S. Pringle

President

National Education Association

PURPOSE OF THE RESOURCE GUIDE



INTRODUCTION TO RACIAL JUSTICE CENTERED EDUCATION

National Education Association (NEA) locals across the country are at the forefront of moving strategic demands grounded in racial justice that dismantle historical and pervasive racist structures in education. Locals are building with parents, students, and community partners to fight for a system where all students can thrive no matter their race, gender, or immigration status.

But for years, corporate actors and political players have stood in the way by defunding public schools and privatizing education, disproportionately impacting communities of color and low-income neighborhoods, implementing hurtful discipline policies that predominantly target students of color, and more recently censoring teachings about racial justice and the histories of Native People, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black, Latino/a/x, Middle Eastern and North African populations.

We must unite to take on these challenges. Union members are recognizing their dual roles as both workers and key leaders in their communities. In a changing and stratified economy, we are expanding collective bargaining, policy fights, and corporate campaigns to address the challenges we face as workers, neighbors, and families. **Labor and community organizations are collaborating to advance unified demands that are relevant to both workers and the broader community.** This way of coming together is called Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG).

In 2022 and 2023, we saw the power and energy of BCG in Oakland, St. Paul, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and in growing numbers of states. These campaigns brought community members to the bargaining table with unions and thousands into the streets to take on corporate power and fight for the schools, housing, and cities we all deserve.

How are unions and community groups Bargaining for the Common Good?

At the center of BCG campaigns are intentional, long-term alignments between unions and community organizations advancing racial justice demands. Connecting at all levels starting with membership, they build strong, lasting partnerships based on trust and a shared analysis of the systemic problems we are confronting and the solutions necessary to transform our communities. BCG campaigns are centered around joint community-labor planning that brings diverse partners to the table in union bargaining, policy fights, and corporate campaigns that build power and address the crises we all face. BCG work centers racial justice because we must collectively confront structural racism to create a powerful, unified movement.

Building strong, sustainable relationships is not easy. **Effective BCG campaigns require unions to use the bargaining process as a tool to engage members in their dual identities as workers and community members. Community organizations must also educate its members about unions and how they can bargain together.** Both groups must work to overcome any historic animosity or mistrust to develop a shared framework, from membership to leadership, that sees corporations and the wealthy elite as the perpetrators of injustice in our communities and workplaces.

In this resource guide, you will learn more about what makes a Bargaining for the Common Good campaign, along with tools and resources that your local can use to work with partners in your area to run a BCG campaign.

THE RESOURCE GUIDE IS BROKEN UP INTO THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS WITH KEY TAKEAWAYS



SECTION 1: PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

Explains Bargaining for the Common Good and the framework principles that are essential to accomplishing our vision of racially equitable and just schools.

Takeaways:

- We need to run Bargaining for the Common Good racial justice centered campaigns because class and race are not separate.
- If we want to win real people power, we have to build campaigns that include racial justice.

SECTION 2: ELEMENTS OF A BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD CAMPAIGN

Provides tools and resources to run a Bargaining for the Common Good campaign through the lens of the five elements of BCG.

Takeaways:

- Bargaining for the Common Good campaigns are rooted in building power in our local unions and communities.
- The five elements of a BCG campaign are:
 - Center racial justice in demands
 - Engage community allies as partners in issue development and the bargaining campaign
 - Expand the scope of the bargaining beyond wages and benefits
 - Expose bad actors
 - Strengthen internal organizing, membership, and member engagement
- Community building is an integral part of the strategy and tactics, which means it takes time to develop, create and build, and move forward. To build a BCG campaign, planning begins two years in advance.
- We need to clearly express who the bad actors—the real decision-makers that affect our workplaces and our communities—are and ensure there is a clear connection between the bad actors and the demands.
- Bargaining for the Common Good campaigns require ongoing organizing, base-building, and leadership development.

SECTION 3: SUCCESS STORIES

Shares stories of locals succeeding in building people power in their area.

Takeaways:

- Victories are feasible in different political conditions.
- Organizing doesn't end when we settle the contract or win the campaign. These victories are possible only if organizing is ongoing.

SECTION 4: RESOURCES

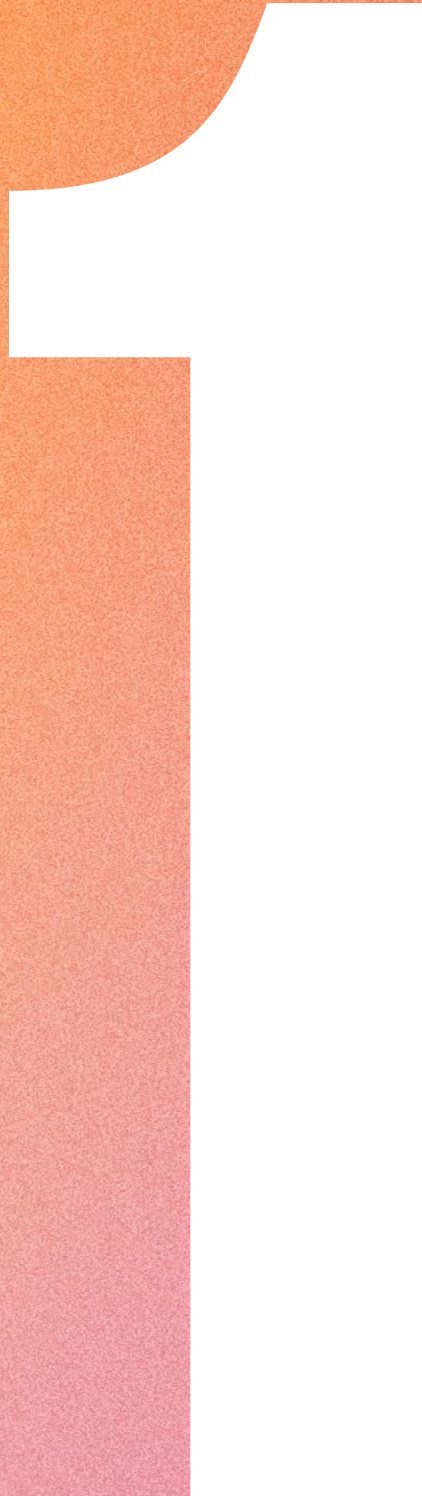
Shares links to tools and resources provided in Sections 1-3.

Takeaways:

- A compilation of BCG tools and resources developed by NEA locals.
- Includes a glossary of racial justice language.



PRINCIPLES AND VALUES



BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

With Bargaining for the Common Good, union members partner with the community around a long-term vision for the structural changes they want to see in their communities. Together, they use collective bargaining and advocacy as critical components in a broader campaign to win that change, advance racial equity, and build people power.

Educators partner with parents and community members in order to identify issues and utilize bargaining, or other forms of advocacy, as a vehicle to make demands for the entire community.

In states with collective bargaining, contract negotiations provide an opportunity for educators and their unions to involve the larger school community in the vision they want for their school and neighborhood. Instead of going to the bargaining table alone and isolated in negotiations, unions join together with parents and the community, which builds our power. In states without collective bargaining, unions and community groups align to push for policy changes that require school districts and corporate actors to meet the demands of the community.

When we expand the continuum of bargaining, we build power and go on the offense in order to fight for social and racial justice for our students, schools, communities, and the future.

With Bargaining for the Common Good, we not only fight for better pay and benefits for educators, we also fight for students and communities. When stakeholders come together, they can determine what their community needs. NEA members have successfully used the Bargaining for the Common Good strategy to win:

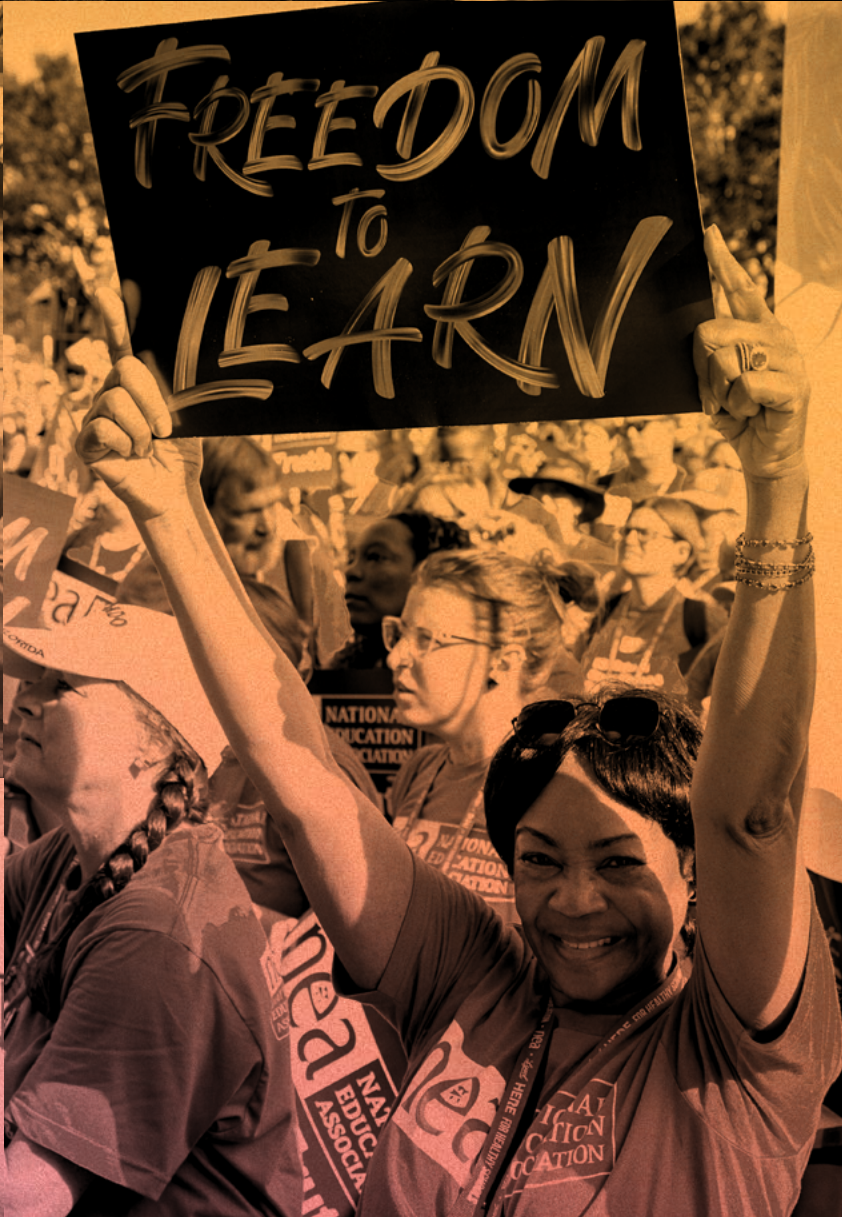
- Less testing
- Smaller class sizes
- Educator recruitment and retention programs
- Equitable school discipline policies
- Mental health support
- More nurses and counselors
- No ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) collaborations
- Implementation of restorative justice
- End random backpack checks
- Institute and/or expand ethnic studies for students

Bargaining for the Common Good works in both areas that have collective bargaining and areas that do not. The mechanics may differ, but the fundamentals are the same.



“In addition to salaries that keep up with inflation and smaller class sizes, Oakland educators held the line for almost seven days on what are known as, ‘common good demands.’ Common-good bargaining refers to agreements that go beyond issues of wages and benefits in an attempt to have a positive impact on the broader community. Under the new tentative contract, the Oakland Unified School District agreed to educators’ demands to utilize unused school buildings for nonprofit housing developments, provide resources for unhoused students, and fund programs such as the Black Thriving Community Schools that would empower Black students with leadership opportunities . . . The groundbreaking common-good demands won in Los Angeles and Oakland are proof that by standing together, educators have the power to effect change outside of normal bread-and-butter issues. Now, students and communities will benefit from the hard work that educators have put in to achieve these victories.

– Cecily Myart-Cruz, President of UTLA and Bargaining for the Common Good Advisory Committee member, “The California Teachers’ Strikes Have a Vital Lesson for the Labor Movement,” The Nation, May 19, 2023.



RACIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION FRAMEWORK PRINCIPLES

NEA has a vision for quality public education for every student. We know that institutional and structural racism are barriers to achieving our vision. We will leverage the power and collective voice of our members to end the systematic patterns of racial inequity and injustice that affect our Association, schools, students, and education communities.

It is our belief that these Framework principles are essential to accomplishing our vision of racially equitable and just schools:

- Our collective work promotes a vision for public education that advances inclusion, equity, and racial and social justice in our schools, Association, and society.
- Our collective work must dismantle white supremacy, and ensure that bigotry and discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, disability, or national origin is not part of our Association, classrooms, educational curricula, classroom management, school policies, and discipline practices.
- Our Association and schools must be safe for all students, and free from state-sanctioned, racialized, and gender-based violence. Our work must actively divest from prison cultivation and invest in counselors and positive discipline practices.
- Our work must result in action—programs, campaigns, policies, and capacity-building efforts for local NEA members that dismantle institutional racism now and into the future. Initiatives should create sustainable infrastructures that can continue to create systemic change and hold decision-makers, elected officials, and institutions accountable.
- Our current governance leaders must recruit, engage, and promote leadership by educators of color to share the ladder of opportunity because we are stronger together.
- Programs, campaigns, and projects must be driven by goals that are clearly outlined, tracked, and measured, and that have accountability systems that explicitly promote racial justice.
- Our work must promote education policies, professional practices, and curricula that highlight and honor the histories and cultures of Native People and People of Color.
- We must work to ensure that all students have access to a safe and quality education, regardless of their country of origin or immigration status.
- Our work must promote and support the engagement of students of color and LGBTQ students in shaping policies that directly impact their educational experience and foster safe and inclusive schools.
- We must work to dismantle discipline systems that create the School-to-Prison Pipeline and replace them with practices that encourage inclusion and are free from racial and ethnic bias.

CONNECTING FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS

Throughout our history, the NEA has joined in partnership to move policies that would address inequities in education, but we understand now that racial justice in education requires movement beyond racial equity. A lack of movement will keep us at the precipice of doing a lot with limited ability to sustain it.

It will require that:

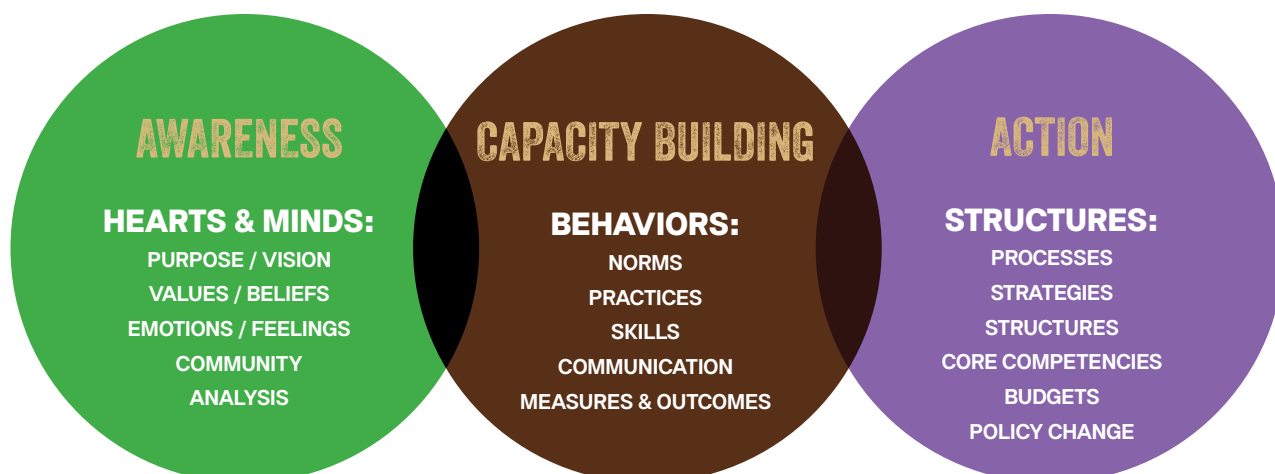
- We have a deep understanding of racial history and the associated trauma and are able to acknowledge the presence of this trauma within current systems, norms, practices, and policies.
- We focus on solutions that will build power (e.g., political, economic, civic, community) for the most sharply impacted communities and people.
- We effectively use racial impact assessment tools and develop racial justice action plans.
- We shift and share power, programs, and resources.
- We adopt anti-racist and racial justice protocols and practices.
- We shift culture and narrative.
- We use data to drive results/impacts.

The NEA Racial Justice in Education Framework was developed in conjunction with the principles and concepts embedded in the “Wheel of Change” model (adapted from the Rockwood Wheel of Change). This Framework centers and guides our systems change work, including our approach and implementation of Bargaining for the Common Good campaigns.

AWARENESS

Goal: Develop and strengthen our collective awareness and understanding of the causes and impacts of systemic (i.e., institutional and structural) racism in education and both the necessity and centrality of racial justice in achieving NEA’s mission.

- Build racial equity awareness and analytical capacity across our Association.
- Foster understanding of key concepts such as systemic (institutional and structural) racism, implicit bias, racial equity, and multiracial systemic solutions.
- Develop shared knowledge and conceptual clarity that supports normalizing explicit and constructive conversations about race.



CAPACITY BUILDING

Goal: Equip and prepare members and leaders with skills to use the strategies to take action to advance racial justice.

- Equip members, leaders, staff, and partners with the skills, tools, strategies, resources and relationships to be effective leaders and advocates in the fight for racial justice in education.
- Develop tools and resources to support organizational and cultural change through policy, practice, and behavior changes.

ACTION

Goal: Equip members and stakeholders with tools and skills to advocate, organize, and mobilize to disrupt institutional racism and advance racial justice in education.

- Engage and activate members, leaders, and stakeholders in on-the-ground efforts to combat institutional racism and advance racial justice.
- Support external organizing efforts to advance changes in our schools and communities.
- Support internal opportunities to implement equitable practices that positively impact the Association's work and promote culture change.

SECTION 1: PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

TAKEAWAYS:

- We need to run Bargaining for the Common Good racial justice centered campaigns because class and race are not separate.
- If we want to win real people power, we have to build campaigns that include racial justice.

ELEMENTS OF BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

2

CENTER RACIAL JUSTICE IN YOUR DEMANDS

Campaign demands should address the role that employers play in creating and exacerbating structural racism in our communities.

What does it mean to center racial justice demands?

Racial dynamics, disparities, and divisions permeate our society, communities, schools, and classrooms. Systemic racism is so deeply rooted in our history, culture, and institutions that there is no escaping it. Visible or not, the impacts are ever-present. Racial justice is the systematic fair treatment of people of all races, resulting in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. Racial justice (or racial equity) goes beyond “anti-racism.” It is not just the absence of discrimination and inequities, but also the presence of deliberate systems and supports to achieve and sustain racial equity through proactive and preventative measures.



To engage in a systems analysis of a racial issue and develop solutions or to test if the campaign demands center racial justice, good discussion questions to have with partners and union members include:

- **Problems:** What racial inequities are you noticing or experiencing? What are the impacts on different racial groups? Who benefits most and who is hurt most?
- **Causes:** What institutions, policies, or practices are causing or contributing to the inequities? What social norms, popular myths, or cultural biases may be contributing?
- **History:** How did things get this way and are things worsening or improving?
- **Solutions:** What solutions could address the root causes and eliminate the inequities? How would different racial groups be impacted by the proposed solutions?
- **Strategies:** What strategies and actions could be used to advance the solutions?
- **Leadership:** Who are the stakeholders most affected by the inequities? Are they involved in naming the issues and solutions? What kinds of active leadership roles could they take to advance the proposed solution?

Source: <https://neaedjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Racial-Justice-in-Education.pdf>



OTHER TOOLS YOU CAN USE TO ENSURE A DELIBERATE ANTI-RACIST CAMPAIGN

RACIAL EQUITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT:

A racial equity impact assessment is used for making decisions with deliberate attention to racial justice, social justice, equity, and inclusion. It provides a guide and protocol for race- and equity-conscious decision-making that is thoughtful, transparent, participatory, and systematic. This type of tool can be used to analyze policies and contract language, institutional practices, programs, plans, and budgetary decisions.

Fix L.A. was a community-labor partnership that fought successfully for:

1. The creation of 5,000 jobs, with a commitment to increase access to jobs for Black and Latino/a/x workers.
2. The defeat of proposed concessions for city workers.
3. A commitment from the city to review why it was prioritizing payment of bank fees over funding for critical services.

“Bargaining for racial justice is a radical idea and will not be easily won. It will require concerted direct action targeting the real decision makers in both the public and private sectors that have a vested interest in keeping racial inequities in place.”

- Maurice Weeks and Marilyn Sneiderman, In These Times, “Why Labor and the Movement for Racial Justice Should Work Together”, September 02, 2016.

BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD DEMANDS:

Bargaining for the Common Good campaigns are rooted in winning racial justice demands. Many have generated amazing wins and demands across the country.

This booklet provides concrete examples of common good demands that unions and community groups have bargained for across the country. Some of these demands have been won in bargaining or outside the negotiations table, and some are still being fought for.

NEA locals have been at the forefront of winning BCG campaigns. They have identified and won racial justice demands across the country. Demands can be about a range of issues from public health and safety, safe working and learning conditions, academic success, and social and emotional well-being. The list of sample demands includes:

- Acknowledge the pandemic was not experienced equally by all communities and populations, particularly in rural areas and communities of color. Listen and learn how different families handled virtual learning.
- Provide and prioritize housing, food, health, dental, and job services in neighborhood schools because it is a common-sense way to begin to address racial justice issues and the racial inequities they create and exacerbate.
- End attempts to re-segregate our school communities with charters, vouchers, and other privatization schemes that funnel resources away from public schools.
- Ensure school plans for in-person instruction are inclusive and equitable for all educators and students by humanizing learning environments and designing spaces that are situated in the experiences of communities of color, not just through white, cis-hetero, and ableist lenses.
- Ensure adequate time is provided for classroom community-building activities and consider additional staff to allow for the development of restorative practices in schools.
- Prioritize hiring, retaining, and promoting educators of color.

BUILDING YOUR RACIAL JUSTICE TEAM:

Building the right team to make decisions and move this work is critical. Your racial justice campaign team should include a leadership team, organizing/mobilizing team, communications team, political team, and in a collective bargaining campaign, a bargaining team. There should also be team members who lead the research work and legislative/policy development.

- The **leadership team** will direct and oversee the entire campaign. They have a bird's eye view and focus on advancing the campaign forward. They provide the vision and make the tough decisions with input from the rest of the team.
- The **organizing and mobilizing team** is responsible for recruiting impacted people and new partners and mobilizing members and activists. They communicate frequently and engage members and activists in two-way conversations about the campaign's vision, strategy, and action plan.
- The **communications team** drives the internal and external communications. They educate and agitate activists and members, work with the media and develop social media to define the narrative, and build public support.
- The **political team** leads the efforts to build support from elected officials, work with political partners who support the campaign, and hold those who do not accountable.
- The **research team** is responsible for pulling together information, data, and facts to support the campaign. They ensure that any data being shared is sourced legitimately and correctly. They are critical in identifying and building a case around the bad actors.

None of these teams work in silos, they work together. They can be a combination of staff, paid release members, and/or volunteer teams. It may be that the political team is from a community partner group and the research team is from the local union. Either way, the teams should understand their roles and how they interact with each other.

It is important to note that sometimes a team is one or two people depending on resources, size of the local, and staffing capacity. The different teams should develop the racial justice demands and be able to drive the campaign forward through a racial justice lens.

CENTERING LEADERSHIP OF NATIVE PEOPLE AND PEOPLE OF COLOR:

The term Native People recognizes the first people of this land, having sovereign national and tribal status, as well as a racialized identity. The term People of Color refers to Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black, Latino/a/x, Middle Eastern and North African, and Multiracial populations. It isn't enough to have Native People and People of Color activists in the campaigns. Centering means Native People and People of Color have a leading voice, are listened to, trusted, and have decision-making power within the partnership.

ENGAGE COMMUNITY ALLIES AS PARTNERS IN ISSUE DEVELOPMENT AND THE BARGAINING CAMPAIGN:

Bring in community partners on the ground floor and develop issues, goals, and strategies together. Common good is about building long-term community-labor power.



BUILDING LONG-TERM COMMUNITY-LABOR POWER TAKES TIME.

Community building is an integral part of a Bargaining for the Common Good campaign, which means it takes time to develop, create, build, and move demands forward. It is important to remember that organizing does not end when the contract is settled or the campaign demands are met or won. As shown in the timeline below, before the launch of a campaign, there are a few steps that can take anywhere between six months to a year or more.

COMMUNITY BUILDING IS THE FIRST STEP:

Whether you live in a big city, a suburban town, or a rural community, there are people who care about the same issues and share your values. But to build a sustainable, long-term relationship, work is required upfront. This may include many 1-on-1 meetings, group presentations, follow-up calls, and more follow-up calls, Zoom calls, emails and more follow-up calls. It is not just about building your member list, but also building relationships. What do the leaders care about? Why do they do this work? What problems are their communities facing? What solutions do they see? Where do you share common ground and where do you have differences in your organization?

BASIC STEPS TO A BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD CAMPAIGN:

This outlines steps starting about 1.5 years before bargaining to after settling the contract. Bargaining for the Common Good campaigns are about building long-term power and changing the power dynamics in our communities, so it is important to think about the work as multi-year that continues after the contract campaign ends.

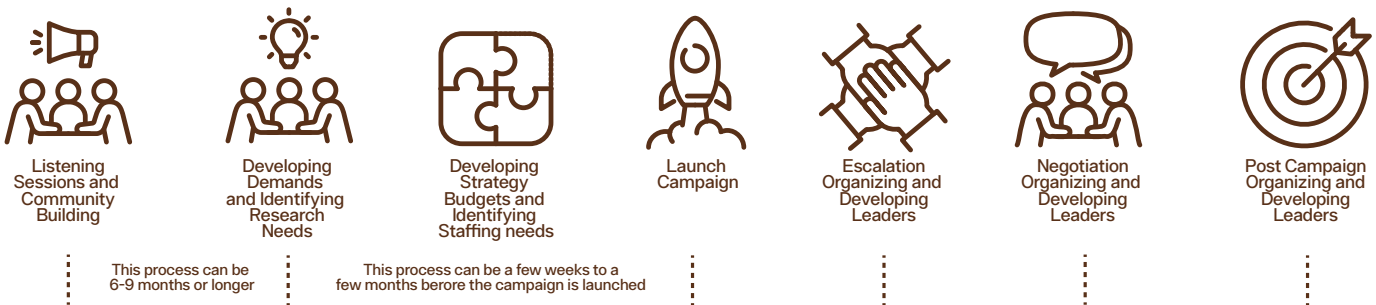
BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD ASSESSMENT TOOL:

This tool is to help reflect on how to build and strengthen a Common Good strategy for your organization or union. This will help you assess where to focus your time and resources to build towards developing transformational relationships, running strong campaigns, and winning Common Good demands!

COMMUNITY MAPPING:

Community mapping is about learning about your community and identifying resources and important networks and relationships. Community mapping includes:

- Surveying your membership and identifying where you have existing relationships and connections to community leaders, organizations, and networks.
- Developing lists of key contacts/social networks—this is the organizer's network of power.
- Proactively developing relationships with these existing networks and organizations makes it possible to mobilize their resources around a shared campaign.
- Prioritizing and focusing outreach to build relationships with the networks that most deeply represent the community, not just those that are familiar and comfortable.



COMMUNITY LISTENING TOURS:

Listening sessions are helpful to build relationships and understand partners' interests, the problems they see in the community, and potential solutions. Listening sessions can be conducted through one-on-one meetings, community meetings, or surveys.

- **Community Listening Session:** Sample list of questions developed by the Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) to learn more about the community interests and concerns.
- **Community Survey - Family Version:** Survey for families and parents about their interests and concerns.
- **Community Survey - Community Version:** Survey for community members about their issues and concerns.
- **Community Survey:** Sample survey developed by the Fix L.A. coalition.
- **Parent Interviewing:** A sample video of a meeting with parents to better understand their needs, opinions, and resolutions.
- **Parent + Small Biz Organizing Conversation:** Sample conversation with questions to engage parents and small businesses.

ENGAGING COMMUNITY LEADERS AND RANK AND FILE MEMBERS:

These are not transactional “we do this for you and you do that for me” relationships. These are sustainable relationships built on trust, respect, and a shared analysis of the conditions and mutual goals to build people power. It is critical that community and labor develop and build the campaign together from the beginning. These relationships will continue after the campaign, so it is important to start with a solid foundation and build with intentionality. This includes:

CREATING A SHARED VISION:

Working with union and community partners to identify priority issues, solutions, and a vision for the campaign is crucial in creating a shared vision. Union members and community partners understand the problems that they are facing in their workplace and communities and have ideas for solutions. It is important for rank and file members and community activists to assist in identifying priority issues and solutions, including why and how it will benefit workers and the community at large, and the vision for building long-term power.

Watch a webinar that shows how a strong community-labor partnership works in action and wins people power! United Teachers Los Angeles former President Alex Caputo-Pearl; Ruby Gordillo, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Parent, Rudy Gonzalves of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE); Amy Schur of the Alliance of Californians for Community Engagement (ACCE), and other community leaders and parents discuss the strategies and lessons learned from the recent victorious Bargaining for the Common Good campaign and strike.

<https://vimeo.com/319978916>

DEVELOPING A JOINT STRATEGY:

The strategy is your guiding star of how to win the demands. You may choose to launch a corporate campaign, or push the school board to change a policy or a town council to pass legislation, or fight for state funding. All partners must be clear about the pathway to winning and decisions stemming from the strategy. Strategies may need to change if an assessment is made that they are not effective or a campaign may have multiple strategies. For example, a campaign may call on the state legislature to fulfill its constitutional funding requirement for public education and target the corporations that do not pay taxes.

Developing a plan in partnership takes time. There are many decisions to make such as assessments, organizing plans, communications strategies, and more. A written plan is critical to ensure that all stakeholders understand the decisions made, what is happening next, and the campaign progress. Review the following to help develop your campaign plan:

- **Local campaign plan:** A comprehensive campaign planning tool for locals and partners.
- **Power Mapping Activity:** Sample exercise developed by the Colorado Education Association to analyze the power structures, influencers, and stakeholders in your community.

DEVELOPING AN ORGANIZING PLAN:

Organizing gets people fired up (agitated) and identifies what is at stake so that participants understand how the cause is personally relevant to them and take action. At the beginning of a campaign plan, start with mild actions and escalate. Examples of mild forms of action are collecting petition signatures or wearing a union button at the workplace. Strikes or civil disobedience are bold actions.

- Use the issues that are happening in the BCG campaign to motivate members to take collective action.
- During the life of a BCG campaign, members should be able to articulate why they are taking action and what they hope to achieve before taking action.
- Different tactics will be required to move different targets.
- Evaluate in real time if the actions are helping, hindering, or not effective and why.

Escalation tactics or direct actions are important to any campaign that is designed to build long-term power. The goal of escalation tactics or direct actions goes beyond highlighting the problem and getting media attention. Escalation tactics or direct actions have four key elements:

- **ESCALATE THE CRISIS:** Deliver a message that exposes the crisis. Create the narrative about who is responsible for that crisis—target.
- **ESCALATE THE TARGET:** Expose the target; turn the target toxic. Cost the target resources—votes, money, time, influence, etc.
- **ESCALATE YOUR VOICE:** If the target ignores the tactics/actions, escalate the tension on a specific demand. Force the target to choose between ongoing direct action or meeting the demand.
- **ESCALATE YOUR BASE:** Develop and energize your leaders and base.

“Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.”

- Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*

Possible actions may include:

- Walking out of a meeting en masse
- Speaking to the media
- Calling a meeting of supporters
- Reaching out to parents
- Meeting as a small group
- Striking
- Running a social media profile picture campaign
- Wearing red on Thursdays
- Stickering up
- Circulating a public petition and deliver it to the school board
- Rallying, for example, have staff rally outside school before the start of the school day and walk in together
- Presenting signage and/or protesting in a high-visibility public space
- Red out: staff decorating their rooms in union colors
- Distributing flyers to parents at the school choice fair
- Informational picketing
- Open bargaining
- Setting up lawn signs
- Visiting corporate actors defunding public schools/ supporting charter schools

IDENTIFYING CLEAR ASKS:

Not many people spontaneously get involved. It takes an invitation to participate or an ask for people to take action. Most people will volunteer or donate to a cause that shares their values when asked. In campaigns, the same principles apply. If you can connect to their value systems and the ask is clear and concise, people will get involved. Recruiting activists, rank and file members, and members of the public to join the campaign means having a clear ask and showing why their involvement matters.

Affirm, Answer, and Redirect is a useful organizing tactic when faced with an individual who blocks or objects to the vision of the campaign or action plan.

1. Affirm:

Although you may disagree with the person, or not share their experience, it is important to show that you hear their frustration, and try to understand where they are coming from.

2. Answer:

It is very important to give an honest answer. If you can give them information that responds to their question, or helps them see the issue differently, do it. If you made a mistake, own it. If there is information that you do not know, tell them you will research it and get back to them (and make sure you do).

3. Re-direct:

At the end of the day, the power to win depends on one thing: the involvement of the people—union members and community partners. So look for ways to re-direct their frustration towards participating in a collective project that will help them see that the campaign is powerful (like the next action). Then repeat your ask.

EXPAND THE SCOPE OF BARGAINING BEYOND WAGES AND BENEFITS:

Identify issues that resonate with members, partners, and allies and that impact our communities. Put forth demands that address structural issues, not just symptoms of the problem.

DEVELOP AND DEEPEN LEADERS' SHARED POLITICAL ANALYSIS:

With an intentional approach to developing and deepening leaders' shared political analysis, BCG campaigns move away from short-term mobilization efforts that develop little to no power and instead harness collective power to develop long term and major wins for our schools and communities. This can take form in different ways like short workshops, training sessions, organizing conversations, and more.

Political education should:

- Be grounded in the racial justice demands and explain the racial dynamics that the demands are addressing.
- Articulate a clear connection between Bargaining for the Common Good demands and the problems workers and communities are facing.
- Include space for labor and community partners to share their stories, interests, and lived experiences that build trust and connections across all participants.
- Build activists' confidence and effectiveness in engaging hesitant colleagues and recruiting members of the public to join the campaign.
- Make it clear what is at stake, who the bad actors are, why the target has power, and how the campaign plan will motivate the targets to meet demands.
- Meet people's education level, literacy proficiency, and language needs. It may mean investing in translators and interpreters and/or an experienced popular educator.

EXPOSE THE BAD ACTORS:

Go on offense in your campaign by identifying, exposing, and challenging the real villains; the financial and corporate actors who profit from and increasingly drive policies and actions.

DO THE RESEARCH:

Scarcity politics and financialization of the economy have devastated our communities and schools for decades and driven funding to the one percent. Research to identify who and how divestment happened in your community is key. Groups like LittleSis and Hedge Clippers are good sources to help map out the financial and corporate actors.

Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) called on state and federal elected officials to fund public education through progressive revenue. The MTA and its partners identified 19 billionaires in Massachusetts whose wealth grew while state coffers were depleted during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. They used the data to agitate and gain the public in support of the campaign's three key demands.

source:

<https://massteacher.org/-/media/massteacher/files/initiatives/education-funding/now-more-than-ever/net-worth-of-massachusetts-billionaires.pdf?la=en>

source:

https://massteacher.org/-/media/massteacher/files/initiatives/education-funding/now-more-than-ever/mta_tax_flyer.pdf?la=en

TARGET THE POWER BROKER:

Identify the decision-makers who can meet the demands. Power mapping can help identify and map the power relationships, who influences power brokers, and your groups' relationships to them. Some general questions to start the identification process include:

- Is it a corporate entity and who in the corporation has the power? Is it the CEO of the bank?
- Is it a government entity? Is it one person or a group of decision-makers? Is it the mayor or city council? Is it the school board?
- Where do they get their power? Who is in their circle of influence?
- What do they care about?

POWER MAPPING:

The Power Mapping tool can help the campaign identify the power dynamics within your community, including allies, opposition, decision-makers, and influencers.



GENERATE PUBLIC SUPPORT:

Building public support is about agitating the public against the bad actors. Be clear in your messaging as to why the bad actor is responsible. Your communications team can help generate stories for traditional outlets like radio and newspaper. Rank and file members and activists can use social media to build up the campaign. The message and narrative should be clear, concise, and consistent across platforms. The following are samples and guidelines for effective messaging:

- Social media posts and news story highlighting the same message:
 - Seattle Education Association
 - Recess, it's important, does your child get enough of it?
- Campaign websites:
 - San Antonio Alliance, Local 67
 - Reclaim Our Schools LA
 - Higher Education Labor United (HELU).
- Messaging and Media Relations Toolkit: Helps develop an effective messaging strategy and build relationships with different news sources
- Digital Best Practices: For Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media outlets

STRENGTHEN INTERNAL ORGANIZING, MEMBERSHIP, AND MEMBER ENGAGEMENT:

These campaigns must deeply engage the memberships of both unions and community organizations, and there must be opportunities for deep relationship building and joint visioning among the members of the different organizations.

Engaged groups produce transparent, useful, relevant, and frequent member communications, such as printed or electronic newsletters. Most importantly, leaders should be open and transparent, which means producing relevant and frequent updates to keep members engaged and active. You should feel comfortable contacting your state/national affiliate communications department for assistance and best practices.

CONTRACT ACTION TEAM (CAT):

Establish a new internal union network of member activists to engage and activate members using a two-way pipeline of communication. The union's ability to successfully win demands for members and the community depends upon the union's strength and power. Strength and power derive from a solid foundation of organizing union members and community stakeholders that increases activism, engagement, and solidarity.

By creating vital new roles and delegating responsibilities, your local can position itself to build capacity and develop enough power to win demands. It also enables your local to identify new activists and leaders to continue to build on its successes for the future along with a strong and sustainable democratic movement.

STEWARD/MOBILIZER:

Your members, especially your stewards or mobilizers, are crucial to the success of the campaign. This requires continually building the team and communicating with them frequently, so they can organize at their workplace and in their communities. Stewards should have a WhatsApp or Signal group and an email list for their building. They should have a weekly plan of how they will communicate with other members, updates and an action plan for the day or week and an explanation of why the action is important, and a role for the members.

1-ON-1 ORGANIZING MEETINGS:

The heart of organizing is about building relationships, which means 1-on-1 organizing conversations. A strong organizing conversation is not like a chat with a friend or loved one. It's a guided conversation that builds connection, engages people in collective action, and helps develop leaders. When a worksite has good, strong leaders who can educate and move their co-workers into action, it's harder for the boss to pit workers against each other.

10-MINUTE MEETINGS:

A fundamental way to disseminate information and empower leaders at the worksite level is to develop a 10-minute meeting system. Short, concise, and frequent meetings increase attendance. Be sure your 10-minute meetings make time for two-way communication. Campaign updates can easily be broken into basic 10-minute meeting agendas. You can break up complex topics related to contract proposals, legislative initiatives, or policy demands into bite-sized pieces within these meetings. Plus, it allows decentralized conversations and a place for local action-taking/planning for early tactics such as button wearing, petition circulation, etc.

GROUP TEXTS:

Texting is an immediate communication tool for quick updates, reminders, and time-sensitive information sharing, but it does not replace the face time necessary for developing relationships and trust with members and community allies.

Before you send your first text message—remember that there are federal laws that prohibit bulk text messaging. Contact your attorney, as well as your state affiliate or NEA, to learn more about different texting platforms you can use to reach our members and supporters within the law.

WEBSITE/ONLINE RESOURCE:

Creating a landing place for members and allies to reference information can be important for the campaign, but it isn't always necessary. Only use a website if your campaign would benefit from a landing page to publicly post resources or documents. Always add a link or directions for how to take action.

SOCIAL MEDIA:

Use social media platforms that make sense to our audience—members/potential-members and community supporters. It is also a great tool for producing media during various parts of the campaign. NEA offers local leaders and staff a variety of additional [social media best practices](#).

Tools and Materials:

- [Sample 10-minute meeting agenda](#)
- [1-on-1 Organizing Conversation Guide](#)
- [Build the CAT structure](#)

SECTION 2: ELEMENTS OF A BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD CAMPAIGN

TAKEAWAYS:

- **Bargaining for the Common Good Campaigns are rooted in building people power in our local unions and communities.**
- **The five elements of a BCG campaign are:**
 - **Center racial justice in your demands**
 - **Engage community allies as partners in issue development and the bargaining campaign**
 - **Expand the scope of the bargaining beyond wages and benefits**
 - **Expose bad actors**
 - **Strengthen internal organizing, membership, and member engagement**
- **Community building is an integral part of the strategy and tactics, which means it takes time to develop, create, build, and move forward. To build a BCG campaign, planning begins two years in advance.**
- **We need to clearly express who the bad actors are and ensure there is a clear connection between the bad actors and the demands.**
- **Bargaining for the Common Good campaigns require ongoing organizing, base-building, and leadership development.**



SUCCESS STORIES

3

SUCCESS STORIES

Columbus, Ohio

The Columbus Education Association (CEA) won an agreement to help address racism and racial disparity. As part of their newest contract, CEA earned professional development opportunities for bargaining unit members in the school board's ongoing Strategic Plan.

Source: <http://www.ceaoio.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/MOU-Re-2021-2022-School-Year-Final-Signed.pdf>

Jefferson County, Colorado

The Jefferson County Education Association fought successfully to implement a staffing and classroom diversity program, including recruiting and retaining staff that reflects the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the student body, and a mentorship program for staff of color. In addition, they formed an Equity Accountability Committee responsible for addressing equity in the district, which would engage the school community.

Source: https://cdnsm5-ss12.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_627881/File/Print%20Agreement%20JCEA%20Final%2007.2023%20Website.pdf

Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) established the Anti-Bias Anti-Racist Educator Development and Support Council, which set up sub-committees specifically tasked with recommending establishing initiatives for recruitment, retention, and development of educators of color and the improvement of district-wide climate and culture. These sub-committees will continue to work to instill a sense of permanency in anti-bias anti-racist initiatives and development.

Source: https://www.mft59.org/files/ugd/bf7435_4a4f8e-50f33e4777a22b23c598e1641e.pdf

St. Paul, Minnesota

Read about how St. Paul teachers, parents, and students organized for the schools their students deserved and won: "Teacher-Community Unionism: A Lesson from St. Paul: How one teachers union brought parents and students into the bargaining process—and won."

Source: <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/teacher-community-unionism-lesson-st-paul>

Seattle, Washington

Following a weeklong strike by more than 6,000 educators of the SEA, a new three-year contract was settled with major wins for both the students and educators of Seattle Public Schools (SPS). Seattle was facing a multitude of systemic problems such as increased class sizes, workload, and staffing cuts; racial inequality of resources and services; unsafe learning and working conditions; unaffordable cost of living for many lower-wage staff; and a looming educator shortage crisis. They established a Joint Task Force for multilingual education and language immersion to improve inclusionary services and student equity and create incentives for teaching.

Source: <https://vimeo.com/208734309>

Sacramento, California

The Sacramento City Teachers Association included parents, business leaders, and community members in their contract negotiations in their bid to make Sac City the destination district in California for students and educators.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBPNX-tajjO>

San Diego, California

In coordination with community partners, parents, and students, the San Diego Education Association (SDEA) identified several bargaining goals with a heavy emphasis on racial justice. To address historical divestment across districts in schools located within communities of color, demands will focus on curriculum, ethnic studies, allocation of resources, educator pipelines, restorative practices, and support for educators and students of color. All these issues run parallel to their advocacy for community schools, staffing, and class size. Bargaining by the local is underway as of summer 2023.

Source: <https://www.sdea.net/2023/04/san-diego-community-schools-coalition-demands-more-after-school-opportunities-in-san-diego-unified/>



SECTION 3: SUCCESS STORIES

TAKEAWAYS:

- Victories are feasible in different political conditions but we have to plan and organize.
- Organizing doesn't end when we settle the contract or win the campaign. These victories are possible only if organizing is ongoing.

RESOURCES

4

RESOURCES

ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR RACIAL EQUITY:

Provides discussion questions to have with partners and union members.

RACIAL EQUITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT:

Is used for making decisions with deliberate attention to racial justice, social justice, equity, and inclusion. A guide and protocol for race- and equity-conscious decision-making that is thoughtful, transparent, participatory, and systematic.

BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD DEMANDS:

Concrete examples of common good demands that unions and community groups have bargained for across the country. Some of these demands have been won in bargaining or outside the negotiations table, and some have only been introduced.

RACIAL JUSTICE DEMANDS:

List of racial justice demands that local unions and community partners can develop together.

BASIC STEPS TO A BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD CAMPAIGN:

Outlines steps starting about 1.5 years before bargaining to after settling the contract.

BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD ASSESSMENT TOOL:

This tool helps organizations or unions reflect on how to build and strengthen a Common Good strategy.

COMMUNITY MAPPING:

Worksheet to map out the community networks of members and activists.

COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSION:

Sample list of questions developed by the Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) to learn about community interests and concerns.

COMMUNITY SURVEY - FAMILY VERSION:

Survey for families and parents about their interests and concerns.

COMMUNITY SURVEY - COMMUNITY VERSION:

Survey for community members about their issues and concerns.

FIX L.A. COMMUNITY SURVEY:

Sample survey to gather information about the community.

PARENT INTERVIEWING:

A sample video of a meeting with parents to better understand their needs, opinions, and resolutions.

PARENT (AND SMALL BUSINESS) ORGANIZING CONVERSATION - GUIDE:

Sample conversation with questions to engage parents and small businesses.

LOCAL CAMPAIGN PLAN:

A comprehensive campaign planning tool for locals and partners.

COLORADO EDUCATION ASSOCIATION POWER MAPPING ACTIVITY:

Sample exercise developed by the Colorado Education Association, which can be used to analyze the power structures, influencers, and stakeholders in your community.

POWER MAPPING TOOL:

Can help the campaign identify the power dynamics within your community, including the allies, opposition, decision-makers, and influencers.

MESSAGING AND MEDIA RELATIONS TOOLKIT:

Designed to help develop an effective messaging strategy and build relationships with different news sources.

DIGITAL BEST PRACTICES:

For Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media outlets.

NEA GUIDE TO TRANSFORMATIONAL

ORGANIZING CONVERSATIONS:

1-on-1 organizing conversations guide to help you start recruitment conversations and navigate the tough questions that members and non-members raise.

SAMPLE 10-MINUTE MEETING AGENDA:

Sample worksite meeting agenda to help disseminate information and mobilize workers quickly.

BUILD THE CAT STRUCTURE:

Internal union network of member activists.

SECTION 4: RESOURCES

TAKEAWAYS:

- A compilation of BCG tools and resources developed by NEA locals.
- Includes a glossary of racial justice language. See next page.



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Glossary of racial justice language

Understanding the context and historical background that many terms convey is essential to encouraging usage that reflects cultural and racial awareness. Using shared language builds a strong foundation among campaign partners, helps prevent translation issues, and empowers workers and activists to speak with confidence and knowledge.

Sources: [Equity in the Center](#) and [Dismantling Racism Works](#)

Affirmative action – This term describes policies adopted since the 1960s that require “affirmative” (or positive) actions to ensure people of color and women have opportunities equal to those of white men in promotions, salary increases, school admissions, financial aid, scholarships, and representation among vendors in government contracts. Although they have been effective in redressing injustice and discrimination that persisted in spite of civil rights laws and constitutional guarantees, these policies have been attacked because of perceived “reverse discrimination.” The Supreme Court has not ruled all affirmative action unconstitutional, but it has limited the use and ways in which policies can be written and applied. See “Reverse Racism.”

Anti-racism – The work of actively opposing racism by advocating for changes in political, economic, and social life. Anti-racism tends to be an individualized approach to oppose individual racist behaviors and impacts.

Civil rights – A group of laws designed to protect various groups against discrimination based on race, sex, religion, age, national origin, and other characteristics. Often used in connection to the civil rights movement, widely recognized as taking place from 1954 to 1968, which included issues and practices such as school desegregation, sit-ins, Freedom Rides, voter registration campaigns, and acts of civil disobedience to protest racial discrimination.

Class – Classism is the systematic oppression of subordinated class groups, held in place by attitudes that rank people according to economic status, family lineage, job status, level of education, and other divisions. One’s race can be a major determinant of one’s social or economic class. The variables of race and class, though closely connected, each need distinct attention.

“Colorblind” – A term used to describe the act or practice of disregarding or ignoring racial characteristics, or being uninfluenced by racial prejudice. The concept of colorblindness is often promoted by those who dismiss the importance of race in order to proclaim the end of racism. It presents challenges when discussing diversity, which requires being racially aware, and equity that is focused on fairness for people of all races.

Colorism – Discrimination based on skin color, which often privileges lighter-skinned people within a racial group, positioning people with darker complexions at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. It is an example of how white supremacy can operate amongst the members of a single racial or ethnic group. This form of prejudice often results in reduced opportunities for those who are discriminated against, and numerous studies have revealed differences in life outcomes by complexion.

Cultural appropriation or “misappropriation” – Adoption of elements of a culture that has been subordinated in social, political, and economic status by a different cultural group. It may rely on offensive stereotypes and is insensitive to how the culture of a group has been exploited by the culture in power, often for profit.

Discrimination – Treatment of an individual or group based on their actual or perceived membership in a social category, usually used to describe unjust or prejudicial treatment on the grounds of race, age, sex, gender, ability, socioeconomic class, immigration status, national origin, or religion.

Diversity – There are many kinds of diversity, based on race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, country of origin, education, religion, geography, and physical or cognitive abilities. Valuing diversity means recognizing differences between people, acknowledging that these differences are a valued asset, and striving for diverse representation as a critical step towards equity. See “Equity.”

Equity – Equity means fairness and justice and focuses on outcomes that are most appropriate for a given group, recognizing different challenges, needs, and histories. It is distinct from diversity, which can simply mean variety (the presence of individuals with various identities). It is also not equality, or “same treatment,” which doesn’t take differing needs or disparate outcomes into account. Systemic equity involves a robust system and dynamic process consciously designed to create, support, and sustain social justice. See “Racial justice.”

Ethnicity – A socially constructed grouping of people based on culture, tribe, language, national heritage, and/or religion. It is often used interchangeably with race and/or national origin but should be considered an overlapping, rather than identical, category. See “Racial and ethnic categories.”

Hate crime – Criminal acts, motivated by bias, that target victims based on their perceived membership in a certain social group. Incidents may involve physical assault, damage to property, bullying, harassment, verbal abuse, offensive graffiti, letters, or email. Hate crime laws enhance the penalties associated with conduct that is criminal under other laws.

Implicit bias/unconscious bias – Attitudes that unconsciously affect our decisions and actions. People often think of bias as intentional, i.e., someone wanted to say something racist. However, brain science has shown that people are often unaware of their bias, and the concept of implicit bias helps describe a lot of contemporary racist acts that may not be overt or intentional. Implicit bias is just as harmful, so it is important to talk about race explicitly and to take steps to address it. Institutions are composed of individuals whose biases are replicated and then produce systemic inequities. It is possible to interrupt implicit bias by adding steps to decision-making processes that thoughtfully consider and address racial impacts.

Minority/minorities – A term that has historically referred to non-white racial groups, indicating that they were numerically smaller than the dominant white majority. Defining people of color as “minorities” is not recommended because of changing demographics and how it reinforces ideas of inferiority and marginalization of a group of people. Defining people by how they self-identify is often preferable and more respectful. The term “minority” may be needed in specific cases (such as “minority contracting” and “minority-owned businesses”) to reflect data that is collected using those categories. See the term “People of color.”

Mixed race, biracial, multiracial – Generally accepted terms to describe a person who has mixed ancestry of two or more races. Many terms for people of various multiracial backgrounds exist, some of which are pejorative or are no longer used. The U.S. Census first gave the option for a person to identify as belonging to more than one race in 2000, at which time approximately 9 million individuals, or 2.9 percent of the population, self-identified as multiracial.

Multicultural – Involving various cultures in a society, usually with the intent to promote tolerance, inclusion, and equal respect for cultural diversity. Does not include an explicit racial lens. Multiculturalism often focuses on interpersonal interaction and communication between people of different cultures rather than a systemic approach to advance equity.

People of color – Often the preferred collective term for referring to non-white racial groups, rather than “minorities.” Racial justice advocates have been using the term “people of color” (not to be confused with the pejorative “colored people”) since the late 1970s as an inclusive and unifying frame across different racial groups that are not white to address racial inequities. While “people of color” can be a politically useful term, and describes people with their own attributes (as opposed to what they are not, e.g., “non-white”), it is also important whenever possible to identify people through their own racial/ethnic group, as each has its own distinct experience and meaning and may be more appropriate.

“Post-racial” – A term used to describe a time in which racial prejudice and discrimination no longer exist. Deep racial disparities and divisions exist across our society, and some are even widening. Much like the notion of “colorblindness,” the idea of a “post-racial” society does not acknowledge that racism and inequity sit at the core of many of our nation’s deepest challenges. See “Colorblind.”

Privilege – A set of advantages systemically conferred on a particular person or group of people. White people are racially privileged, even when they are economically underprivileged. Privilege and oppression go hand-in-hand: They are two sides of the same power relationship, and both sides of the equation must be understood and addressed. People can be disadvantaged by one identity and privileged by another. See “Intersectionality” and “White supremacy.”

Race – While often assumed to be a biological classification, based on physical and genetic variation, racial categories do not have a scientific basis. However, the consequences of racial categorization are real, as the ideology of race has become embedded in our identities, institutions, and culture, and is used as a basis for discrimination and racial profiling. How one is racialized is a major determinant of one’s socioeconomic status and life opportunities. See “Racial and ethnic categories.”

Racial and ethnic categories – System of organizing people into groups based on their identified race and ethnicity, with categories that may change over time. Data is derived from self-identification questions; however, people often do not get to select the categories from which they must choose, making most methods of categorizing and counting highly political and often problematic.

Racial hierarchy – Ranking of different races/ethnic groups, based on physical and perceived characteristics. Racial hierarchy is not a binary of white vs. non-white, but rather a complex system where groups occupy different rungs of political, economic, and cultural power. Racist ideology relies on maintaining hierarchies, even among racial groups.

Racial justice – The systematic fair treatment of people of all races, resulting in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. Racial justice—or racial equity—goes beyond “anti-racism.” It is not just the absence of discrimination and inequities but also the presence of deliberate systems and supports to achieve and sustain racial equity through proactive and preventative measures.

Racial profiling – The discriminatory practice by law enforcement officials of targeting people of color for suspicion of crime without evidence of criminal activity, based on their perceived race, ethnicity, national origin, or religion (e.g., “stop-and-frisk”). Racial profiling is ineffective, damages community-police relationships, and is being litigated around the country as a violation of constitutional rights. However, law enforcement authorities at the federal, state, and local levels continue to use racial profiling.

Racial slur – Derogatory, pejorative, or insulting terms for members of a racial or ethnic group. While some slurs, like the “n-word,” are understood as such and are avoided, some slurs are still used in everyday speech, with little understanding of their harm.

Racism – A historically-rooted system of power hierarchies based on race—infused in our institutions, policies, and culture—that benefits white people and hurts people of color. Racism isn’t limited to individual acts of prejudice, either deliberate or accidental. Rather, the most damaging racism is built into systems and institutions that shape our lives. Most coverage of race and racism is not “systematically aware,” meaning that it either focuses on racism at the level of an individuals’ speech or actions (individual-level racism), dismisses systemic racism, or refers to racism in the past tense.

Racist – Describes a person, behavior, or incident that perpetuates racism. Stories of race and racism that focus on personal prejudice (“who’s a racist?”) get a disproportionate share of attention in the media. This reinforces the message that racism is primarily a phenomenon of overt, intentional acts carried out by prejudiced individuals who need correcting and/or shaming and tends to spark debates of limited value about that individual’s character. Media and racial justice advocates should use a systemic lens when producing race-related stories and topics to examine systems, institutional practices, policies, and outcomes.

“Reverse racism” – A concept based on a misunderstanding of what racism is, often used to accuse and attack efforts made to rectify systemic injustices. Every individual can be prejudiced and biased at one time or another toward various people and behaviors, but racism is based on power and systematic oppression. Individual prejudice and systemic racism cannot be equated. Even though some people of color hold powerful positions, white people overwhelmingly hold the most systemic power. The concept of “reverse racism” ignores structural racism, which permeates all dimensions of our society, routinely advantaging white people and disadvantageous to people of color. Structural racism is deeply entrenched and in no danger of being dismantled or “reversed” any time soon.

Stereotype – Characteristics ascribed to a person or groups of people based on generalization and oversimplification that may result in stigmatization and discrimination. Even so-called positive stereotypes (e.g., Asian Americans as “model minorities”) can be harmful due to their limiting nature.

Systemic analysis – A comprehensive examination of the root causes and mechanisms at play that result in patterns. It involves looking beyond individual speech, acts, and practices to the larger structures—organizations, institutions, traditions, and systems of knowledge.

White supremacy – A form of racism centered upon the belief that white people are superior to people of other racial backgrounds and that white people should politically, economically, and socially dominate non-white people. While often associated with violence perpetrated by the KKK and other white supremacist groups, it also describes a political ideology and systemic oppression that perpetuates and maintains social, political, historical, and/or industrial white domination.

White supremacy culture – Characteristics of white supremacy that manifest in organizational culture and are used as norms and standards without being proactively named or chosen by the full group. The characteristics are damaging to both people of color and white people in that they elevate the values, preferences, and experiences of one racial group above all others. Organizations that are led by people of color or have a majority of people of color can also demonstrate characteristics of white supremacy culture.



Three Theories of Change

Organizing, Mobilizing, and Advocacy

BY ELENI SCHIRMER

Why have unions gotten so weak, and how can they strengthen? In her book *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (Oxford, 2016), labor organizer and strategist Jane McAlevey argues that a major factor in labor's decline has been that unions have abandoned the work of organizing, relying instead on the more superficial methods of building power, namely mobilizing and advocacy. What are these three different methods of union strength, and what path toward power does each build?

To organize is to build mass support and strength among ordinary people. Organizing draws its power from working people's biggest strength: our numbers. Working people may or may not see themselves as activists or politically active or even in political agreement, but through organizing, they come together to act in common cause. The work of organizing is systematic and rigorous: It requires connecting with every single worker in a shop, every educator in a building, every building in a district. At its core, it asks people to understand their own agency and to make choices about how they will exercise it. The work of organizing is difficult; ordinary people are seldom confronted by their own agency nor asked to make choices that recognize their own power. As McAlevey notes in her first book, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement* (Verso, 2012), a memoir of her organizing work: "In the normal course of human events, workers don't expect much from their jobs, government, or unions, because the reality is they don't get much. The job of the organizer is to fundamentally change this." The work of organizing is difficult, but as McAlevey argues, it is essential: There are no shortcuts.

Mobilizing, by contrast, activates an already-convinced membership. Mobilizing encourages those who already support a cause or a mission to take action to defend their belief—for example, by attending a protest, wearing a button, or signing a petition. Mobilizing is a very important step for building movements, but it is not the same thing as organizing. The crucial difference between mobilizing and organizing is that mobilizing relies on the actions of people who have already been brought on board; organizing is the work bringing ever more people on board, having a stake in the direction and outcomes of the actions (mobilizing can be an important component of organizing). McAlevey distinguishes mobilizing as



BRIAN STAUFFER

relying on the participation of a “self-selecting” group—people who have chosen to participate in something due to personal preferences or beliefs, such as environmental protection groups, the ACLU, or Planned Parenthood. Organizing, by contrast, relies on “structure-based” groups, groups determined by a predefined, often structural, relationship, such as working for the same employer, living in the same housing complex, or attending the same place of worship. Membership in a structure-based group, unlike a self-selecting group, is not a result of personal

affinity. In a structure-based group, the number of possible members—and therefore people to organize—is finite and knowable: the number of workers in a firm, residents in a housing building, or members in a church, for example. Whereas mobilizing relies on participation from a self-selecting group, organizing builds high participation among all eligible individuals.

Advocacy is the work of creating change through the actions of professionals or technical experts—lobbyists, pollsters, lawyers, communication specialists, researchers. Advocacy relies on the expertise, status, and know-how of these groups of people to make change. Advocacy usually happens in a closed-door room; ordinary people play a small to nonexistent role in its efficacy. Advocacy has become a dominant strategy for unions and liberals. But its efficiency comes at a cost; it disables the masses of ordinary people who have a stake in the issues under scrutiny by advocates.

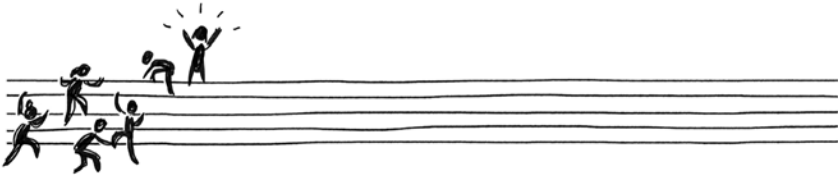
These three forms of making change do not exist in isolation; a successful campaign may very well rely on all three strategies. Yet organizing, McAlevey argues, is the most fundamental: The base of any campaign should come from its organizational capacity above all. Yet in reality, according to McAlevey, it's often the strategy most avoided or shortchanged. After all, it is often hard, slow work that requires building connections with mass numbers of people. As a result, it's often sidestepped for quicker grabs for power—mobilizing or advocating support, rather than organizing for it.

McAlevey's framework rests on a more fundamental argument about power. In an age of massive inequality, many see power as the province of the elite—the small, powerful minority who run the courts, the banks, and the media in the U.S. and around the world. From this perspective, forging change is the process of altering who occupies those powerful institutions: voting in new leaders, appointing new judges, securing better regulators who can safeguard the system with an eye toward fairness. In McAlevey's words, this belief is little more than replacing one set of elites with another, better set of elites. It relies on advocacy and, to a certain extent, mobilizing to get the job done.

Yet exclusively focusing on the undemocratic hyper-concentration of elites obscures the power of ordinary people. Ordinary people have two major forms of power: our numbers—there are more of us than them—and our ability to withhold our participation in a system that denies us fairness, dignity, and health: They need us to keep working. Organizing, especially organizing with an eye toward building strikes, activates both forms of power. Successful labor movements and social movements often use a combination of advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing. But as McAlevey argues, organizing is the most important of those tasks—yet often the most overlooked. Her work aims to bring the movement back into labor, and winning back into the movement. 📖

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6.2

Base-Building**Labor Unions: Worker Power, the Common Good,
and the St. Paul Federation of Educators**

Leah VanDassor grew up in a union town. She saw the power of unions to strike and win higher wages, but when she became a teacher and a member of the teacher's union, she wasn't that interested in it. "I didn't pay attention," she told us in an interview. "Every other year there was a vote for the contract or not, but I didn't know what was going on in the union."¹

Things began to change when new leaders came in to run the union, the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) in Minnesota.² Suddenly, instead of only talking about wages, union leaders were talking about students and schools. "This really struck a chord with me," says VanDassor. "We were looking at things that would impact our students' lives and therefore impact our working conditions. So that's when I started getting more involved."³

A decade later, VanDassor was elected president of SPFE. A year into her term, she found herself leading the union and bargaining for a new contract

in the middle of a pandemic. The St. Paul School District called for rollbacks in the contract, claiming that declining school enrollment was creating a \$43 million budget shortfall.⁴ But along with their colleagues in the Minneapolis Teachers Union, St. Paul educators demanded limits on class size, funding and staff for student mental health services, and wage increases, including larger-than-usual pay bumps for low-wage education assistants.

It was going to be a fight. The pandemic was hard on union leaders and members, and everyone was exhausted. Still, when the union came together to discuss their options, “Folks said, ‘we might be tired, but we’re not stupid. We’re fighting back. We’re ready to go,’” SPFE organizer Leah Lindeman told us. “And people did the work. The muscle memory was there from the past, they woke it up, they did the organizing work that needed to happen.”⁵

When negotiations hit an impasse, almost 80 percent of SPFE members voted in favor of a strike. And just minutes before their deadline on March 7, 2022, the union reached an agreement with the school district. Had they failed to do so, SPFE was prepared to go on strike the next day.

The union didn’t win all its demands, but they won a lot, including an average 13.5 percent raise for education assistants, a drop in class sizes, and new funding for school psychologists. Like the slow and methodical work done by Make the Road, SPFE’s story shows that persistence can pay off. Lindeman sums it up as follows:

Because we had done so much work over time and people knew how to organize in their [school] building, they knew what was going on. They trusted each other. Even when you get into those tight moments, that’s when that work comes into play. And it was much easier to come together and fight back and win than if we hadn’t ever done any of that work.⁶

SPFE celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2019. In the last seventeen years, the union has adopted a number of strategies to advocate on behalf of its members, who number in the thousands. Part of their success has been rooted in their communal and transparent base-building approach.

“Our” Union, Not “the” Union

Unions rely on various forms of power and use many of the strategy models we cover in this book, but we focus on their base-building work because all of their other strategies must be built on a solid foundation of member organization. A strike won't work if members don't stick together. Base-building starts with the theory that union power is predicated on people power. Unions derive strength and influence when the majority of workers are members of the union and when those members participate in union meetings and activities. Power comes from workers' ability to act together.⁷

Stephanie has been a member of, and worked with, unions for decades, particularly with organizers working to make unions more democratic, militant, and inclusive. For several years in the 2000s she helped coordinate national calls of rank-and-file teachers looking to reform their unions and was inspired by the number of educators passionate about making schools work better for teachers as well as for students and parents. Teachers have been transforming their unions around the country, putting them on the frontlines in the fight to save public education. Some of that has been driven by young teachers wanting to bring racial justice into their education work, and much has been driven by veteran teachers who were tired of the growing attacks against public schools.

VanDassor's election—in fact, her candidacy—wouldn't have happened without Mary Cathryn Ricker. Ricker was a teacher who was tired of the way teachers and public schools were being portrayed by politicians and in the media. She decided to run for union president in 2005, and won. Prior to Ricker, the SPFE had a traditional structure—it was run by a president and “business agents”—Ricker, however, replaced the business agents with organizers who had a history of developing rank-and-file leaders.

The new leadership took several steps to rebuild the union. Ricker explained: “The first step was quite simple: to talk to one another.”⁸ They established a Contract Action Team (CAT) in each of the sixty schools and cultivated rank-and-file leaders to prepare for the next round of bargaining. “I really honestly think one of the major things we did was start saying ‘our union’ instead of ‘the union,’” VanDassor says. “Instead of treating

our union like a pop machine, we treat it like a gym membership.” In other words, you have to work out to get something out of it, and you have to keep working.⁹



VENDING MACHINE



GYM MEMBERSHIP

Next, they knew that changing the culture of the union would require changing the narrative about public schools and teacher unions. The union formed a group to write a mission statement: “A New Narrative for Teachers, Educators, and Public Education.” The statement highlighted student success and social justice, emphasizing the strong relationship between student and educator issues and interests.¹⁰

Most unions bargain with a small team of leaders and lawyers but SPFE used a provision in state law that allowed for “open bargaining,” which let all union members, as well as parents and members of the community, attend bargaining sessions. They set bargaining sessions for a regular time on Thursday evenings to make it easier to attend.

Each year the union expanded its efforts to deepen member and community involvement. The St. Paul school district is diverse: over 70 percent of students in public schools are students of color, over 70 percent qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch, and more than one third speak English as a second language.¹¹ In order to accommodate this wide array of needs and preferences, in 2013, SPFE organizers solicited input from teachers, parents, and community members about how schools could be run better. They wrote up their findings in a report called “The Schools St. Paul Children Deserve,” which was subsequently used as the basis for the union’s bargaining proposal that year.

The union's membership is predominately white, and SPFE has struggled to address racial equity inside its ranks. Noting strong racial disparities in school discipline, SPFE brought a demand for restorative justice practices into bargaining in 2015. They won an agreement to launch a three-year, \$4.5 million pilot program, initially in six schools, and now in twelve. With funding from their parent union, the National Education Association, SPFE created a training curriculum in restorative practice—conflict-resolution methods that attempt to address root causes of behavioral problems and give students new skills, rather than harsh “zero tolerance” disciplinary policies.¹²

The union took on a project to educate themselves and the community about how schools are funded. They created TIGER Teams (Teaching and Inquiring about Greed, Equity, and Racism) to study how “money is being stolen from our school and our community by our state's largest corporations and wealthiest citizens,” according to SPFE's website.¹³ VanDassor explains that the union is working to change taxes and funding streams in the state, as well as to make corporations pay higher taxes.¹⁴

The work continues, like any good workout routine. The pandemic has taken a toll, but the hard work of the past decade has helped the union continue and even come out of its recent bargaining with a win.

Labor Union Revitalization

The SPFE story almost makes it sound easy to build a strong union. And, compared to larger unions with entrenched leadership, it was easier to rebuild the SPFE. For instance, when Ricker decided to run for president, the incumbent stepped aside. In Chicago, teachers had to assemble a reform caucus and organize for years in order to win leadership and implement rank-and-file base-building.

While some union leaders see member engagement as a threat to their power, SPFE's story is an example of union leadership that understands member participation as their key focus and source of power. Some unions have always been that way, while others have had to rebuild after years of atrophy. “We were dusty,” Ricker said when describing the union.¹⁵

In Stephanie's work she has heard from workers that in their own workplace, co-workers don't care. People don't have time or are selfish. But as the organization Labor Notes points out in its books and training, apathy isn't real. Everyone cares about something. They might be scared to speak up, or they might believe nothing can change, but they do care. The challenge for organizers is to help turn fear, hopelessness, division, confusion, and inaction into action.¹⁶

Not all unions see member power as their strength. Some rely on developing strong relations with the employer or policymakers; others focus on legislative gains. But even if a union must rely on legislative action to win union recognition, they still will need to deal with member engagement at some point. And member engagement is the one thing that is 100 percent in a union's control—particularly when workers get active and see themselves as the union.

Some unions have built internal education programs to build solidarity and member participation. The Communication Workers of America (CWA) created a curriculum for members to teach each other about inequality and the ways in which employers, policies, and laws have divided workers by race.¹⁷ Other unions are rethinking what it means to be a leader, challenging the myth that good leaders are charismatic types who lead from above, and instead making space for people who lead by bringing others with them, as well as for more women and people of color. "We need leaders," Lauren Jacobs, the executive director of a network of labor and community groups, told us. "But we need multi-racial leadership, feminist leadership who are committed to their members and to the communities in which they work and live."¹⁸ When leadership reflects the membership, it's better positioned to hear and act on the issues at hand. It can also motivate members to get more involved.

Some renewal has been influenced by **Bargaining for the Common Good** (BCG), an approach that expands bargaining beyond the usual topics of wages and working conditions to broader issues impacting union members and communities.¹⁹ For example, many teachers have come to understand that they can't do their jobs well if they don't also address student issues, like class size and counseling. Shantella Barnes, a special education assistant

in the St. Paul schools, works with students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Without adequate support and staffing, she can't do her job well and meet the needs of her students. And without a living wage, her work is stressful: "It makes it difficult for us to come to work and deal with other kids and try to help them when we have to figure out how we're helping our own family."²⁰

Structured Worker Power: Common Elements of the Base-Building Model in Labor Organizing

A. Philip Randolph was the founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a union of Black workers that led the fight for civil rights, including by anchoring the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He famously articulated the core of the organizing ethos:

At the banquet table of nature, there are no reserved seats. You get what you can take and you keep what you can hold. If you cannot take anything, you won't get anything. And if you can't hold anything, you won't keep anything without an organization.²¹

So, how do unions build that organization? Labor organizing includes establishing unions in nonunion workplaces as well as revitalizing existing unions. The nature of base-building plays out somewhat differently in these two scenarios, but there are common core elements in both, as follows:

Map the workplace. How many people work there? What departments or divisions exist? Are there multiple shifts? Part-time or seasonal workers? Even in a unionized workplace you may not have a clear sense of who actually works there. Alongside the workplace, organizers have to map out existing networks of co-workers: Who eats lunch together? Does anyone carpool, or spend time together outside of work hours?²²

Identify leaders and build a leadership team. Leaders are not necessarily the ones who are most pro-union to start, but the people others look to, those who are good at their job, are trustworthy, and command respect. Leadership teams should be as representative as possible of the workforce.

Develop new leaders. Train members in organizing skills, labor history, strategic thinking, and how to cultivate new leaders themselves. Leadership development can happen through formal and informal training and mentorship.

Identify a key issue. Leadership teams listen to co-workers to understand their concerns in order to figure out what to fight for. Traditional unions fight on workplace issues like wages, health insurance, and scheduling. But workers have interests beyond these traditional issues, like how teachers fight for student issues. Experienced organizers know an effective issue touches workers' sense of respect and dignity. Just like community organizers, union organizers must find the issues that will mobilize members and build power.

Research. Unions study their employer and industry, looking for points of leverage in bargaining, opportunities for new organizing, and potential threats of job loss. Given the enormous power corporations have on almost every aspect of our society, strategists in other traditions and models would do well to learn from unions' expertise in corporate research.²³

Escalate tactics. The union works backward from the end goal, using tactics that get riskier and more impactful, which could include workers' signing petitions; wearing the same color shirt, sticker, or button; visiting a boss together; holding informational picket lines; building relationships with supporters outside of the workplace; developing bargaining demands with students or patients; and striking. These also serve as "structure tests"—as union organizer Jane McAlevey writes, "How strong is the people's army?"²⁴ If union leaders call on members to wear a union T-shirt to work, or sign a petition, or show up to a rally, how many will do so? Some organizers have observed that some people don't want to do these types of activities because they don't see

how they connect to a larger vision: how does wearing a T-shirt build power? Former union organizer Zack Exley (Chapter 2) found it more effective to involve workers in developing long-term plans as a way to motivate them before asking them to take the small steps.

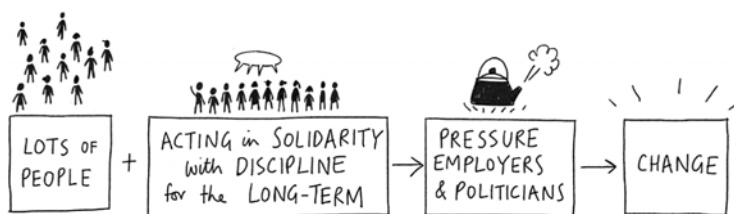
Build internal structures. Structures such as a shop steward system formalize relationships among members. Shop stewards are workers elected to learn the contract and help co-workers solve problems on the job. In some unions this is a volunteer position, others provide a small stipend. Ideally stewards are trained, attend union meetings, and stay in frequent contact with union leaders, staff, and members. A strong shop steward network may have one steward for every ten or twenty workers.

Internal structures include member committees, such as health and safety, social activities, retirees, international solidarity, diversity, bargaining, and so on. Large unions may also have internal caucuses based around race, ethnicity, or specific interests. Committees and caucuses are ways to build internal solidarity and commitment to the union.

SPFE has found changing the internal structure to be invaluable for building internal participation and strength. Lindeman told us, “We have to trust the members—this is their profession, this is their job, this is their life.” Even if it takes extra time to involve members, it has been key to strong member engagement. SPFE members Chong Xiong and Brian Hodge-Rice explained that in the past, stewards would show up and give presentations on the contract, but with their new structure, members are involved in bargaining the whole way and can wrestle with the hard issues as they come up.²⁵

Solidarity power is enhanced when elected leaders, member leaders, and union staff can work together creatively as a team, particularly when diverse leaders bring in experience with a range of traditions of struggle and connection to a broad array of networks.²⁶ (Table 6.1.2 summarizes the key characteristics of the model).

The theory of change for union strength is similar to what we offered in the prior chapter for community organizations:



Strengths and Weaknesses of the Union Model

Strong unions have won much for their members and the working class overall. Robust evidence shows that they raise wages, provide job security and benefits, and reduce disparity and discrimination. None of this would have been possible without a base of well-organized members.

Organizing of this kind is labor intensive and time consuming. In the 1990s and 2000s, a group of union leaders took bold steps to bring in new AFL-CIO leadership and push for new organizing, committing 30 percent of their budgets to staff and resources to bring unorganized workers into unions. They hired thousands of young, energetic organizers who traveled the country, living out of hotels and working long days, using the techniques just listed: mapping the workplace, visiting workers at their homes, assessing workers' support for unions, running well-executed campaigns. The efforts sometimes paid off. But for the most part, new organizing could not keep up with the growing labor force, the loss of unionized workplaces when plants shut down, or the loss of members when union workers retired and were not replaced. The victories came at a great cost in terms of union expenditures and burnout among these young organizers.

Most union growth does not happen incrementally, plant by plant, workplace by workplace. As union organizer Mark Meinster writes, "The problem is that even great tactics can't overcome the social, political, and economic forces of capitalism, which combine to make organizing a gigantic challenge . . . Employers are under intense competitive pressure to resist workers' demands—there's no generous 'high road' for them to take; they won't willingly give in to a union drive. And employers are compelled to come together as a class to exert power over the government, passing laws and

using the courts to challenge unions on all fronts.”²⁷ Instead, union growth comes in “upsurges”—periods where workers rise up more broadly.²⁸ In the United States, these upsurges took place at the turn of the twentieth century, in the 1930s, and in the late 1960s/early 1970s. There are signs we may be in the beginning of another upsurge as we write this book.²⁹

This suggests that the steady, slow work of building unions worker by worker must be paired with other strategies, especially given the added obstacles unions face—intense employer opposition and weak labor laws. Labor organizers have devoted a lot of time and thought to the best ways to bring large numbers of new members into unions. We won’t cover that debate here but will note that no one model has had overwhelming success in recent decades.³⁰

Town Hall or Army? Tensions in the Union Model

So far, we’ve explored unions as an example of the base-building model. Now we turn to some of the tensions unique to unions, a product of their unique role in the history of underdog organizing. There are over 14 million union members in the United States as of 2023, and collectively they control almost \$30 billion in assets, making them far larger than other underdog organizations.³¹ But unlike many underdog organizations that have a self-selected membership, unions represent workers with the full range of political views. This creates tensions unique to the model.

First, a union must represent all workers in the workplace (technically, in a “bargaining unit”).³² In some cases, workers don’t have to be members of the union, but under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), the union is still legally required to represent all workers. This is different from community organizations, which can establish rules and requirements for who is allowed to be a member. This can be both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, it means that unions must work hard to unite workers across differences. That might push the union to hire more organizers, build stronger structures of representation, and learn to find common ground among a diverse workforce. On the other hand, it might push the union to focus

only on the lowest common denominator, such as a demand for higher wages, and play it safe in terms of bolder demands and decisions, such as supporting a controversial political cause. Regardless, this stipulation affects base-building, as a union that wants to build power may have to appeal to anti-union workers in the process.

Second, unions are democratic organizations. By law, all union officers must be elected, and unions must have constitutions and by-laws.³³ Local elections must take place at least every three years; national elections at least every five years. Leaders can be voted out of office.

In theory this should make union leaders more accountable to members than leaders of organizations without a formal democratic structure. But formal democracy is not always participatory. Participatory democracy requires transparency in union functioning, along with regular membership meetings where members have input on strategy and decision making.

A number of labor scholars have found that true internal democracy augments a union's influence, particularly vis-a-vis powerful employers.³⁴ For example, sociologist Carolina Bank Muñoz argues that Walmart warehouse workers in Chile were able to win strong contracts in part because internal democracy encouraged creative strategy development and engagement in militant action.³⁵ Democracy is not just an end, but also a means to building a strong base, she argues.

Not all union leaders agree, which relates to the next tension: unions play a dual role. Labor and peace organizer AJ Muste wrote of the complicated nature of unions in 1928, noting that in addition to serving as "town halls," unions must also function as an army. Town halls are democratic spaces whereas armies are usually top-down, hierarchical operations. This creates tensions within the union: "Imagine the conflict in the soul of a union official who must have the attitude and discharge the functions at one and the same time of both general and a chairman of a debating society," Muste wrote.³⁶ Indeed, there can be greater struggles within the union, such as between those members who see it primarily as a form of insurance and those who might want the union to play a role in societal transformation. To use VanDassor's analogy, you can see the union as a vending machine where you insert a dollar and get a can of Coke, or you

can see the union as a space you attend regularly to work out and get stronger to win big change.

This relates to a larger question: What's the main purpose of unions? Is it to improve wages and working conditions, or to fight for broader demands for members and workers as a whole? Many of the earliest unions were formed as mutual aid for co-workers, who helped fund each other in times of sickness or death, trained one another, and built community (Deepak's father was a member of a union that represented taxi workers—the union paid most of Deepak's tuition for the first year of college). They also worked to keep control over their work by keeping other workers out. Other unions organized all workers in an industry into one union and fought for legislation that would protect all workers and reduce employers' power, such as minimum-wage laws and unemployment insurance. Still, other unions have played a role in overthrowing dictators or apartheid regimes and bringing democracy to countries such as Brazil, South Korea, South Africa, and Indonesia.

This tension reflects different goals. It also reflects different analyses of power and organizing models. We mentioned in Chapter 2 how Exley was trained as a labor organizer in an Alinsky-like model (asking workers to take small steps around least-common-denominator demands), and how he found that many workers were not willing to or interested in taking the big risk of unionizing for a small goal like a 5 percent raise, but would take risks for a potential big demand. In Exley's approach, labor organizing should tackle larger ideological questions, going beyond the least common denominators of wages and hours. This is likely to require robust political education, including addressing issues that may be divisive, such as structural racism in the labor market and within the union movement.

Finally, it's worth noting that from the beginning, labor unions have confronted powerful opposition. The first legal case against unions in 1806 ruled that the very act of collective worker activity was a criminal conspiracy.³⁷ Even the landmark NLRA allows unions only insofar as they don't harm business. They have weathered sustained surveillance, sabotage, assassination attempts, and other attacks from corporate opponents and the government itself, far more than most civil society groups, with the exception of Black and Indigenous social justice groups.

Base-Building and Other Strategy Models

SPFE's example shows how the base-building model, built on solidarity power, can interact successfully with the other models of transformational change from below. SPFE used base-building to revitalize its union. It began with teachers talking to one another, but it used other strategies as well—starting with its new mission statement, followed by a narrative shift strategy that built toward disruption.

Unions have used electoral strategies for decades, particularly since the 1930s, when the labor movement developed close ties to the Democratic Party. Unions endorse candidates, they engage in massive get-out-the-vote efforts, and their members voluntarily contribute millions of dollars for their political programs. Unions have prepared members to run for office, and in some cases supported the formation of independent political parties with a stronger labor focus. That strategy has yielded limited results on the federal level, where unions have been unable to win favorable labor law reform or other key legislative demands for many decades. Unions have had better success at the city and state levels in certain states, but for the most part they've been taken for granted by the Democratic Party.

Several unions have used an inside-outside strategy to pass legislation that improves conditions for all workers, such as higher minimum wages, paid family leave, and paid sick days. Some have fought for legislation to improve conditions for unionizing workers, such as rules governing government contracting or designating home-care workers as employees with the right to unionize.

Member Power Is Your Biggest Weapon

The SPFE's resurgence is a story of good organizing. It also highlights some strategy fundamentals. When Mary Cathryn Ricker took over the leadership of the union she had to choose: Would she build up the union's capacity to provide better services to members? Or would she take a risk and open the union for members to lead? She chose the latter. In this case, the initial strategic decision was made from the top: the president. But opening up the

union ensured that future strategy would be guided by rank-and-file educators. The case shows how strategy may be guided from above, by leaders, in a way that fosters conditions for emergent strategy from below.

Many union leaders find it scary to open the union to greater member leadership, says Leah Lindeman. But by doing so, the SPFE was able to build more power. “Whenever I hear that open bargaining is scary to people I am always baffled,” Leah VanDassor explained. “It seems like it’s one of our biggest ‘weapons’ to build our power within SPFE.”³⁸ The union attracted educators, parents, and community members ready to organize for better public schools. They were motivated by winning a better contract, but more than that, they had a vision of schools that worked better for everyone.

**Table 6.1.2: Key Components of the Base-Building Model—
Labor Unions**

Component	Base-Building Model
Form of Power	Solidarity
Theory of Change	Lots of workers acting in solidarity with discipline and for the long term → pressure employers and politicians to make change
Examples of Historical Practitioners and Theorists	A. Philip Randolph, William Z. Foster, Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, Rose Schneiderman, John L. Lewis, Emma Tenayuca, “Big Bill” Haywood, Lucy Parsons, Flint sit-down strikers. Most labor unions begin with a base-building model.
Protagonists and Structure	Members, shop stewards, elected leaders, organizers Representative and usually formally democratic structure
Goals and Methods	Demands are specific, immediate, winnable (though can be more abstract); issues are chosen and defined in terms of member self-interest; recruitment of new people; membership dues; democratic participation; systematic leadership development

Component	Base-Building Model
Tactical Repertoire	Shop floor direct action, collective bargaining, strikes, lobbying, political engagement
What Does Winning Mean?	Demands are wholly or partly achieved; successful election for union representation; win a collective bargaining agreement; social change for the working class
Time Horizon + When the Model Is Most Effective	Evergreen, but especially useful in slower periods in movement cycles, laying the groundwork for upsurge in worker organizing and action. “Trench warfare”—change mostly comes in small increments over time. Seeks to establish permanent institutions
How It Works with Other Models/ Movement Ecosystem	Works closely with electoral change and inside-outside campaigns. Relies on disruptive movements for exponential growth and on collective care for sustainability. Less history of combining it with narrative shift and momentum. Some unions were formed out of collective care and some have attempted to revive this.
Strengths	Concrete wins that improve people’s lives; builds worker leadership; can engage in struggle over years, can build powerful institutions that have great impact on society
Weaknesses	Can be slow and incremental, focused narrowly on the interests of existing members, bureaucratic, undemocratic, and corrupt. At times works to reinforce the status quo against other underdog movements.

Tools
Tool 7 Power for Underdogs Tool 11 Leadership ID Tool 13 Bargaining for the Common Good Tool 34 Strategy Chart



Climate activists participate in a national day of action on March 21, 2023.

(Photo: Courtesy of Third Act)

Justice for All: Road-Tested Strategies for Building a Bigger Movement

Three members of the Just Economy Institute share their insights on how to weave multiple worlds together to accelerate change.

DEB NELSONTINA BECK Oct 27, 2024 [Common Dreams](https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/build-bigger-movements-for-justice)

Most activists sense the dense web of connections linking social, economic and climate justice issues, yet stick largely to their own anchor points. It's time to come unstuck. To make progress at a pace that matches the urgency of our problems, we must widen the circles of activism and invite everyone in.

"We need to take big leaps of faith," says Akaya Windwood, lead advisor for Third Act and founder of the New Universal Wisdom and Leadership Institute. "There are enough of us now doing this work. We have everything we need in order to make transformation happen."

To find out what it means to pull all the pieces together, we interviewed three members of the Just Economy Institute who are doing it: Windwood; Tzeporah Berman, international program director at Stand.earth; and Stephone Coward, economic justice director at the Hip Hop Caucus. Here are their insights on how to weave multiple worlds together to accelerate change.

Make Money's Role Visible

Many fellows who came to our program with a social justice focus have dissociated from money. What they find, though, is that tracing its flow reveals hidden leverage points.

"There's an opportunity to lean more into the power that people have through their money—even if they don't have a great portfolio—to send a message that we can't prioritize profit over people," says Coward.

To that end, Coward recently launched Bank Black and Green, a multiyear campaign to rally impact investors to shift capital to Black-owned banks that pledge not to finance the fossil fuel industry or mass incarceration.

“These minority depository institutions are frontline actors in a just transition from the current extractive economy to a regenerative one,” Coward says. Meanwhile, “fossil fuel companies come into underdeveloped communities with the promise of good jobs and actually end up poisoning these communities, lowering the value of homes and local businesses, and driving away other forms of economic investment.”

Meet People Where They Are—Literally and Figuratively

“We need to bring the organizing away from the centers of power and into the centers of impact, where climate change is already hitting hard,” says Coward. “New York, D.C., L.A.—places like that are important, but the people who live in the Gulf states also want and need to be a part of this work. We have to build power and mobilize people in the South.”

That requires a long-term commitment, he adds—not just “parachuting into communities to do some type of vanity project and then leaving. And in order for us to do this financial activism and climate activism work together, we’ve got to understand where people are currently.”

“If we’re actually going to change things, we need to start finding honest common ground.”

This is true in every dimension of difference. “It’s been eye opening to me to understand that we are having two very different conversations generationally,” Windwood says, “and I’m coming to the understanding that cross-generational work is as essential as working across race, gender, and class—and perhaps more salient now than anything else.”

Doing that work, she adds, requires moving away from negative communication habits.

“One of the most toxic patterns in our social movements is the critiquing that we do, the contest to see who’s the smartest person in the room—and the way I can tell you that I’m the smartest person in the room is by tearing down your ideas,” Windwood says. “If we’re actually going to change things, we need to start finding honest common ground. Imagine going to a social justice gathering where we are welcoming and kind, and can disagree with some grace.”

Do the Work to Work Across Difference

“We have got to learn how to listen—listen to understand, not to respond,” says Berman, whose organization builds power side-by-side with the frontline communities most impacted by environmental crises.

“There is an inherent tension in the work we do, because when you work on environmental and climate issues, you always feel like you’re racing against the clock,” she says. “Yet true justice-based relationships that are not extractive take trust, and trust takes time.”

Building trust—especially with frontline communities—starts with the approach to developing the campaign, she adds: The most effective actions involve co-creating the strategy, not just giving people the opportunity to have a voice in it. Berman offers Stand.earth’s Amazon campaign, which persuaded banks to shift billions of dollars away from financing oil extraction.

“We built a resistance strategy jointly with Indigenous associations and leadership. And when we decided to try to convince banks to stop funding oil drilling in the heart of the Amazon, we weren’t just facilitating Indigenous leaders to do a speech to a bank,” Berman said. “Instead, our researchers briefed them on all the financial information and answered their questions so that when the Indigenous leaders showed up in a meeting with vice presidents of some of the largest banks in the world, they were negotiating with real information, and they were equal partners.”

“Those bank executives were hearing not just the story of impacts on the land and in the forest, but an assessment of their recent financial transactions in the oil trade and a direct request to stop this contract and no longer pursue this particular company. They didn’t expect that.”

Bring the Storytelling, the Hope and the Joy

Activism by its nature is focused on problems, and that can make the work feel grim to people who don’t do it for a living—and even to some who do.

“We need people to stay for the long-term. Our hope must be louder than the other side’s grievances,” Coward says. “We can use the power of storytelling to put out something aspirational, to talk about what a society that doesn’t prioritize profit over people looks like.”

Windwood echoes the need for “stories that tell us of possible futures,” along with an experience of community. “I think that’s why Third Act is so effective, and how we went from an idea two years ago to having over 70,000 members today,” she says. “When we say, ‘Let’s go sit in front of the banks in our rocking chairs,’ people want to do that. Why? Because it’s fun.”

Berman’s parting advice: “Find ways to experience joy together. It will do more to strengthen your work than anything else because joy is the justice we give ourselves in troubled times.”

DEB NELSON

Deb Nelson leads the Just Economy Institute and has decades of experience working with social entrepreneurs and impact investors. Her work calls on her strengths as a connector, providing vital support for leading financial activists across North America.

[Full Bio >](#)

TINA BECK

Tina Beck designs and oversees the Just Economy Institute programs, community engagement and systems management. Passionate about building community and cultivating relationships, Tina previously served as senior events producer at Social Venture Network and volunteer director at Paul Newman’s Painted Turtle Camp before launching JEI in 2017.

<https://forgeorganizing.org/article/plan-2028-bringing-labor-and-social-movements-together/>

The Forge

March 14, 2025

Plan 2028: Bringing Labor and Social Movements Together - Stephanie Luce

Plan 2028 isn't just another general strike call-it's a strategic, long-term push to unite labor and social movements in a coordinated fight against rising authoritarianism.

The Trump Administration has come in with brute force, attacking working people and institutions from all angles. Their "flood the zone" strategy has left many feeling confused and powerless. But MAGA forces are not unstoppable. Strong coalitions among labor and social movement organizations offer one of the best hopes for blocking the rise of white Christian nationalist forces, and for countering authoritarianism with progressive power.

In fall 2023, United Auto Workers (UAW) President **Shawn Fain called for unions** around America to align their contracts with a May 1, 2028 expiration date, in order to align with the UAW's next round of bargaining with the Big Three: Ford, General Motors (GM), and Chrysler (now Stellantis). This was, in part, a call for class solidarity: to bring workers together across unions, labor and social movements, and geography. It was also an acknowledgment that some of the biggest demands that UAWmembers have-strong pensions and healthcare-cannot be won alone. Workers will need to build broad alliances that can leverage greater pressure on employers and the state.

Over the last year, Fain's call has spread. Unions, base-building organizations, and political organizations are talking about how they can use May 1, 2028 as a compression point: bringing together a broad coalition of groups with bold demands, to share collaborative corporate campaigns and electoral work.

Long-time labor organizer, strategist, and *In These Times* executive director Alex Han coined the term "Plan 2028," which highlights the need to *plan* for such a coordinated action. There is a need to build power, grow our impact, and increase our capacity: through elections, issue and/or policy campaigns, and street heat in the buildup to May 2028. But we can't wait until 2028 to take action! "Plan 2028" can begin with MayDay2025.

Will labor pull off a general strike?

Anyone who has been around the Left is used to regular calls for a general strike. But actual general strikes are rare in the United States and difficult to pull off. Only



10% of workers belong to a union, and even where workers are unionized, they face barriers to striking. For many public sector workers, it is illegal to strike, and while some unions have **defied the laws** and **struck anyway**, there can be heavy penalties and consequences. Union contracts usually include no-strike clauses, meaning that workers can only strike under certain conditions once the contract is up. Workers lose money while on strike, and in some cases they are replaced and lose their jobs permanently. Many unions don't have adequate strike funds or other forms of support in place.

Given the challenges, it seems unrealistic to picture May 1, 2028 as a full-blown general strike. Rather, Plan 2028 could look more like a series of escalating actions over the next several years, including engagement in the 2026 elections and coordinated fights against the implementation of Project 2025. Those actions could build up to a month or several months of national protests in early 2028; that could include big strikes, rallies, protests, and legislative campaigns. Disruptions may take other forms beyond a strike- workplace actions like slow-downs, sit-downs and walk-outs, or the kinds of community boycotts and direct action seen in the Civil Rights movement. Any real disruption will still involve risks- arrest, harassment, and surveillance for example-and, whether strikes or otherwise, disruptions must come with careful planning and collective care.

Plan 2028 is more realistic than many previous calls for a general strike because it comes from the UAW: a large union with major contracts expiring in May 2028. Whatever happens, there's a possibility that some or all of the 150,000 UAW members at the Big Three auto companies will strike.

Unions with a history of successful strikes are aligning with Fain's call. Most notably, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) endorsed it, and are working to line up their contract talks with UAW's dates. CTU worked with the Baltimore Teachers Union to support a **resolution** at the 2024 American Federation of Teachers (AFT) national convention, calling on AFT locals to support the call. The resolution passed overwhelmingly. The American Postal Workers Union (APWU) also passed a resolution in support. Other unions and labor councils are **joining in**.

There are plenty of unions who can't set up their contract expiration dates for May 2028. Perhaps their agreement expires in the months before or after, or not in the same year. The 2028 date gives unions time to do the slow and steady organizing work needed to build capacity in order to pull off coordinated action of other kinds, such as support for legislative campaigns aligned with May 2028.

Bringing in social movement organizations

Plan 2028 needs to build a coordinated national effort going beyond unions, and beyond the usual suspects. This could begin with May Day committees in cities around the country that are led by union, social movement and political organization leaders ready to work together against shared electoral and non-electoral targets. Ideally, Plan 2028 would carve a path to building visionary and strategic partnerships between unions and organizations with a substantial base, like Mijente, SURJ, the Working Families Party, faith-based organizations, and more. We must also involve unions that haven't been engaging in progressive coalitions, and union members who have voted for MAGA candidates.

We've had a few examples of unions coordinating contract expiration dates in the last decade; in some of those cases, from **Connecticut** to **California**, the unions also aligned with social movement organizations around shared demands that benefitted all. This approach, known as **Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG)**, opens up exciting opportunities for unions and social movement organizations to find **common targets and overlapping demands**. Many teachers' unions have used BCG, **fighting alongside parents and students** for better working *and* learning conditions.

In **Minnesota**, 70 unions and base-building organizations have worked together over the past 10 to 15 years to align union contracts and community demands. This alliance also conducts a shared power analysis, identifies common targets, builds trust, develops leaders and takes coordinated action. These unions aligned their contracts to expire around March 2024. Working with one another and local social movement organizations, they developed coordinated contract and legislative campaigns around four shared themes: stable housing, good schools, dignified work, and a livable planet.

While not all of the unions ended up striking, the groups in the alliance used contract expiration dates as a compression point. The alliance held a **week of action** with protests, rallies, leadership training and picket lines. And the unions and organizations won many of their demands, including substantial wage increases for janitors, teachers, and city maintenance workers. Base-building groups representing low-income renters and the worker center **Centro De Trabajadores Unidos En La Lucha** (CTUL) joined the weekly actions and called on developers to join their **Building Dignity and Respect Program**, which creates an independent monitoring group to examine working conditions in the residential construction industry.

Bargaining for the Common Good invites a long-term approach that builds trust over time and takes on demands no group could win on their own. But the work is challenging. Unions usually have more power and resources in these relationships, and the legal framework of labor law and collective bargaining can dictate the timeline. It is easy for one partner to cut a deal and leave others out, or to exit an alliance. To build durable coalitions, relationships between organizations must go deeper by including members, rather than just being leader-to-leader.

The Minnesota alignment attempted to preempt some of those pitfalls with guidelines on how to work together. For example, they agreed that if anyone partner in the alignment got a deal from their target, they were allowed to take it, rather than having to wait until everyone got a deal. But each organization still had to participate in the Week of Action, support other groups' pickets and actions, and send members to leadership schools.

Bargaining for the Common Good is not a magical solution for unity; rather it is a tool or framework that can be used well or used poorly to deepen alignment among social movements and labor. The **examples** of where it has been used well are inspiring, and provide a model of what we might see building towards 2028.

Some union leaders may be slow to join in. However, it's possible that a labor upsurge can come from militant leaders at the local level. The late **Dan Clawson**, scholar and

union leader, argued that upsurges don't tend to come from the top leadership, but in spite of it. Mark Meinster of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) **suggests that upsurges are more likely** when you have a large number of "politically conscious working-class leaders who have experience in militancy and a view that the existing system is illegitimate." If successful, the concept could quickly spread beyond the communities or workplaces where we've been working.

There are many constituencies skeptical of working with unions, and for good reason. Their organizations may have been cut out of deals union leaders made with politicians, or they've even had a negative experience of their own with a bureaucratic or inept union. And the vast majority of people don't belong to unions. Plan 2028 could provide a way to bring new life to the labor movement: giving energy to militant members and leaders, and inspiration to workers looking to **organize their own workplace**.

Coordinate actions from 2025 to 2028

Starting this May Day, local labor and social movement leaders are encouraged to begin planning coordinated actions in cities across the country, united around key demands or themes. We can start by focusing on a handful of regions where union and social movement leaders are willing to take risks and think creatively, and where they have a real base. The Chicago Teachers Union is working with ARISE Chicago and over 80 organizations to plan for May Day 2025. Leaders in other cities are joining the call to action. These aligned forces will ideally move toward a shared analysis of long-term targets and a shared infrastructure to support collective organizing in the coming years.

These shared actions will necessarily take a defensive character as Project 2025 is implemented, immigrants are attacked, and public jobs and services are cut; but it is crucial that this effort includes visionary demands as well. The UAW's demands are not just to *defend* Social Security and Medicaid, for example, but to *expand* it.

The UAW calls for strikes, but Plan 2028 should also include an electoral strategy. We must make demands on employers as well as the state, at the local, state, and federal level. Plan 2028 activities could include building independent political organizations and supporting progressive midterm candidates.

It's too early to predict what might be the most pressing need in 2028. Rather, an organized leadup to 2028 could be a vehicle for surfacing demands, candidates, and engaged bases that build the counterweight to corporate Democrats; something we will need to effectively challenge the Right's faux populism. Given the growing authoritarian threat in the US and globally, a militant politicized labor movement working with social movement organizations needs to take leadership in defending and expanding democracy, just as they have done in **other countries**.

What's Needed?

We learn from labor-community alignments in Minnesota, Connecticut, California, and elsewhere about the components that make these efforts more likely to succeed:

A consolidated core of social movement organizations and unions

In the last 70 years in particular, the center of gravity for doing powerful electoral and non-electoral work has shifted and grown. It will be imperative that, in addition to UAW, some of these organizations will become the nucleus that can align and steer the broader Plan 2028 effort. Without a powerful and reliable center, Plan 2028 has less of a chance to maximize its national and state level impacts.

Organizations with real bases

We cannot pull *off* a strike of any kind without real membership involvement. Union and workplace leaders need to build internally, using **workplace mapping**, **structure tests** and leadership development. Social movement organizations must also have real bases. While think tanks and advocacy non-profits might be allies, they cannot anchor a true alignment that is about building power.

Organizations that are clear about their self-interest

Plan 2028 is exciting and many people are eager to jump on board for political and visionary ideas. But organizations need to have a concrete way to tie the 2028 actions to building their own power. The most successful alignments happen when organizations understand that they have big goals that they cannot win on their own.

Involvement from members and the rank-and-file

Building coalitions or alignments requires making the time and space to bring in members. Offer political education and skills training. Involve them in decision-making. Run practice pickets or policy negotiations; pair up labor and community members to knock on doors.

Shared research

We need to conduct power analyses of our communities and states. Who holds power? What are favorable or unfavorable trends that are shaping our terrain? Who controls production, who lends money, who makes decisions, who pressures politicians? Where do we have common targets?

Shared calendars, staff, lists, and resources

Working together long-term goes better if we move beyond shallow ad-hoc coalitions and into deep alignment. We need to be able to look under the hood of each other's organizations to increase trust as well as capacity.

Strike funds and mutual aid

Direct action is risky and can be expensive. We need to collectivize the funds, childcare, food, healthcare and other care work needed to help people take risks. They need to know someone has their back. We'll also need legal support and a sober assessment of potential infiltration and backlash.

Guidelines for working in coalition

There have been countless labor-social movement coalitions over the years; we've learned a lot about potential pitfalls. Especially when labor—who often is the most well-resourced partner at the table—has not always participated through an equity lens in respect to other partners. The Minnesota alignment's guidelines

provide one model. Madeline Talbott, formerly with Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), has **additional advice for working in coalition**, such as: establish an agenda-setting committee, be clear about who has decision-making power, and talk about how to address power differentials between groups.

Preparation for an upsurge

It's hard to predict an upsurge, but it is possible to prepare for one. We can train thousands of workplace and community leaders to be organizers, strike captains, alliance builders, and strategists. We can **use tools** like tabletop exercises to predict how bosses and the state might try to infiltrate, divide us, co-opt us, or crush our actions. We can find on-ramps to bring in new people at any level.

In contrast to many calls for general strikes that are defensive reactions to attacks, the Plan 2028 call is a push to go on offense. Labor and social movement organizations working in close alignment can build power inside and outside of workplaces. We begin our joint work this May Day.

None of this is just about a day in 2028. That date provides a natural compression point for coordinated action, but building power will require a long-term strategy that starts with organizing *now* and that goes beyond 2028; that aspires to build a strong, militant, and aligned labor and social movement, as well as building governing power that changes the rules of the game altogether.

About The Author

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Taking Stock: Lessons From Labor-Community Coalitions in the Fight For Educational Justice

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Executive Summary

Since the November 2024 election, the fight for educational justice has assumed a new urgency and intensity. Efforts to expand school privatization, deport millions of undocumented immigrants, and rollback protections for LGBTQ students are anticipated to increase. The most vulnerable students and communities that our public schools serve will be the target of continued attacks and are at risk of being left behind. Our ability to defend our rights and fight for justice in this moment is dependent on our ability to create communities that support and fight for one another. The necessary battles for engagement will be on our doorsteps, at the local level – fighting for our students, our schools, and our communities.

In order to generate the power needed to rise to the occasion, labor unions and community organizations will need to come together in partnership. The union movement is one of the few forces capable of mobilizing working families en masse to prevent the US from succumbing to MAGA authoritarianism. Education unions are uniquely positioned because they already have a workplace presence in most neighborhoods across the country. Organized communities have ears to the ground on how to build power at the local level and mobilize communities across different

neighborhoods. Together they can build power to not only protect, but to strengthen our democracy for future generations.

Midwest Academy, National Education Association, and The LIFT Fund have been acutely aware of the threats to our democracy and the need to ignite more labor-community partnerships and initiatives to fight back. With that in mind, we reviewed and synthesized lessons from the past 10-15 years of educational justice work that included coalitions of education unions along with grassroots community organizations. There are a variety of distinctions between community organizations and unions which can present a challenge in coalition spaces if not recognized or discussed. If understood, however, the differences overall are exactly where-in the power of a coalition lies. Coalitions find success when they use and learn from varying approaches, acknowledge the multiple sources of power, and understand how they can be used to build their collective strength.

At this moment, there is clear consensus regarding the need to form working class, multi-racial coalitions to build the power necessary to advance a progressive agenda. We confirmed what many organizing practitioners have experienced on the ground – that successful labor-community coalition work includes the following key elements:

- Committed leadership that dedicates resources, time, and energy into building authentic relationships with member organizations to make partnerships work.
- Shared vision and power analysis among partners that is grounded in racial, social, and economic justice.
- Strategic campaign work that focuses on common issues, and shared values and ideas.
- Disciplined practice of base building and commitment to ongoing organizing.
- Shared coalition power and joint strategic planning that recognizes and builds on each organization's strengths and sources of power.
- Clear coalition structure, decision making processes, and expectations of each coalition member.
- Coalition coordinators and bridge builders that can bring partners together and help them navigate their coordinated efforts.
- Most importantly, long-term and dedicated funding to help all partners build deep levels of capacity that are needed to win.

In order to achieve these elements, organizations need the resources to build greater capacity and organizing discipline. Therefore, based on our in-depth analysis and the urgent need to expand on this work, we offer the following recommendations to develop, strengthen, and sustain future coalition work in the fight for justice.

- **Long-term, Flexible Funding from the Philanthropic Community:** Unrestricted, multi-year grantmaking to community organizations and coalitions that are ready to work with labor, so that organizers on the ground can move quickly.

- **A Renewed Commitment by Labor to Organizing with the Community:** From 2012-2016, the Service Employee International Union made a bold decision to invest tens of millions of dollars in the “Fight For 15” campaign and as a result won \$150 billion in raises for 26 million workers. The moment we are in, calls for similarly bold and large investments into organizing from labor unions. Large national and state unions can provide crucial funding through unrestricted, multi-year funding for local labor-community coalitions.
- **Movement Building Center:** Establish a Movement Building Center that brings labor and community organizations together and offers the following types of training and support to organizations, with the goal of joining UAW’s call for a general strike and large scale actions in May 2028:
 - **Coalition development:** Guidance to emerging coalitions on implementing key coalition elements and recommendations for setting up positive coalition dynamics.
 - **Organizing training:** Helping organizers on the ground develop quality organizing skills and practices needed to combat misinformation and apathy.
 - **Political education:** Inspiring and helping organizations in coalition bring their memberships together to engage in political education and learn from one another.
 - **Conflict resolution and restorative justice practices:** Supporting groups to build strong, trusting, inter-organizational relationships.
 - **Mentorship network:** Teaching new labor and community leaders who are transforming their unions and organizations to take on the tough challenges in front of us.
 - **Research and communications:** Support for coalitions running strategic campaigns.

If labor unions and community organizations come together in struggle, they will emerge as a powerful force that can take on bigger, larger scale battles to reclaim the promise of our country to create a more just and equitable society. Together we can support the revitalization of our labor movement and community organizing culture. Building the power we need to reverse the trend of continued growth of economic inequalities and meet the needs of working class people. Most importantly, we can provide a renewed sense of community and hope for generations to come.

About

This report was a collaborative effort of Midwest Academy, National Education Association, and The LIFT Fund.

Midwest Academy

The Midwest Academy is one of the nation's premier training institutes for organizers committed to the struggle for racial, economic and social justice. The Academy has played an important role in preparing several generations of organizers over the last 50 years, many of whom are now in leadership positions in community and labor organizations. Our training focuses on key organizing skills, including base-building, leadership development and strategic campaigns, as well as the importance of organizers developing a political vision for the world they are hoping to help create and strategies to lead a balanced life and avoid burnout. Our work is intended to support the development of self-determined, democratically governed organizations that win real improvements in people's lives and help build the broader movement for justice.

National Education Association

The National Education Association (NEA) is more than 3 million people—educators, students, activists, workers, parents, neighbors, friends—who believe in opportunity for all students and in the power of public education to transform lives and create a more just and inclusive society.

The LIFT Fund

The LIFT Fund connects labor unions and philanthropy to coordinate resources, strategies and funding that support worker organizing and power building. We provide wraparound support, multi-year funding and a low-barrier approach for grantees. We center Black and Brown workers because they are leading powerful, innovative movement building that will raise standards for everyone and transform our economy and democracy. The LIFT Fund has invested more than \$20 million in operating support grants to nonprofits, worker centers and other worker organizations across the country, mostly in the South. By 2034, we will invest more than \$50 million into worker movement building. We invest in people and organizations on the frontlines of building worker power because their collective action can create a world where we all thrive together.





Acknowledgements

We like to express our appreciation to the many individuals who were interviewed and contributed their time and expertise to the development of this report. A full list of participants can be found on page 54.

Thank you to the Hewlett Foundation for their support and funding for this report.

Eric Zachary from Midwest Academy, Kyle Serrette from the National Education Association, and Jennifer Epps from The LIFT Fund conceived of this project and contributed invaluable insight into the final document. Thank you to Leah Lindeman who conducted the interviews and research and crafted the report. Leah has been a union organizer for over twenty years, including twelve years with the St. Paul Federation of Educators.

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Preface

Since the November 2024 election, the fight for educational justice has assumed a new urgency and intensity. Efforts to expand school privatization, deport millions of undocumented immigrants, and rollback protections for LGBTQ students are anticipated to increase. The most vulnerable students and communities that our public schools serve will be the target of continued attacks and are at risk of being left behind. Our ability to defend our rights and fight for justice in this moment is dependent on our ability to create communities that support and fight for one another. The necessary battles for engagement will be on our doorsteps, at the local level – fighting for our students, our schools, and our communities.

Labor-community partnerships have been an effective tool to advance progressive agendas and ideas for decades. Different structures and formats have been tried, research has been done, and organizers have experienced powerful partnerships as well as ineffective ones. One thing that rings true through time, however, is the

necessity for labor and community organizations to pool their power to make change. This is true now, more than ever. The union movement is one of the few forces capable of mobilizing working families en masse to prevent the US from succumbing to MAGA authoritarianism. Education unions are uniquely positioned because they already have a workplace presence in most neighborhoods across the country. Organized communities have ears to the ground on how to build power at the local level and mobilize communities across different neighborhoods. Together they can build power to not only protect, but to strengthen our democracy for future generations.

With this in mind, The LIFT Fund, National Education Association, and Midwest Academy came together to better understand how to ignite more labor-community partnerships and initiatives. We reviewed and synthesized lessons from the past 10-15 years of educational justice coalition work done by education unions and grassroots community organizations, to better understand the elements that lead to coalition success, to identify challenges, and to make recommendations to inform future coalition work.

More than 50 union and community leaders and organizers from over a dozen cities who have been involved in educational justice coalitions or labor-community coalitions were interviewed for the project (a list of individuals interviewed can be found on page 54). The spectrum of coalitions discussed range from loose networks that came together around a specific campaign to coalitions of organizations that formalized their own nonprofit and staff. The coalitions in this project that did not focus on educational justice worked on intersecting issues such as workers rights, affordable housing, and retiree rights. Everyone interviewed had experienced some degree of success and believed there was value in working together – either in coalition spaces or in organizations that align their individual work to increase their strength. They shared their expertise in how the organizing community can work to improve coalition or alignment dynamics and support more collaborative work to build power to win on social justice issues. Throughout this report, the word “coalition” is used to describe a wide range of working relationships of labor-community organizations that took on various structures, including “alignments”, to run a campaign or series of campaigns together.

Additionally, a review of articles and research on the general topic of labor and community coalitions was reviewed to inform our synthesis. Recommendations outlined at the end of this report were offered by those interviewed and were further discussed and crafted by a committee of coalition practitioners who were interviewed to ensure that the recommendations are a reflection of their experiences and ideas for improving and shaping future coalitions.

Introduction

For decades there have been efforts to dismantle our public education system by privatizers, corporate reformers, and right-wing ideologues. Urban public school districts have been the main target of many of these attacks, especially attempts to privatize public schools through charter schools and vouchers. Over the past 10-15 years, communities that believe in the promise of fully funded public education to serve as the gateway to racial and economic justice have formed labor-community coalitions to fight back and advance their own vision. These coalitions primarily came together to address issues within the scope of a school district or city, with some expanding or joining a state-wide coalition to address issues at a broader level.

When seeking out labor-community coalition practitioners to interview for this project, we focused on coalitions that had organized a base, taken action, and had success. Each coalition consolidated their power to make positive change. Most focused on changes in public education policy at the local or state level, other coalitions won local or state policy changes for tenants, workers, and retirees.

“Unions cannot do big structural change on their own; and at the end of the day when we are talking about public goods, the workers and people receiving the services have a common interest.”

One critical thread that emerged was that building power through labor-community coalition work is key to making structural changes to our public institutions. Norma Martinez HoSang, Director from Connecticut for All, talked about how, “unions cannot do big structural change on their own and at the end of the day when we are talking about public goods, the workers and people receiving the services have a common interest.” Research supports this assertion, showing that coalitions are important for achieving broader, longer term goals.

Labor-community coalitions deliver credibility, both to the organizations involved, and to the issue they support. Immediately they demonstrate that multiple organizations, who may be representing different perspectives and voices, are already in agreement on the issues and long-term solutions. For unions, this also translates to more influence in bargaining and politics, because, as research shows, community support boosts the legitimacy of their issues.¹

In addition to building power, community organizations involved in coalitions can also reap benefits. Studies have demonstrated that they benefit from being in coalition with labor unions because there is typically an increase in funding, capacity, and access to other resources such as communications support or political relationships that they might not otherwise have.²

For a labor movement in decline, the benefits of forming labor community coalitions are significant. Unions have an opportunity to build relationships with communities

that may be skeptical of them or lack understanding about how unions work. Amanda Tattersall, Associate Professor in urban geography and community methods at the University of Sydney, argues that coalitions can also help revitalize union participation among members, “Union power is increased if and when unions connect their coalition engagement to deeply engaging union members, and if and when they establish reciprocal interdependent interconnection with community organizations.”³

DIVERSITY OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Another theme that emerged when considering how coalitions can maximize their impact, was the differences between labor and community organizations. There are a variety of distinctions between community organizations and unions which can present a challenge in coalition spaces if not recognized or discussed. If understood, however, the differences overall are exactly where-in the power of a coalition lies. Coalitions find success when they utilize and learn from varying approaches, acknowledge the multiple sources of power, and understand how they can build collective strength.

In describing her coalition experiences, Aquilina Soriano Versoza from Pilipino Workers Center of Southern California talked about how the organizations in coalition compliment one another and how they can support one another. “There is so much experience and organizing in unions but that is a very particular structure that doesn’t work in all spaces; understand the differences and figure out what applies and what doesn’t apply,” she explained.

A union’s distinct legal status under State and Federal labor law, for example, differentiates them but is also a source of power for a coalition. If the union has a collective bargaining agreement that is open for negotiations, a “Bargaining for the Common Good” strategy for negotiations can be a path to address community-wide issues. This was evident in the educational justice coalitions in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Oakland.

Differences in the source of organizational strengths also present an opportunity for coalition partners to learn from one another. For instance, to protect and improve their legal status, unions generally have organized their structures and resources to include a focus on policy campaigns at the state and national level. This, coupled with their experience with regularly negotiating contracts, gives them more experience with internal strategy and compromise (in some cases, they may become too reliant on internal strategies to their detriment). Community organizations, on the other hand, typically don’t have the same type of status and are more likely to focus on organizing direct actions on local targets with their membership base. This can often give community organizations a better understanding of regular base building and grassroots organizing. Because unions have a captive membership with their collective bargaining agreements, some have become more complacent with base building over time and have instead focused on servicing.

Community organizations working with unions have opportunities to learn more about negotiations and manage internal strategy to get demands met. Unions focused on servicing versus organizing can learn from community organizations collective action tactics. Unions will find that community groups are willing to take more risks and can drive organizing efforts that help them advance a narrative in the eyes of the public; community organizations will develop more internal strategies to win their policy agenda. If a labor and community coalition has capacity to successfully merge both inside and outside strategies, they can increase their likelihood of winning campaigns.

It is worth noting that many unions and community organizations alike can learn from unions that have adopted a social justice union organizing model. These unions are engaged in ongoing organizing, regularly recruit new workers into the union, and have defined structures that they use to deeply engage workers in their campaigns. The teachers unions highlighted in this report, in particular, have successfully made this shift. Their transformation and base building practices can teach us a lot about the potential power of the labor movement. Community organizations can learn from these locals on how to do structure-based organizing and how to organize for majorities within defined universes.

DECISION MAKING STRUCTURES

It is also important to understand each organization's decision making structure in order to gain insight into how everyone may engage in a coalition and how quickly decisions can be made. Unions have multiple layers of elected leaders, this is an important part of how they operate. Community organizations, on the other hand, may not have as many layers of democracy. Local unions are structured to engage thousands, in some cases tens of thousands, of members in their organizing work and campaigns. This democratic structure creates dynamics, and sometimes interesting dilemmas, that community organizations may not be familiar with and that can be challenging to navigate both within the union and a coalition space. For example, certain decisions may need approval by multiple bodies within the organization, slowing down the decision making process. It's necessary for community organizations to understand union democratic processes and their structures so they know how it might intersect with coalition work.

Top down or highly bureaucratic union structures at the state and national levels, for example, can be an obstacle – there may be a high level of risk-aversion in the leadership or union staffing structures may limit capacity for involvement in a campaign, etc. This is particularly a challenge in many educator unions where the threats to public education require radical change. Unions (at state, and national levels), need to break down internal structural barriers in order to create capacity to more deeply engage members in broader fights and develop strong relationships with their local communities. A resistance to doing so could be detrimental to the union's existence. Nonetheless, in these situations, community organizations should seek understanding and continue to try and work with them in order to build the power needed to win change. It is critical that leaders continue to find the intersection of their self-interests.

BUILDING DIVERSE COALITIONS

Perhaps the more critical value of organizing as a labor-community coalition, lies in the relationships that are built across a diverse set of identities focused on a shared vision. Relationships that have the potential to remind us of our collective power and multitude of shared interests. As we build stronger relationships across class, race, and other identities we build more collective power to strengthen our democracy.

Of course, in order to achieve this, bringing together a diverse coalition requires conscious effort to ensure inclusivity. Participants shared challenges with racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of prejudice showing up in coalition spaces, even when folks brought their best intentions. In the interviews conducted for this project, racial dynamics and racism of white participants was the most common issue identified. Community leaders in particular stressed the importance of paying close attention to these dynamics and having open dialogue. “Be conscious of where racial justice plays into the whole situation,” says Billy Easton, formerly the long-time director of the NYS Alliance for Quality Education. “A lot of unions are very white heavy and the community is Black or Brown, so avoid symbolic relationships, [and] avoid tokenism.” Organizations should do the necessary internal work around identifying their racist, sexist, and/or classist practices and past mistakes in order to show up and be respected.

SEEDING MORE LABOR-COMMUNITY COALITION WORK

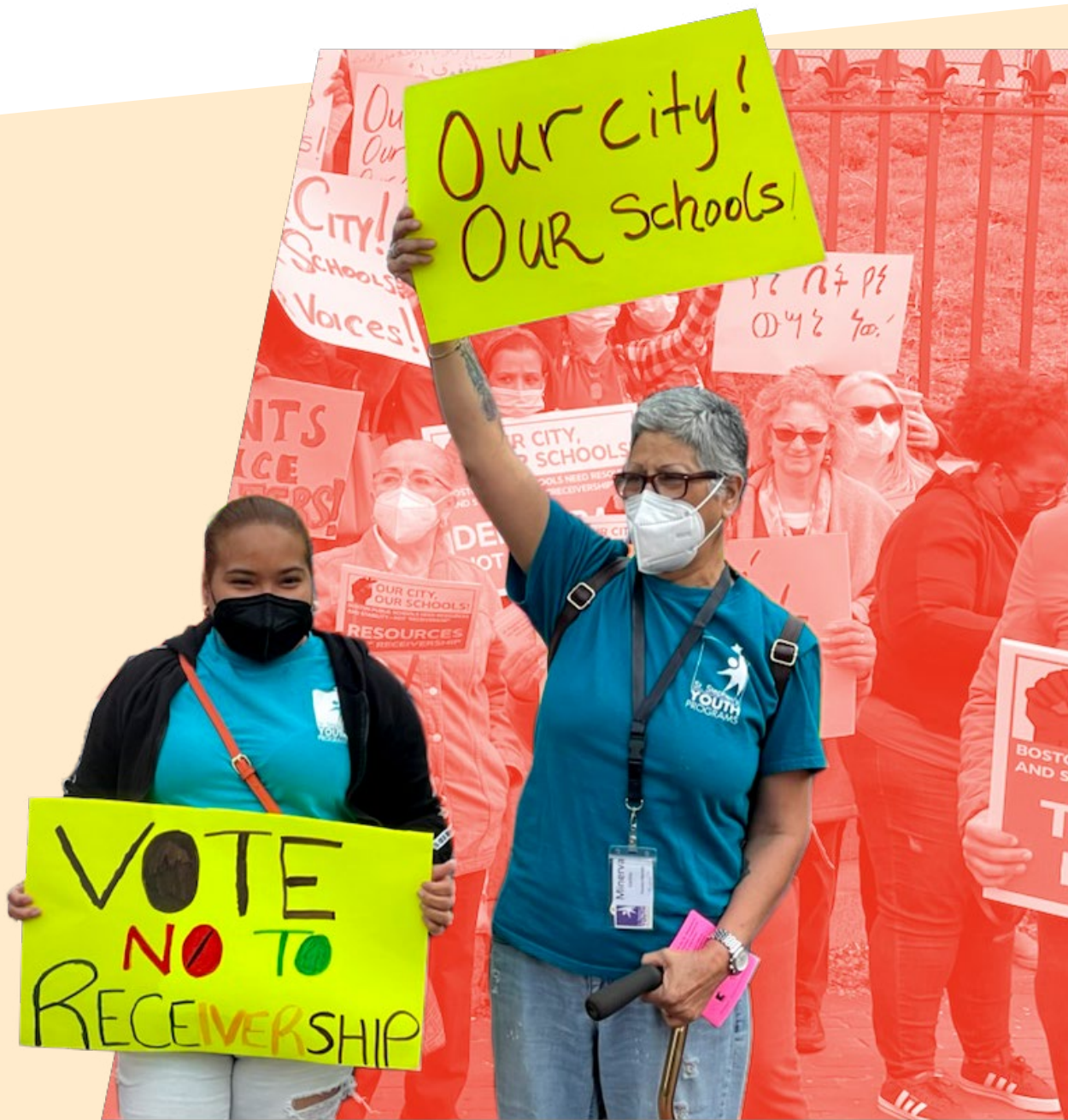


Ultimately, the necessity for more collaborative social justice organizing between labor unions and community organizations to initiate structural changes is greater than the challenges it presents. This report offers a recipe of key coalition elements for any type of labor-community coalition work. These key elements were identified by leaders and organizers engaged deeply in the work. We also asked participants to help identify common challenges that any coalition should prepare themselves for and think about proactively. And after looking at coalition dynamics and practices, we asked:

- What will it take to seed more of this work?
- How can we create organizing models within unions and coalitional spaces that have the capacity to both shut down attacks and proactively spread a narrative and vision for a better future?

In an attempt to answer these questions, we will review examples of education justice coalitions that have already stepped up and responded to the relentless attacks on public schools; sharing how they came together, the issues they have organized around, and how they have evolved.

Then we will offer recommendations for starting down a path to creating, supporting and nurturing such organizing spaces. The most critical and urgent needs identified: financial support and capacity-building so organizations can build unified coalitions that are ready to engage in the fights that are on our doorstep.



Coalitions in the Fight for Educational Justice

Coalitions in the fight for educational justice have taken on extraordinary work to protect public education from neoliberal reforms and privatization efforts. This section highlights some of the achievements of labor-community coalitions that formed over the past 10-15 years in response to privatization attacks on public education and summarizes their work.

Grassroots Education Movement Chicago, Illinois

In the early 2000s, Chicago's Kenwood Oakdale Community Organization (KOCO) had a strong base of youth and parents. According to Jay Travis, KOCO's executive director at the time, they started to hear about school closures from parents—specifically the Mid-South Plan and Renaissance 2010 (a “portfolio district” school reform plan that would close “underperforming” public schools and expand the number of privately managed charter schools). Chicago Public Schools have been under mayoral control since 1995, leaving them particularly vulnerable to politically driven reform measures. According to Travis, the city had used a trumped-up community engagement process and used parents' opinions about schools to make the case to close 20 of 22 area schools. Travis explained that, “If [Black parents] from our communities had not said they were tired and ready to fight...we would not have picked up the fight. We started to figure out that this plan was big, connected to gentrification, and was going to go broader than our community.”

Travis and Jitu Brown, the education organizer at KOCO, started to meet with other potential allies: Action Now—another Chicago organizing arm with a base, SEIU 373—the school service employees union, and Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Back then,

under CTU President Marilyn Stewart, the union was not taking a significant stand against school closures, but KOCO understood the importance of working with the union and made efforts to build a relationship. Parents and teachers at the threatened schools began organizing and fighting back against the closures. Through these fights Travis and Brown met teachers Jesse Sharkey, Jackson Potter, Karen Lewis, and other rank and file educators who were fighting back alongside parents and students.

At the same time, these educators were forming the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) out of frustration with CTU leadership. In

“Having organizations trained in the Alinsky model of organizing helped train CORE leaders on how to build structures and bring together the coalition. It was part of their culture to hold each other accountable and turnout a base to actions. We went beyond the model by building coalitions that built people power not for powers' sake but for the purpose to advance shared values of defending public education by improving funding and stopping privatization.”

2010, CORE took over leadership of the union when Karen Lewis was elected the new CTU President. The new union leadership met with KOCO and other community partners and together they formalized the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM) coalition.

Organizers were already working together informally before this moment, but the election of CORE into CTU leadership was an opportunity to specifically coalesce organizing groups that had a base of members that could turnout and mobilize. According to Jackson Potter, CORE Leader and current CTU Vice President, “Having organizations trained in the Alinsky model of organizing helped train CORE leaders on how to build structures and bring together the coalition. It was part of their culture to hold each other accountable and turnout a base to actions. We went beyond the model by building coalitions that built people power not for powers’ sake but for the purpose to advance shared values of defending public education by improving funding and stopping privatization.” CORE benefited from working with community organizations and was able to apply those lessons within CTU, strengthening the union’s power.

Initially, the main focus of GEM was keeping schools open and fighting closures. Brown explained that, “In the beginning we were under attack and fighting back. But you can’t sustain a struggle just about what you are against, you have to get to your vision.

So we started to talk about community schools and getting more Black teachers into the classroom.” Eventually the coalition evolved to address other issues including winning an elected school board with the state legislature. According to Jay Travis, “Locking arms around real struggles to stop privatization in schools in Black and Brown communities was critical. We knew it was a real tangible hit to our neighborhoods. The rhythm of those fights helped ground us in terms of our power analysis and the impact of what was happening. And in terms of how popular support strengthened the union’s power in the city. A core piece of what made the union strong is that it had popular community based support across the city because it supported community-based fights.” The work the coalition did together helped the organizations involved recognize that issue-based campaigns were not enough to move the dial, they had to build political power as well. Eventually they would support Karen Lewis as a Mayoral candidate and Jay Travis as a candidate for the Illinois House of Representatives.

Together, GEM successfully fought back school closures, won contract language for annual funding of sustainable community schools, and eventually evolved to fight for an elected school board. GEM also supported CTU in multiple contract negotiations, including the strikes in 2012 and 2019. Those contracts delivered numerous victories

“Locking arms around real struggles to stop privatization in schools in Black and Brown communities was critical. We knew it was a real tangible hit to our neighborhoods. The rhythm of those fights helped ground us in terms of our power analysis and the impact of what was happening. And in terms of how popular support strengthened the union’s power in the city. A core piece of what made the union strong is that it had popular community based support across the city because it supported community-based fights.”

to the CPS students and teachers including lower class sizes, more nurses, social workers, and librarians, improvements for teachers serving special education students, and improvements in pay and benefits for teachers.



In 2022, the State of Illinois passed legislation to create an elected school board for Chicago Public Schools. However, the final days and hours of work that went into passing the legislation uncovered a deep disagreement between the union and community organizations. CTU was willing to compromise on splitting the election of the board in half (delaying a fully elected board until 2026). KOCO and other coalition partners believed they had the power to win a fully elected board without compromise. The disagreement ultimately ended the coalition. However, the GEM participants who were interviewed for this project remain hopeful that they can work together again in the future. Relationships have continued and together they have had to navigate a new reality—working with former teacher and CTU organizer, Brandon Johnson, the Chicago Mayor that they helped to elect in 2023.

In August of 2013, The Boston Truth Coalition launched by holding its first community meeting at the historic First Parish Dorchester, next door to the oldest public school in the United States– Mather Elementary School. The room was packed, at least 100 community members came out and energized the event. The diverse group of community stakeholders included students, educators, school staff, parents, caretakers and community members. They shared a commitment to public education and wanted to change the fact that predominantly low-income Black and Brown communities in Boston had not had fair and equitable access to quality public

Jessica Tang, a middle school social studies teacher and Boston Teachers Union (BTU) executive board member at the time, had started planting the seeds for the coalition in the

years prior by putting together a community advisory committee for the union that included parents and non-profit leaders. Along the way, she met Carlos Rojas, a student representative on the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC) when he was on a panel at the Boston Area Teacher Social Justice Conference. Rojas played a pivotal role in bringing students into the coalition fold from the beginning, which is a challenge for most coalitions. “At that time, Boston was going through a huge round of budget cuts, everyone was outraged. We saw a strategic opportunity to coalesce and fight together. The students orientation led us to agree to be a part of this. We had very little money but a lot of heart,” explained Rojas.

In the years that followed, BEJA beat back budget cuts and a “unified enrollment” proposal for Boston Public Schools that would have closed schools based on an unproven methodology for determining under-enrollment of students. According to



Bill Schiebler, who was supporting the coalition through his role at the American Federation of Teachers, the group stabilized when they found a way to help fund the other organizations, and when national unions and BTU started to give more money and resources. Funding brought their organizing to a larger public audience through the development of a website and newsletters that broadened the reach of their organizing work, and they started to build out a coalition structure for making internal decisions. The win that solidified their reputation, however, came in 2016 when BEJA and the newly formed Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance (MEJA) worked together to defeat a state ballot measure, “Question 2,” that would have lifted a cap and opened the floodgates for new charter schools.

“We had a good basic campaign structure led by people who do that work, but we made room in that campaign structure for lots of flexibility and individuals could pick up the work in the way that they wanted to do it. People were setting up town halls, debates, asking for ground so they could canvas; there was a chaos to the structure that allowed folks to step into the work without having to follow specific rules.”

MEJA was made up of state and regional groups including AFT-Massachusetts, Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA), NAACP Northeast Regional Office, Jobs with Justice, and Citizens for Public Schools who formed the coalition in 2015 to talk about charter schools and high-stakes testing. The following year, MEJA partners included BEJA and similarly organized local tables across the state to unite against the ballot measure. Massachusetts Jobs with Justice (JWJ), an original partner with BEJA, played an integral role in helping build those tables. They had relationships in the Gateway Cities of Massachusetts—economically struggling, mid-sized cities across that state where industry had once “offered residents a good job and a ‘gateway’ to the American Dream.”⁴ “The education reform people were always trying to push their policies in those cities. So with MTA [Massachusetts Teachers Association], we started working together informally on relationships and campaigns. JWJ had the entree into the immigrant and black communities that the union did not have,” explained Russ Davis, former Executive Director of Massachusetts JWJ.

Another critical factor in the formation of MEJA, was electing Barbara Madeloni as President of the Massachusetts Teacher Association (MTA), an affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA) and the largest educators union in the state, in 2014. Running as a rank-and-file candidate, Madeloni upset the tradition of electing the sitting vice-president. At the time, she represented a new voice in the educator union movement, was against neo-liberal reforms and was ready to fight back.

When Question 2 was introduced, the coalitions recognized the urgent need to fight the ballot measure. With funding from the national unions (AFT and NEA), the coalition unified around a campaign to stop it, even though they faced an uphill battle. Polls in March of 2016 showed a 20 point lead to approve the measure. They led a

statewide campaign that deeply involved students and parents. “We had a good basic campaign structure led by people who do that work, but we made room in that campaign structure for lots of flexibility and individuals could pick up the work in the way that they wanted to do it. People were setting up town halls, debates, asking for ground so they could canvas; there was a chaos to the structure that allowed folks to step into the work without having to follow specific rules,” explains Madeloni.

The deep engagement in the campaign gave them the power they needed to defeat the measure. According to Tang, “it made us a family—it was the biggest victory we had and we felt like we saved public education in Massachusetts.” In 2018, Jacobin reported on a leaked report commissioned by Walton Education Coalition regarding the Question 2 defeat:

“...a postelection survey commissioned by Walton ‘showed that just over a third of Massachusetts parents (34%) and just under a third (32%) of No voters spoke with teachers about Question 2.’ Unfortunately, the study reports, ‘voters sided with those they knew, and trusted, best’ — that is, with teachers. The report complains ‘that the MTA took such a hard turn. ... Teachers were fiercely activated ... [they] appeared all over the state to voice their opposition.’ In the past, the report lamented, ‘MTA was amenable in some cases to doing positive things.’ Things were different now: ‘Barbara Madeloni was positioned as a rabble rousing, outsider, activist, leftist. That’s how she ran and how she governed ... She’s a very ideological and uncompromising person. She’s Occupy Wall Street and into claiming that education reform is all about corporatization.’ In addition to heightened member involvement, the Walton report complained: ‘Much to the surprise of the Yes on 2 campaign, the teachers’ union spent an unprecedented amount of money. In previous campaigns the unions spent around \$5 million, but in 2016 the No side spent close to \$15 million.’”⁵

The victory helped solidify BEJA and MEJA as formidable coalitions. In 2019, they also organized to help pass the Students Opportunity Act, which is intended to equitably fund schools over a seven year time period. They have both evolved into autonomous entities with their own staff and organizers, regularly bringing together organizational partners and families to lead on a vision for public schools in their city and state. Since the pandemic, MEJA has worked to develop a strategic plan and establish a more definitive coalition structure, according to their Executive Director, Vatsady Sivongxay. In addition to state-wide campaigns, the coalition provides support to local tables across the state organizing around local issues. BEJA has been organizing around the “BEJA Pledge,” a list of basics that every school should have.⁶ According to BEJA Executive Director Ruby Reyes, “the first win around the BEJA pledge was a full time nurse for each school (right before the pandemic), then a family liaison for every school, and then an increase in counselors and school psychologists.” They also successfully organized for reading specialists and eight restorative justice coaches. In 2022, BEJA fought back an effort to put Boston Public Schools into receivership. Other issues on their agenda include improvements to special education and the continuation of fighting school budget cuts and school closures.

Reclaim Our Schools Los Angeles

Los Angeles, California

In 2014, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) brought groups together to explore what came to be Reclaim Our Schools Los Angeles. Newly elected UTLA leadership had made a commitment to repairing relationships with community organizations that previous leadership had let erode. They hosted a community round table with a number of LA's progressive community organizations to analyze education issues and look for areas of agreement. At the time, Sharon Delugach was helping UTLA through this process as part of her role with the American Federation of Teachers. The report, *Building the Power to Reclaim Our Schools* describes this process:



“Hoping to form a local AROS [Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools] table, Delugach and UTLA leaders convened several meetings with a range of LA’s progressive community and issue-based groups. Representatives from AROS, the NEA, and the AFT helped facilitate these early conversations where a core set of principles were floated as a way to gauge consensus...

“...After months of talking, four organizations formed Reclaim Our Schools LA (ROSLA). The anchor groups included UTLA, The Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), and Students Deserve—a youth-led group that had its roots in the Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ). Together, they agreed to build a movement for broad-based education reform that would engage teachers, students, parents, and community members and build power to force real change in LAUSD. To strengthen the capacity of these partners, UTLA made the decision to give annual programmatic funding to the other three anchor groups, and the NEA, CTA, AFT, and CFT followed suit.”⁷

Once identified, the anchor groups spent over a year meeting and developing the coalition's first campaign. With the help of researchers at LAANE and UTLA, they released their platform in December of 2016 in a document called *A Vision to Support Every Student*. The following year they began to implement their platform by training promising leaders from each of their organizations four focal points: Community Schools, school funding, anti-privatization, and anti-criminalization of youth, all through the lens of racial justice. At the same time, they worked together to win the adoption of a Community Schools Resolution with the Los Angeles Unified School District.

The coalition's power was most evident, however, when the coalition agreed to use a "Bargaining for the Common Good" strategy in the 2017-2019 UTLA negotiations.



The strategy is about bringing "common good" demands or proposals to contract negotiations that will have a wider community benefit and using community leverage in negotiations to win.⁸ With this strategy and significant community pressure on the district during negotiations and the January 2019 strike, they were able to win a more powerful process to implement community schools that included UTLA and ROSLA representation on the steering committee; an Immigrant Defense Office in LAUSD to help families; a Green Space MOU that led to the creation of green space at schools; and the elimination of student searches at an initial set of schools that would eventually grow to be district wide. In the strike, they also won enforceable class size caps, victories against privatization, special education improvements, and salary increases.

In a *Convergence* article in 2023, Alex Caputo-Pearl, former UTLA President describes the power of the coalition during the strike:

"In the lead-up to the strike, Reclaim created "Committee of 100" meetings for parent, youth, and community leaders to develop organizing skills. During the strike, hundreds participated in the Reclaim "La Escuelita," a daily meeting of parents, youth, and community members that engaged political education and planned daily actions—among them mass protests at the houses of School Board members, the LAUSD Superintendent, and billionaire privatizers.

"Trust among the Reclaim anchor organizations grew even firmer when UTLA refused to back away from Common Good demands under the pressures of strike negotiations, and when UTLA members saw daily viral videos of parents, youth, and community leading militant solidarity actions. Many of the parent, youth, and community leaders who developed skills

in the Committee of 100, La Escuelita, and strike actions are now leaders in Reclaim's latest structural evolution — parent/youth/community/educator teams in each of the seven LAUSD board districts."⁹

Today, Georgia Flowers, UTLA NEA Vice President and ROSLA steering committee member, says ROSLA has "built power so we can influence and force concessions in spaces we couldn't before." She explains that Reclaim is about "creating the community that we want to have. It's looking at all the things we see that are maybe wrong with the world and as a coalition doing our part to improve our communities." Housing justice, climate justice, and supporting students against school policing are additional areas where the anchor organizations support each other's organizing.

The Schools Our Students Deserve Coalition San Antonio, Texas

In 2017, when Alejandra Lopez was a rank and file member of the San Antonio Alliance, the school she worked at was slated to be turned into a charter school. Additionally, the Superintendent was pushing partnerships with outside entities—a form of privatization. Lopez traveled with other union leaders to participate in an institute led by the leaders and staff at the St. Paul Federation of Educators focused on “Bargaining for the Common Good” and how to take steps to develop a narrative, local structures, and community relationships. After attending the program, her union local started to craft a narrative and connect with parents and other organizations who felt the same frustrations about school privatization.



It was clear that teachers, parents and school workers were frustrated with school closures and takeovers and eager to work together. The early years of building relationships paid off when the pandemic hit, the coalition really started to coalesce around an organizing campaign to influence the COVID-19 response. The success of their pandemic response organizing reinforced the power of their coalition.

They immediately went to work to write a platform—“The Schools Our Students Deserve.” They launched as an official coalition and ran school board candidates.

“Doing the work together is what builds relationships and capacity,” explains Lopez. The group didn’t take a lot of time to formalize their coalition within a couple of months, early participants identified priorities and then strategically started to identify organizations who were aligned with their platform. They formed The Schools Our Students Deserve Coalition.¹⁰

“Doing the work together is what builds relationships and capacity.”

Together they invested in a field program for the school board elections and won 1 of the 4 races. Sarah Sorensen, from the parent organization Our Schools San Antonio, had organized with the coalition through the pandemic, and with their support ran for and won her seat on the school board. Then they shifted to a fight against school

closures, but after doing an honest assessment of their power, they knew they couldn’t stop the train completely and were only able to save some schools from closure. They leveraged their losses in the fight and used the campaign as an opportunity to make more connections with parents and build momentum.

In 2021, with the support of the National Education Association Strategic Campaigns Institute,¹¹ they started to formalize their structure. The Schools Our Students Deserve Coalition continues to work on policy changes related to their priorities and regularly review the platform to refine it. In a non-collective bargaining state, they have been able to leverage their community organizing power to develop a more responsive relationship with the district Superintendent through the “meet and confer” process—giving them an influential voice in district decision making. According to Lopez, “We have been able to move to a culturally responsive and sustaining framework district wide, the union runs professional development for it and all teachers are expected to teach through this lens. We also pushed apprenticeship programs with our coalition partners, the Laborers Local 1095, who now have a member doing a program at the high school level. Our partner, Move Texas, a civic engagement for youth organization, now has access to high schools to do voter registration for seniors.”

Justice 4 Oakland Students Oakland, California

In 2018, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) elected new leadership from the internal Build Our Power caucus. Keith Brown, the new President, and his leadership team demonstrated that there was a new commitment from OEA towards working for equity in the schools. By electing Brown, a Black man, the union now had leadership that was more reflective of the student body racial demographics. Due to OEA's new commitment to equity, Justice 4 Oakland Students (J4OS), a coalition of community groups, invited the Union to become an official partner.

J4OS had started a few years earlier without union representation and had been campaigning against a Superintendent who was implementing policies that eroded the outcomes of previous advocacy work they had done on behalf of black, immigrant, and indigenous students and families. In 2016, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) also announced that they were going to implement deep budget cuts and close schools.

The coalition started to grow and collectively they demanded a community voice in budget decisions, a delay in any cuts, and, when the Superintendent announced he was leaving, a public engagement process for the selection of a new Superintendent. They won a delay in cuts and the school board hired a local candidate to be the new Superintendent, another demand they made as a coalition. Unfortunately, they were not able to completely stop school closures that started in the 2017-18 school year.

According to Pecolia Manigo from Bay Area PLAN, the pivotal turning points for the coalition were having union leadership involved, adopting a plan to use “Bargaining for the Common Good” strategies, and a renewed national conversation at

AFT and NEA about being in coalition with community that provided a path to a more trusting and stronger relationship between coalition partners and OEA.

The first year OEA became involved with the coalition, they were also in bargaining with OUSD. The Union kept the coalition up-to-date on their demands and discussions with the district, which was a change in practice from previous leadership who had



chosen not to share details about bargaining. They also organized toward a strike. Manigo credits the 2019 OEA strike for unifying the coalition and showing the partners what was possible. “It helped build the coalition’s awareness of how far we could take the city, it flexed everyone’s power and ability to understand inside and outside strategy (critical for a coalition trying to advance systems change), and it taught us that we didn’t have the power on the [school] board that we needed.”

After the strike, the coalition worked on supporting school board candidates, resulting in the election of four endorsed candidates; they worked with Oakland Youth Coalition to pass Measure QQ giving 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote for the office of the school board director in 2020; they supported the statewide effort on Prop 15–Schools and Community First, which unfortunately failed in 2020; and they worked to stop the closure of majority Black schools by naming Anti-Black racism in the district’s school closure policy. The later work eventually turned into the campaign to pass the Reparations for Black Students Resolution. The resolution set up a multi-million dollar fund and the formation of the Black Students and Families Thriving Task Force, a task force to name priorities and make recommendations for system-wide solutions and monitor progress in eliminating structural anti-Blackness and rebuilding systems within Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) through 2026. This led to winning OEA contract language for reparations for Black students and Teacher on Special Assignment (TSA) positions at school sites that are intended to help improve student outcomes by providing teachers with more time for planning and collaboration. Moving forward, Justice 4 Oakland Students plans on working with the community to develop more demands they can bring to negotiations as part of a “Bargaining for the Common Good” strategy.

H.E.A.L. Together and Tennessee For All Tennessee

Political polarization has expanded the threats to public schools beyond privatization. Communities face book-banning and prohibiting instruction materials in attempts to erase the truth about race and our country's racial history; initially a call to reject "critical race theory." Threats such as restricting bathroom access for transgender students or prohibiting conversations about sexual orientation and gender identity present themselves in the form of legislation and school board policies. Together these threats are often framed as "culture wars" and they're primarily bred in rural and suburban areas, where strong educational justice coalitions do not necessarily exist in the communities.

"As we were bottom-lining the voucher campaign, another arm of the coalition was bottom-lining a campaign on the grocery tax. We were able to say, we have public schools that are literally falling apart, state actors were saying we don't have the money to fund them. At the same time, we have corporations getting tax incentives and not contributing to the local tax base and we have this regressive grocery tax that hits working families. We were able to tie those together in some simple messaging—and we've been able to see that message click."

In response, Race Forward in partnership with NYU Metro Center and the Schott Foundation started the initiative H.E.A.L. Together (Honest Education, Action & Leadership) with the goal of driving support to the field to counteract these attacks. By providing training to volunteer leaders, research and data analysis, communications, coaching and funding, H.E.A.L. supports grassroots campaigns on many issues in school districts across the country. In order to expand their geographic reach with few staff, H.E.A.L. NC developed a distributed organizing model called Public School Strong.

This model of organizing is generally a horizontal network of volunteers that lead autonomous groups that organize toward the same goals. This model works well in situations like these where the threat is clear (banning words, books, and bathrooms), is easy to understand, and triggers a deep sense of urgency that motivates folks to organize to fight back. Public School Strong is a unique education-focused distributed organizing model that trains parents, educators and community leaders to be champions for education equity at their school boards, and connects PSS teams in dozens of districts across a state for joint learning and campaigns.

Tennessee For All is a coalition of seventeen organizations that has partnered with H.E.A.L. to put this model into action with their Public School Strong campaign. They

focused their ongoing campaign to fully fund public schools on defeating a bill that would create a statewide voucher program that the Governor announced in 2023. Across the state they focused on pressuring local school boards to pass resolutions against vouchers by training participants to speak and attend meetings, and were able to pass anti-voucher resolutions in 70 counties. They held statewide and local events to bring parents, educators, and community together to talk about the issue, helped folks understand what was going on and the resource-depleting impact of vouchers, and to connect about the great need for more allocations of funds and resources to the existing public schools. The Governor's plan failed, thanks to their efforts.

Tennessee For All builds power to target bad corporate actors in the state and cast a positive vision for what they want in their public institutions. One of the positives of their coalition, from the perspective of Austin Sauerbrei of Statewide Organizing for Community Empowerment (SOCM), is the structure of having specific organizations lead different parts of the work, playing to the strengths of each member organizations. Sauerbrei explained that their organization (SOCM) spearheads the public school campaign team for Tennessee For All, but the work, like the school board training, happens across the organizations. They have multiple campaign teams working at once: "As we were bottom-lining the voucher campaign, another arm of the coalition was bottom-lining a campaign on the grocery tax. We were able to say, we have public schools that are literally falling apart, state actors were saying we don't have the money to fund them. At the same time, we have corporations getting tax incentives and not contributing to the local tax base and we have this regressive grocery tax that hits working families. We were able to tie those together in some simple messaging—and we've been able to see that message click," said Sauerbrei.



Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools

One overarching connection these coalitions have is their relationship with the national coalition, Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS).¹² For the purposes of this report, we focused on coalitions operating on a local scale. However, individuals doing educational justice organizing valued having a national connection and opportunities to work together on a larger scale through AROS.



Founded in 2013, AROS was created to help build the national movement for educational justice and to be a force to shift the narrative around public education by highlighting success and lifting up community solutions over corporate and legislative mandates. It is a coalition of national unions and community organizations with local and state tables across the country. In an interview with the Schott Foundation, AROS National Coalition Director Moira Kaleida said the following about the coalitions' role:

"AROS' unique role is the ability to bring many different groups into one space. We don't typically have spaces where NEA and AFT organizers can come together — let alone in collaboration with community organizations, faith leaders, parents, and students. We all have differences in perspectives, but what unites us is a goal of protecting and transforming public education. And we do that by looping in labor, community, parents, and students and creating a coalition led by the people on the ground."¹³

AROS participants agree that public schools are the heart of a strong democracy. Fighting to preserve and shape them into equitable institutions requires a multi-faceted effort that involves a deep and diverse base. That can only be created through multiple organizations working together in coalition or alignment in school districts across the country.

Common Coalition Elements that Contributed to Success

Despite having much more in common than separates them, organizations and organized labor do not have a long and deep history of collaboration. Moreover, the Right has worked diligently to demonize teacher unions and to divide them from the communities that they serve. During the course of interviews with participants, we asked them to share what ingredients were most important to the success of coalitions based on their experiences. The following are the key elements most frequently identified.



COMMITTED LEADERSHIP

Organizers and leaders in educational justice and other labor-community coalition spaces agreed that successful coalitions are composed of organizational leaders (both labor and community) who dedicate resources and time to develop relationships with each other.

For community organizations this is usually par for the course; for union leaders, making a commitment to develop relationships with outside organizations requires more intentionality. The 2018 report, “Keeping Students First: Building Community Labor Partnerships for Strong Schools,” acknowledged that in the labor-community partnership cases it reviewed, the relationships that were built started with a “conscious shift on the part of the union.” Union leaders had to be deliberate about welcoming partnerships and indicate their importance to the union’s strategic plans.¹⁴

The educational justice coalitions reviewed for this project are additional examples

“The union has to be committed and have a strategic view as to why it is important [to form coalition] overall, what the key benefits will be, and know there will be external and internal struggle.”

of how union leadership is key to igniting powerful coalitions. The educator unions involved all had recently elected leadership that was committed to social justice unionism. Academic research also supports this, finding an increase in staff and member involvement when union leaders had “an ideological buy-in” to deep coalition building. Absent that mindset, unions were less likely to invest in working collaboratively with community organizations. When “narrowly focused leaders” did engage in coalitions it was from an “opportunistic perspective only, seeing coalitions as merely a tactical device for immediate gain.”¹⁵

Commitment at the top, however, is only a start. Norine Gutekanst from CTU explains, “You need visionary leadership and you need to understand what the other organizations want and fight for that in your work.” Unions have to make an effort to build mutual respect with community organizations and this takes time. In Los Angeles, UTLA leadership spent months reforging relationships with community leaders before forming ROSLA. “The union has to be committed and have a strategic view as to why it is important overall, what the key benefits will be, and know there will be external and internal struggle,” says Alex Caputo Pearl, former President of UTLA.

Furthermore, for long lasting and sustainable relationships to develop, there has to be efforts to go deeper into the membership of all organizations involved. Internal work on developing an understanding of why these relationships exist, how they meet the interests of the organization, and how groups are building power together should be part of the organizational plan. For unions, this should include engaging the executive board, building leaders, rank and file members, and staff in these conversations. Equally, community organization staff, leaders, and members need to engage in a similar process.

Initial coalition work should incorporate these goals of building relationships and

building trust. Easy first steps can include joint education on issues or organizing tactics, small actions, taking time to learn about each other's organizations, or socializing together. This was important for Bridget Murphy from Palenque LSNA in Chicago, "The number one thing was relationship building—different educational organizers in the city were able to build relationships with each other, which might not have happened without GEM [Grassroots Education Movement]. It was a space where an organizer could come in and meet people. Also, it was very valuable to get to know other parts of the city. Jitu [Brown, the education organizer at Kenwood Oakdale Community Organization] led a bus tour with different spots around their neighborhood and we saw where schools were closed. Understanding the city as a whole came out of our work together."

Greg Nammacher from SEIU Local 26 warns that only having the buy-in of, or meetings with top leaders can stall the work. He suggests that organizations identify who will be driving the work in the field and create space for them to plan and work together. In the Twin Cities, Nammacher has specifically led alignment work. An alignment table is bringing different organizations together who have a shared vision for building power to line up their individual campaigns and coordinate instead of collectively planning and engaging in one campaign, distinguishing it from coalition work. Progressive organizations and unions have aligned their campaign calendars, and in some instances targets, to strengthen their visibility and power. The most recent alignment in 2024, brought their bases together for a week of action that included joint training and support for each other's actions which included protests and strikes. Communication and organized planning between the organizers and members who were driving the work at each organization was critical to successful alignment.

"Even when it is uncomfortable, let's learn and be willing to keep the lines of communication open....Even though we had disagreements, we didn't abandon from each other. Those kinds of binding ties are important, they are difficult."

Ideally, and arguably most critical for developing a deep level of commitment, union leaders must also have a serious dedication to building an organizing union. In order for unions to be strong partners in a coalition or an alignment table, committed leadership needs to include a commitment not only to working with the community but to organizing its own members regularly on internal issues as well. Unions that organize around issues members care about can more quickly build a strong base that understands collective action and power building intuitively. Giving member leaders the training to identify organizing issues and the tools to organize against a bad boss or a harmful policy lays the foundation for organizing on a larger scale.

Finally, all leaders should be steadfast on achieving social, racial, and economic justice in their community by thinking about how their members' self-interest is tied to the self-interest of their students' families and/or their community. All organizations

harm to different communities. In order to move forward, leaders will need to acknowledge such harm and work to repair relationships.



Committed leadership and developing long-lasting relationships can set the stage for accountability between organizations as they work to achieve justice. “Even when it is uncomfortable, let’s learn and be willing to keep the lines of communication open,” says Jay Travis from KOCO and GEM in Chicago, “Even though we had disagreements, we didn’t abandon from each other. Those kinds of binding ties are important, they are difficult.”

With leadership committed to achieving racial, social, and economic justice, the next step is creating a shared vision with partners that is grounded in those ideals. A shared vision crafts a broader narrative about coalition identity and goals, and counteracts unproductive conceptions of labor unions being solely focused on their own self-interest. Experienced organizers and leaders suggest cooperative discussion and debate to outline what your group hopes to achieve. In some instances, a core group will develop a clear vision and platform that is politically aligned prior to inviting in other organizations. If other organizations want to be part of the coalition, they have to commit to the platform. Clarity of vision is important for grounding your work, for public facing purposes, and to make sure all parties are on the same page. It is possible that during these discussions, organizations may realize they are not in agreement and some may step aside or adjustments and compromises may need to occur. Being clear up front will hopefully prevent more complicated divisions from emerging in the coalition down the line.

Once a vision is discussed, it can be used to start doing an analysis of local power structures by asking questions like: who has the power to make decisions that will achieve this vision? Who will actively work to prevent this vision and why? What powerful people and/or organizations do we need to convince that our vision is good for our community? And, once you review current power structures and identify allies

and adversaries, what is our path to power to achieve this vision? As Madeline Talbot from Chicago puts it, “Building an organization based on taking power is far more important than anything.” Doing a power analysis of local and/or state structures helps to identify targets, weaknesses in the power structure, tactics, and ultimately sound strategy.

Organizers also advised that each organization figure out its own power analysis and how being part of the alliance builds on that power. Labor and community organizations bring different forms of power to the table, working together can increase that power. Be honest about where the ultimate power lies and what can actually move structures and secure change. In many instances power strategy may include a strike. Withholding labor is the most powerful tool



labor unions have—that any worker has—so take time to consider if your coalition can wield this power or can build toward such an action.

Without a shared vision or agreed upon power analysis, an alliance can quickly drift into uncomfortable territory where disagreements start to become a deterrence to making change. Organizations that were focused on ending the school to prison pipeline who tried to align with teachers unions experienced that first hand. Youth organizer, Jonathan Stith recalls being in the room with leaders from NEA and AFT discussing school discipline with the Obama administration. As the conversation was underway, the students found it difficult to stay aligned because it became clear that the unions didn’t necessarily believe that a school to prison pipeline existed. As mentioned before, racial and social justice topics can sometimes be divisive between union members who come from varying political positions.

In New York, the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) had a positive working relationship with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City and New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). UFT has been part of organizing with AQE since it was created in 2000 to organize for the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. However, when AQE was not willing to compromise on the integrity of the “Solutions Not Suspension” (SNS) bill, the union distanced itself from them. They decreased collaboration and resource sharing.

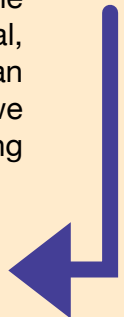
The SNS coalition continued to push forward without UFT’s direct partnership, working to clarify the bill’s needs. Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari, Co-Executive Director of AQE reflects, “When it worked, it worked well. Over the last two years, we’ve had more meaningful conversations with NYSUT, especially under the new leadership of

Melinda Person, and we've re-engaged with UFT. Now, our focus is on what we can do together—fighting for smaller class sizes and pushing back against privatization. With challenges looming in 2025, we all must show up with greater courage, including the unions.”

Indeed, experienced coalition organizers interviewed found that the strongest, longest lasting coalitions came together when there was a shared ideology among coalition partners who had engaged bases of members. Other coalition leaders were clear that managing expectations is critical when working with unions—particularly expectations about the depth of your coalition work and the length of time you may continue to partner. Many folks repeated the phrase, “no permanent enemies, no permanent friends.” However, not everyone agrees with this sentiment. Madeline Talbott, a seriously accomplished community organizer over the course of decades, writes,

“Ultimately, we need to build trust across all levels of organizations in the movement: directors, staff, leaders, members. If you are fighting for racial, economic, and social justice, there are permanent sides. Of course, we can establish a temporary alliance with an enemy for a pragmatic goal, and we can have a terminal falling out with an ally. But there are sides, and knowing who is on which side is critical to our success.”¹⁶

Example Coalition Platforms and Visions Power Mapping Resources



VALUES-FOCUSED and CAMPAIGN-CENTERED

Even when all organizations are on the same side, it is not uncommon to hear about experiences with coalitions that struggled because they remained reactive and failed to lead strategic campaigns when fighting for policies and solutions to problems. Many folks interviewed stressed the importance of avoiding this trap by ensuring all organizations are indeed committed to running issue campaigns and are ready to mobilize their base of members. “Doing the work together builds trust, builds good will, and makes the other things easier to do together,” explains Alejandra Lopez from the San Antonio Alliance and Schools Our Students Deserve San Antonio. Like others, she talks about how draining it can be to spend time on crafting a vision or platform. Folks agree, make sure most of your energy is put into organizing a campaign or series of campaigns that have clear demands and solutions to the problems you're fighting. Muni Citrin from the California Teachers Association put it succinctly: “The only way to build a coalition is to have a campaign in common to start building the coalition. It's hard to imagine building it without a campaign.”

In addition to being campaign focused, successful coalition work is centered around shared values –beliefs and principles of what is important and how you will act

together— and ideas —policies to fight for and solutions to problems— that build your campaign or series of campaigns. Jay Travis emphasized the importance of being values focused, “My mind goes back to the folks who were foundational to the fight, their wisdom around why they were being attacked, wisdom about gentrification—they didn’t need to be in meetings with leaders to know what was happening in their community. We have to honor the perspective that people bring to the table when we are shoulder to shoulder in the fight. When we don’t do that, that’s when we get away from values.” In Chicago and other educational justice coalitions, this meant honoring the experiences of the Black and Brown families and communities that were impacted the most by the privatization efforts.

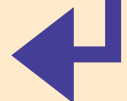


Campaigning means your values need to include a willingness to fight and mobilize a base to engage. “If you are afraid of a fight and you don’t have the capacity to punch, it won’t be a breakthrough experience—it will become a narrative war and it won’t be a base engaging fight,” says Greg Nammacher (SEIU Local 26). And make sure your campaign plans are doable. Molly Sweeny from 482 Forward in Michigan stresses the importance of having clear collective plans, “simplify your plan and don’t try to do too much.”

Furthermore, union contract negotiations can be a good vehicle for coalescing coalitions. Some of the most successful coalitions used a contract campaign, and in some cases a strike, to make shared demands using a “Bargaining for the Common Good” strategy.¹⁷ These coalitions found the contract campaign and strike transformational by increasing everyone’s awareness of the power they had being in coalition together and identifying key work for the future (e.g. electing new school board members). The strikes in Los Angeles and Oakland were definitely key in moving the coalition forward. Strikes were also part of the alignment campaigns in the Twin Cities. As mentioned previously, this is the ultimate tool for building power and getting demands met—it’s important to take the possibility seriously while not shying away.

In situations where a strike is not possible or too risky (such as non-collective bargaining states), make sure the campaign and coalition remains relevant and don’t be afraid to change course if it’s draining your resources. Julio Lopez Varona from the Center for Popular Democracy advises, “when you are in a coalition you need to ask—what is the coalition doing to advance the work? Sometimes [coalitions] become fake validators for fake work and it can be a vicious circle for folks involved.”

Campaign Planning Materials



BASE BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS AS COALITION PARTNERS

Building a coalition of organizations with shared values and the ability to run an escalation campaign requires a solid base of members who are ready to organize and mobilized to engage. Having members who are impacted by the issues, have relationships with others who are impacted, and who want to fight to make change is the heart and soul of a campaign. The power in a coalition lies in having a base that can mobilize to show strength, that can disrupt and show discontent and not just talk about it. Many of the participants in this report would argue that engaged membership is the most critical element of a successful coalition and campaign. They also note that many community organizations have lost some of the discipline and rigor of base building. Instead there has been a shift toward simply mobilizing and/or focusing on advocacy instead of organizing, at the detriment to deeper connections and building power. Coalitions can support the concerted effort to re-engage members within the field.

In the case of the educational justice coalition work, the need to focus on base building has been especially true when fighting well funded school privatizers whose aims are



to syphon public resources toward opening new charter schools or using vouchers to fund private schools with public money. Billionaire neoliberal privatizers and right-wing conservatives have put money into fake parent organizations in order to create a facade of popular support for educational reform efforts; groups such as the National Parents Union, Moms for Liberty, Stand for Children, Educators for Excellence, Teach for America, The 1776 Project, Moms for America, and Parents Defending Education, to name a few. As Diane Ravitch commented on a blog post by Maurice Cunningham about these groups, “When an alleged “grassroots,” “family-led” group of “ordinary moms” begins their existence with a budget of more than \$1 million, you can be certain there were no bake sales.”¹⁸ Calling out organizations that take this dark money and responding with force means that public school advocates have to show up in large numbers to distinguish themselves from astroturf organizations. It has to be obvious

that families strongly support protecting and maintaining their public schools. People power is the strongest defense when there is no question of being outspent by billionaires who aim to privatize and profit from our children’s education.

A coalition’s organized base should have a wide reach within their community or union universe, be engaged in political education that deepens their understanding of

the issues and power analysis, and be ready to act. Unions are historically structured to support a wide base of members through structural roles such as stewards or building representatives that are elected by members at their worksite or in their work area. These structures, when maintained and supported through regular union education and organizing efforts, also allow a union to organize widely and deeply within the membership because there are already leaders communicating and keeping members engaged and up-to-date. Labor power has declined over time because some unions have decided to focus more on servicing and they have not used their internal structures to organize and engage their base. Nonetheless, the structures are often still present to some degree and can be used to jump start organizing efforts.

Community organizations face the challenge of defining and building structures and relationships that enable them to organize both widely across the community and simultaneously deepen engagement in order to build its leadership core. They should strive to have a base of members that are not only willing to be mobilized and show up, but also members who are trained and willing to have tough conversations on issues with their neighbors, friends, and co-workers. For example, the Connecticut For All coalition works to deepen members' understanding by holding a regular Democracy School where rank and file leaders from their partner organizations align and connect across issues and campaigns.¹⁹



In many large urban areas, there are deep roots of community organizing in Black and Brown communities that are models for this work. These are also the communities most impacted by privatization of public goods, like education. Coalitions who are privileged to work with these organizations should honor the values of their members and be open to learning from their organizing experiences. Chicago is an example of a city with these organizing roots, with community organizations like KOCO and Action Now as leaders in education justice.

In locations where there is paucity of such groups, part of the coalition's plan should focus on helping each committed organization develop sound organizing and base building practices. As a union town, Detroit, Michigan residents are deeply familiar with the power of unions and the importance of maintaining public goods. Yet, many of the organizing structures that once existed in a more vibrant Detroit are no longer active. 482 Forward has made it a priority to re-establish sound organizing practices with organizations and start from building new bases that can come together. Across the country, there is a need for more base-building community organizations and unions, but this work requires foundations to fund volunteer groups to hire organizers that will increase their capacity.

Long time successful organizer Steve Kest's advice, "Make sure folks can turn out; that is power in a coalition."

SHARED COALITION POWER AND JOINT PLANNING

Shared power was a key element for anchor organizations coming together to form ROSLA. They agreed to do strategic planning together and they agreed that each organization would get one vote to ensure decisions were made in an equitable way. Joint strategic planning, joint execution of campaign plans, and joint debriefing along the way are key elements of sharing power in a coalition.

For Kampala Taiz-Rancifer, strategy discussions with the Justice 4 Oakland Students coalition were important because they helped draw lines around what each organization was willing to do. Others interviewed stressed that it was equally as important to participate in both campaign execution and action debriefs in order to continue the shared development of a joint analysis that goes into decision making.

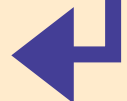
“Recognize that everybody at the table has power, it may look different, but we have power that we bring to the table.”

Sharing power requires deliberate effort. When community organizations and labor unions come together, many community organizations have seen the power dynamics quickly skew toward the unions. It makes sense that this happens, unions are likely to bring more resources and capacity to the table. Some community organizers shared examples of unions who started to make strategic decisions about joint campaigns away from the coalition space simply because they didn’t want

to continue to share power and had resources to do what they wanted. Those actions ended up hurting their relationships with partners. Billy Easton, former executive director of ROSLA explained that their coalition model managed the power dynamics between community-led organizations and UTLA, “Even if there were conflicts, there was an overall sense of moving in the same direction and everyone had an equal voice.” Arelia Valdivia, the current executive director of ROSLA advises coalitions to create an independent decision making process that allows everyone to participate, so the process doesn’t just become an extension of the union.

Coalitions regularly receive the advice: acknowledge power dynamics upfront and discuss what power each group has so you can figure out how to collaborate as equally as possible. Be clear about what contributions each organization can make and what barriers they might have with inside and outside strategies that the coalition may consider. Be deliberate about avoiding skewed dynamics by setting up structures for voting and decision making that are clear and give equal voice as much as possible. Just because a union has more members and resources, does not automatically mean they should have more decision making power at the table. If unions need the community to win the improvements the coalition is seeking, it is important to have equal voice and power at the table. As Jitu Brown said, “Recognize that everybody at the table has power, it may look different, but we have power that we bring to the table.”

Example Coalition Structures and Agreements



IDENTIFIED STRUCTURE

The coalitions analyzed for this project have taken on a range of different structures based on their local capacity, relationships, and context. What is important is that all coalition groups are clear and in agreement on the structure and expectations. Why is clarity around structure and expectations important? Because coalition work is messy. Clarity is a tool for working through the messy challenges of multiple organizations with different cultures and practices trying to work together. Clarity is particularly important around these specific elements: your coalition goals (what do you want to achieve), how each organization is going to participate (what power and resources does each organization contribute), criteria for decision making (who gets a vote, how many votes, or will you operate by consensus), and the structure that you will work within (are there different levels of decision making or anchor organizations making strategic decisions for a larger group). Some coalitions create written agreements to outline their structure and procedures. Others have found that putting together written agreements distracts from the goals and isn't necessary—as long as you do the work to build trusting relationships. One key tip, written agreement or not, is to have clarity around how money will be handled. Whatever the formation, interviewees found some level of success when most of the key elements of coalition work identified in this report existed.

COALITION COORDINATOR and BRIDGE BUILDERS

Coalition work is not easy and takes time and interpersonal capacity to manage. Having a coordinator who can facilitate meetings, bring partners together, and help resolve internal tensions is a huge asset to any coalition that can afford one. “It takes a person who has the tools to build relationships across race and generations—somebody that everyone can respect. It can be difficult to be principled in that way, especially if you have your own biases. [It takes] someone with emotional intelligence, equipped with support and networks,” says Carlos Rojas who was a co-founder of BEJA and MEJA and previously an interim director at BEJA. Other organizers and coalition participants agree. Rudy Gozvalves from ROSLA believes a coordinator is important and that they have to be strong so they don't get eclipsed by the participating organizations. Austin Sauerbrei stressed that “finding the right person to fill the role is essential.” Ruby Reyes from BEJA

“It takes a person who has the tools to build relationships across race and generations—somebody that everyone can respect. It can be difficult to be principled in that way, especially if you have your own biases. [It takes] someone with emotional intelligence, equipped with support and networks.”

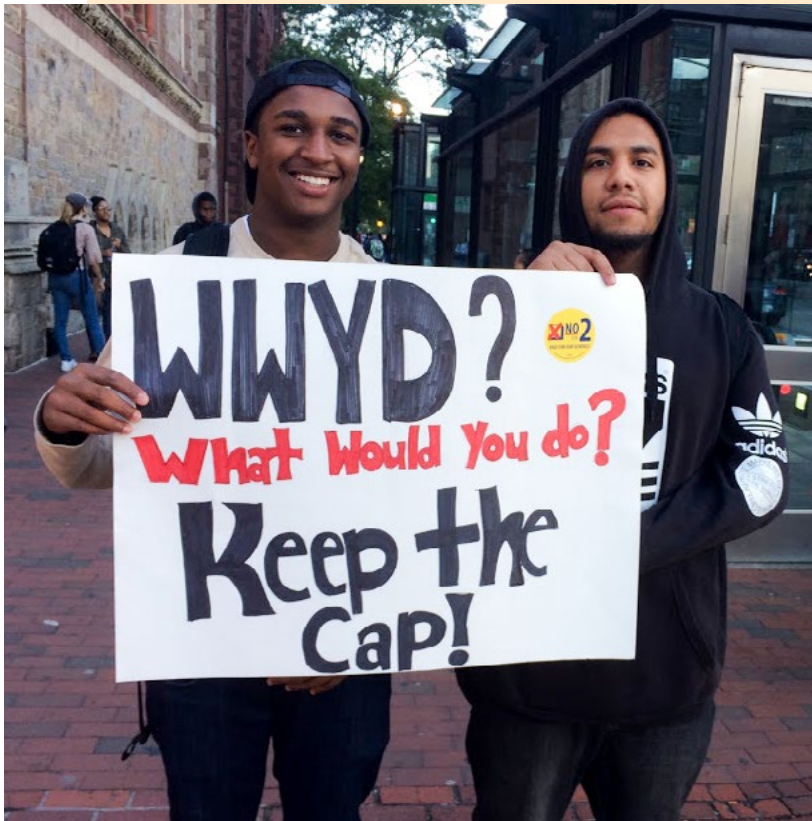
added that coordinator may not be a strong enough role because it doesn't get the respect that the work warrants, instead she advocates for an executive director role to manage power dynamics. She explains that a coordinator is likely to be removed from important decisions about fundraising, budgets, and organization infrastructure or will be doing director level work but not fairly compensated or treated as such.

In addition to the practical coordination and facilitation, it is helpful for the coordinator, or somebody working closely with them, to have a dual understanding of union and community organizing work so they can act as a bridge builder to help participants better understand each other and figure out how to work together. Fred Rose introduces the concept of "Bridge Builders" in his book *Coalitions across the Class Divide: Lessons from the Labor, Peace, and Environmental Movements*. Bridge builders are individuals who have experiences with, or enough understanding of, both labor and progressive movements that help bring organizations together. They are comfortable communicating and "dialoguing across movements", and can easily articulate the common goal everyone is working toward.²⁰ Research shows that they can help translate the different organizational cultures and strategies and help build trust among coalitional partners.²¹ When Bruce Nissen took a closer look at labor-community

coalitions in South Florida, he found that all of the coalitions in that area "...depended heavily on 'bridge builders' who share both labor and community viewpoints, and who actively work to bring labor together with potential non-labor partners."²²

Will Tucker from Jobs to Move America in Alabama explained that they too have key people who span both worlds and who bring those worlds together—they are younger people who have good relationships with local leaders and rank and file union members. Others interviewed saw themselves playing that role for the coalition. Sharon Delugach initially coordinated ROSLA while in her role at AFT—she came into the role with years of experience in both community and labor organizing. She shared stories about ensuring there was a clear process involving the

union, community organizations, and stakeholders before coming to consensus and finalizing common good demands. She acted as a liaison between organizations, running interference and helping to resolve tensions when things got heated. Coalition participants agreed her role was critical to the building of ROSLA.



If a coalition doesn't have the funds for a coordinator, an organization may agree to contribute by taking on this role or a couple organizations might contribute co-coordinators. The Schools Our Students Deserve Coalition in San Antonio is an example of organizations sharing the coordinator responsibility. Sarah Sorensen says, "We would love to have a coordinator for the coalition who could hold the work together for us and that would allow for us to look for ways we could grow and to follow-up on stuff we have started." Some coalitions have tried to rotate the role among organizations, but that can come with additional challenges that might not be worth the effort. In Oakland, Kampala Taiz-Rancifer said they tried rotating, but that didn't work for very long. "There needs to be somebody who can hold it," she said. Having coordination as an assigned and on-going role for one or maybe two people, ensures consistent meeting practices and sharing of information to keep the group moving forward.

DEDICATED FUNDING AND CAPACITY

Coordinators and organizers with organizing expertise lay the groundwork for successful coalition work that moves beyond a reactive and defensive posture to a more long-term and offensive strategy. Long-term organizing requires long-term funding. This is a challenge for a majority of organizations ready to do this work, particularly smaller ones who already run on shoestring staffing and budgets. In some instances, funding for coalition work comes from participating organizations' own budgets or through grants. The biggest challenge to sustained organizing and relationship-building is finding funders who are willing to provide multi-year, sustainable support to make that happen. Many grants are awarded on an annual basis, making long-term planning challenging.

Ideally, comprehensive campaigns will have dedicated organizers from each organization, a dedicated coordinator, research and communications support, and funds for other needed resources. Nissen concluded from his research that paid staff are necessary for success, "Effectiveness of the coalitions depends heavily on their ability to mobilize enough resources to have adequate staffing. All volunteer organizations (or virtually all) never develop beyond a low level of effectiveness."²³

Unfortunately, when we look closer at education justice coalitions, this is a primary challenge to expanding these efforts. Even though public education is one of the last public goods citizens are entitled to and has a highly unionized workforce, funding for these coalitions is nowhere commensurate with the need and threat.

Families and students have a powerful voice in education justice, but they are not always adequately amplified by base building organizations with sustainable funding. When coalitions have struggled to find a strong base of support, organizing or seeking out family and student school groups has been an alternative. For example, when no

one else was organizing parents in their city, St. Paul Federation of Educators started by reaching out to school based parent groups and eventually they formed their own teacher-parent organizing team called the TIGER Team (Teaching and Inquiring about Greed, Equity, and Racism). However, school based groups are typically low on capacity and underfunded to be able to take on the level of organizing required to fully participate in coalitions. Initial funding to develop family and student organizations or additional support for organizing them is needed to ensure they have a spot at coalition tables.



Both the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers have provided some investment in supporting community coalition work over the past 10-15 years, but considering the severity of the threats, it's surprising how little these organizations have dedicated to the work. They have provided training, staff support, and small grants to locals who needed to increase capacity. More recently, however, successful coalitions reported seeing a drop in funding from their national unions. They believe this was due to support being shifted to help or encourage the development of new coalitions. But why not increase the total amount of money budgeted for both established and new coalition work instead of spreading resources thin? In many instances, assistance from state affiliates is barely mentioned, if it exists at all. Some of this could be explained by the varying degrees of how local and state unions are organized or what their relationships to each other look like or even how big the state affiliate is. Regardless, if education unions are serious about building power and partnering with communities, they have to invest beyond small grants and show a long-term commitment to power and base building. If overall spending correlates to gauge an organization's priorities, you might infer that supporting education justice coalitions was of little importance to national and state unions.

As Chris Bohner has reported, US labor unions in general maintain a large amount of cash and investments: “Net assets (assets minus liabilities) grew [by] \$2.6 billion in 2023, from \$32.7 billion in 2022 to \$35.3 billion in 2023. According to data from the Bureau of Economic Affairs, union dues are up \$871 million as of June 2024, likely continuing the trend of asset growth in 2024.”²⁴ According to LM2s, NEA’s net assets in 2022-23 were \$318.7 million. AFT’s net assets are fewer, but both organizations are strong financially and have resources to support this type of organizing. Bohner calls this “finance unionism” where unions spend far less on organizing and strikes than they collect in membership dues and invest the surplus in the financial markets.”²⁵

As one of the largest teachers union locals in the country, UTLA stands out on this front. The union made a strategic decision to support their three coalition partners by providing annual grants of \$75,000 each for the last nine years (which equates to over \$2 million). This has provided long term and sustainable funding for their community partners that has helped to increase the level of successful organizing they are able to do together in protecting their public schools.

On the other hand, in order to manage power dynamics, some argue that community organizations cannot just view their partnerships with unions as a “blank check.” When unions do provide an extensive amount of resources, it can lead to tensions. Former LAANE representative with ROSLA, Rudy Gonzalves explained their experience, “We dealt with the dynamic of UTLA being a funder of the three organizations on a few occasions. While grappling with some controversial issues, such as police free schools, everyone was aware of the power dynamics, but the grantees wanted to be honest and UTLA wanted them to be equal partners. UTLA and all grantees were very principled, and we navigated these dynamics by openly acknowledging them, dedicating time to address tensions, and struggling with the issues at hand.” Other coalition leaders strive to avoid this dynamic. If the union provides a large amount of resources there can be an expectation that they get more control. Vatsady Sivongxay, executive director of MEJA, believes that coalitions need to be committed to finding and diversifying funds for sustainability. Diversifying funds prevents the sole reliance on one organization and allows the work to advance without disruption due to changes in funding reduction or loss, staffing and leadership, or direction of funders.

“Our strategic horizon has to be broad and wide to upend the power structures.”

Diversifying income streams for educational justice coalitions, however, can be challenging. Community organizations dedicated to education justice have experienced a net decline in funding from pro-public education foundations, which has reduced their ability to allocate staff time toward building a local education justice movement. This has created an opportunity for organizations focused on education privatization, which have often succeeded due to the absence of organized resistance. This also means that community organizations participating in educational justice coalitions, who want to maintain principles that align with pro-public education work, are likely turning down potential funding streams that come from organizations that also fund privatization efforts.

In the February 2024 report, “Justice is the Foundation,” commissioned by The Schott Foundation, they examined educational philanthropy through the dual lens of racial equity and racial justice. Racial equity refers to grants aimed at closing the achievement gap between racial groups. Racial justice refers to grants that focus on empowering people to organize in their communities to change systems and structures that reinforce racial inequities. In this review they found:

“K-12 education philanthropy’s already scant investment in racial justice dropped sharply compared to 2018-2020. The \$62 million recorded in 2019-2021—just 0.3% of grantmaking—pales in comparison to the still-meager \$105 million (0.7%) in 2018-2020. Given the monumental task of addressing and solving structural racism in our schools and wider society, this funding inadequacy cannot be overstated.”²⁶

The report offers a number of action steps philanthropic organizations can take to reverse this and other trends outlined in the report, including to “commit to longer-term grant cycles to better accommodate the true pace of systemic change.” As well as: “commit to trust-based philanthropy and sustainable funding practices.” Which is good advice beyond the educational justice world and for any philanthropic funders who want to support labor-community coalition work.

Many organizational leaders shared their frustration with the mentality of funders that is too focused on immediate results (including unions who provide internal grants)—demanding quick results or stories of success that the funder could boast about. They cited that organizing to make systemic change is a longer-term project. When these demands are made by funders, organizations may compromise process and organizing principles—disrupting the path toward that change. As Ben Wilkins stated, “Our strategic horizon has to be broad and wide to upend the power structures.”

ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE FOR COALITIONS

In addition to the above elements for coalition success. Participants offered the following guidance for improving coalition dynamics:

- **Have organizational decision makers and drivers at the table.** Make sure organizational representatives at the table have some authority to take action and can lead the organizing efforts needed to accomplish your goals.
- **Dedicate time to relationship building.** Take time to build relationships with coalition partners and to identify and understand organizational differences up front. Be deliberate about creating opportunities for relationships to be built at all organizational levels, including between rank and file union membership and community members.

- **Manage your expectations.** Expect a spectrum of radicalness from organizations involved and plan accordingly. Manage your expectations of what you can work on together or seek understanding on how far each coalition partner will go in a campaign.
- **Embrace your differences.** To embrace differences and build relationships, community organizations and labor unions should take the time to learn about each other's interests and organizational operations. Community organizations should seek to understand the union's organizational self-interest, what employers they negotiate with and the nature of those relationships, the demographic make-up of the membership and their interests, the leadership of the union (do they come out of a union caucus and what is their caucus platform), and what is the level of risk the union is willing to take and where might they pull back from any organizing a coalition might pursue. Unions should seek to understand the community groups they are in coalition with by learning about the organization's interest in the issue, their organizing philosophy and practices, their membership base (who they are able to mobilize and what their interests are), how they secure funding, and the level of risk they can and are willing to take.
- **Create coalition agreements.** Create agreements that outline your values, goals, decision making procedures, and other specifics for working together as a coalition.
- **Focus your efforts.** Coalitions hoping to form longer term partnerships sometimes start out with too broad of a reach. If the umbrella is wide when identifying partners and issues, you might struggle to get campaigns moving. Broad coalitions are easily fractured and slow because some partners may not be completely aligned or have too many differences, causing a drag in decision making. Scale the scope of your work to your capacity to be successful together.

“We had people who were really good about making sure we weren’t setting people up to fail. You can have a big vision, but scale your campaign so you can have some wins. Design a campaign that is matched to your capacity and power.”

Megan Hester

Former Organizer with New York City Coalition for Educational Justice



Recommendations

In this historical moment, where we see grotesque economic inequality, an upsurge of racism, attacks on public education as the last public good, and real threats of authoritarianism, we simply have to grow our power in order to resist and chart a different direction. We offer the following recommendations to develop, strengthen, and sustain future coalition work in the fight for justice.

DEVELOP A MOVEMENT BUILDING CENTER

Building power for and winning education, economic, environmental, or racial justice, requires a multi-faceted effort that involves a deep and diverse base. This is a base that can only be created by bringing multiple labor and community organizations together to work in coalition or alignment. These fights require focused effort and support for developing key skill sets for organizing and developing campaigns.



The report “Fighting Shape: An Assessment of U.S. Organizing” identifies a “crisis in the organizing talent pipeline.” It discusses a vital lack of training as one contributing factor in this crisis. Organizations too often don’t have robust training, don’t provide mentorship, and don’t integrate training into the day-to-day of organizing. The report recommends:

“...new organizers need more training in the basics of recruitment, leadership identification, leadership development, and campaigns (including power analysis and escalation), advanced organizers need training in strategy and the skills of supervision and leadership. Many interviewees stated that organizers and members alike do not have a robust analysis of root causes, power, or history.”

Interviewees for this project agreed that there is a need for training and mentorship in order to expand capacity for this work. Organizers see a need for not only training to create a pipeline into organizing, but also ongoing mentoring and support for organized leaders to hone their leadership abilities. As one participant said, having common space for this type of support would not only build capacity but help build tighter alliances.

Furthermore, a lack of historical collaboration and misunderstandings about each other’s goals and structures have sometimes resulted in mistrust and suspicion between labor unions and community organizations. A movement-building center that intentionally brings labor and community organizations together could be designed to ensure strategic support and training between partners. This kind of space would help facilitate clear and direct actions and campaigns in the field that are planned and executed collaboratively by participating organizations. It could offer the following types of support to organizations:

- **Coalition development:** A center could provide guidance on implementing key coalition elements outlined in this report and reinforce the guidance on creating strong coalition dynamics.
- **Organizing training:** There is a need for training that develops quality organizing skills and practices, including training for 1:1s and other basic base building skills.
- **Political education:** Political education deepens understanding and broadens the context for community coalition work. We recommend developing efforts to do political education with union members, community organizations, and potential members or activists, particularly for coalitions who want to build bridges across issue based groups (e.g. educators collaborating with housing activists or worker centers).
- **Conflict resolution and restorative justice supports:** Preparing to work through the inevitability of conflict when working in coalition will make it less disruptive to operations and outcomes in the long run. Coalition leaders expressed a need for external resources of support that help with the establishment of conflict resolution and restorative justice practices and/or guidance and facilitation during times of conflict.
- **Mentorship network for new union leaders:** New union leaders need mentorship as they work toward transforming their union and building a base. A movement building center could create a network of experienced local labor organizers and other local leaders to provide guidance, advice, and insights on navigating internal organizing work as well as coalition work.
- **Support for unions improving internal structures to organize members:** Interviewees for this project were clear that for coalitions to be successful, local unions have to engage in some internal organizing before participating in community coalition work. A movement building center could support union locals in the following:
 - Developing structures and plans for organizing members at the worksite and, if applicable, for contract negotiations;
 - Building up strong commitments of support for community engagement work from the executive/governing board, demonstrated with designated funds in the local budget; and
 - Creating a clear decision making structure and delineation of duties for carrying out internal responsibilities among staff and release-time leadership, including specific designations for who will hold community relationships.
- **Research and communications support for coalitions:** There is not an apparent body of strategic research or communications that is widely available to coalitions in the education justice field. Larger organizations may have these resources built into their infrastructure, but mid to smaller sized organizations don't have automatic access to staff with specific research or analytics expertise. Further exploration on how to support and ensure quality execution of research and communications could be informative and helpful to new coalitions.

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING SOURCES

In order to support the long-term relationship and organizational capacity-building that is needed for successful coalition work, ongoing, sustainable, and flexible funding sources are needed. Philanthropic sources can adopt longer-term grant cycles and commit to an approach that sees grantee relationships as an ongoing partnership rather than a one-time transaction.²⁷ It is time for philanthropic institutions that are committed to economic and racial justice, democracy, job quality, and family and child welfare to see this work as an interconnected pathway toward a better society. Looking at these collective issues in a silo or separate from one another dilutes our outcomes. Working together provides the opportunity to build power and win on multiple fronts.

To show a real commitment to this work, state and national unions must also choose to invest more long-term resources in locals engaging in coalition work and locals that want to transform their practices to social justice unionism. From 2012-2016, the Service Employee International Union made a bold decision to invest tens of millions of dollars in the “Fight For 15” campaign and as a result won \$150 billion in raises for 26 million workers.²⁸ The moment we are in, calls for similarly bold and large investments into organizing from labor unions. Large national and state unions can provide crucial funding through unrestricted, multi-year funding for local labor-community coalitions.





Conclusion

With the threats to our democratic institutions increasing, the importance of labor and community organizations to work together to strengthen our democracy is more critical than ever before. There is an urgent need to pool our power in the form of coalition organizing in order to make change and protect our public schools and institutions. Greater investment of time and resources into labor-community partnerships can effectively advance progressive agendas and ideas for decades by establishing best-practices for communication and collaboration, provide ongoing funding models, and support leadership development and membership growth. If labor unions and community organizations come together in struggle, they will emerge as a powerful force that can take on larger scale battles to reclaim public goods for the public. Together we can combat the culture of misinformation by building bridges of trust and fellowship that can revitalize our labor movement and community organizing culture. Most importantly, we can provide a renewed sense of community and hope for generations to come.

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**Designates that the individual is no longer with the organization*

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Appendix

A collection of tools and materials for coalition leaders and organizers can be found at the links below.

-  [*Checklists and Steps For Creating a Coalition*](#)
-  [*Example Coalition Platforms and Visions*](#)
-  [*Example Coalition Structures and Agreements*](#)
-  [*Campaign Planning Materials*](#)
-  [*Power Mapping Resources*](#)
-  [*Communications Guides and Toolkits*](#)
-  [*Example Surveys*](#)
-  [*Other Miscellaneous Examples and Materials*](#)