

The Forge



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Letter to a Young Organizer #2

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If it feels like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders, it makes sense. These are heavy times, and you are an organizer. Still, this weight is not yours alone, I hope you know that.

Our responsibility is to build a base, develop people, win things, and contribute to something larger. That is not easy, and it is more than

enough. Doing this, along with lots of others doing the same, is exactly what we need.

In the introduction to *The Populist Moment*, the historian Lawrence Goodwin names a handful of qualities of impactful social movements. One that always struck me was reaching a state of “collective self-confidence,” where a large enough group of people believe we are in fact going to win.

It’s no secret that we do not have that feeling now. That’s ok. We have had it before, and will have it again.

I believe we rebuild that confidence by winning and winning often. You have come of age amidst vibrant social movements, stunning shifts in our broader culture, and a live fight for the heart and soul of both major political parties.

You and your generation are not here to win the best thing possible in the existing landscape, but to remake that landscape all together. It is a beautiful thing.

If you have not already, I want you to have the chance to run campaigns to turn cultural change into wins that people can touch and feel. We chant “I believe that we will win,” but the truth is, most people don’t. A good campaign can change that. People need a reason to believe and winning some shit, even if imperfect, is one antidote to cynicism. We are not responsible for the weight of the world, but we are responsible for giving more people a reason to believe.

The federal landscape is tough, and possibly about to get tougher. We build collective self-confidence by moving to higher ground, where we have a stronger hand. I believe we are entering a return to corporate campaigns, of going local, of making demands of federal and state agencies. Places where we can fight, win, and restore hope.

We are in the dawn of an **organizing revival**. As we enter what I believe will be a period of great campaigning, I want to share some things I have learned along the way. I hope they can be of help.

Campaign on Issues that are Widely and Deeply Felt. An issue that only a handful of people care about will not build much power. An issue that everyone agrees on but no one is passionate about will not provide the fight needed to win. We listen for issues that are widely and deeply felt. One without the other will not get it done.

There are lots of ways to listen for what issues meet this test. You can knock on doors, do one on ones, or track and test what's most resonant using the digital tools we have today.

Regardless of the method, figure out what is most widely and deeply felt, and then figure out how to pay for the campaign. Always in this order. Let the listening lead the way and the campaigns will be better for it.

Learn to cut an issue. When I started organizing in Southern Indiana we had no training or books to show us the way. Still, we did some things right. We listened for problems. The lack of affordable housing topped the list.

We had rallies, got some media, and raised awareness about housing problems. We did **not** have a specific demand or a clear target. And so, absolutely nothing changed. Even if the Mayor or City Council were tracking what we were doing, they felt no direct pressure to do anything. We were stuck.

Around this time I got invited to a tenant organizing meeting in Indianapolis. There was a guy there, Mike Evans, who seemed to know this organizing thing. After I drove back home, I called him up and said we didn't have money to pay him, but we could cover his gas and feed

him if he would come down and teach us about organizing. It was Mike who first taught us how to cut an issue.

One of the things we learned is that we don't organize on problems, we organize on issues. Organizing works in part because we turn problems into specific and actionable solutions and then demand people with power agree to enact them.

Problems feel overwhelming. Facing them, we often feel defeated before we have started. Examples of problems might be poverty, climate change, or racism. So, we "cut out" a more discreet part of the problem, identify a solution, and use that as a stepping stone toward larger structural progress.

"Come to a meeting to talk about the problem of all the abandoned buildings in the neighborhood." This sounds familiar and tired. We've had that meeting many times. "Come to the meeting about how we pressure the Mayor to demolish the dilapidated abandoned buildings in our neighborhood and turn them into community gardens," sounds more clear and inspiring.

There's a reason Frederick Douglass' "Power concedes nothing without a demand" is among our most enduring organizing axioms. We are not just putting forth broad wishes, or generalizations, but clear demands to specific people with power, names, and addresses.

Learn how to cut an issue, and you will build a base, win things, and soon be ready to take on an even larger cut of the problem.

We organize to get to the table. That is our job. Yes, we need to flip the table, reorganize the table, reimagine the table, but we have to be at it if we are serious about winning. Otherwise we will not win shit, or, maybe worse, we will have set the table for some operative to be sitting at it, settling for a lesser win, and taking credit all the same.

If we are not at the table, our members are not at the table, and our members are missing out on a chance to win, and a chance to grow. We do not develop ourselves or others by sitting at the bar bragging of how we are too pure to be at the table.

Recently me and a couple of staff from **People's Action**, which I used to direct, were going through our archives. For decades we had a national newspaper that went out to a hundred thousand people in neighborhoods that had been touched by organizing. As we looked through past issues, one team member said, "I expected more photos to be of direct action, but so many are of a group of neighborhood leaders meeting with a few guys in suits."

It's true. That's because we organize to win things, and that means being at the table. The table is complicated. We often leave the table and go back to the streets, but we are always trying to get there. At the table people not only win, but they develop. They get tougher. They learn lessons that will be essential as we move into demands that are more transformative, and targets more powerful.

Power analysis first, strategy second. Your strategy is never better than your power analysis. When you have a good power analysis it is hard to win. Without one, it's not even a thing.

When doing a power analysis of a decision maker you need to know these things: 1) what they have power over, 2) who has power over them, 3) what they most want, and 4) what they most do not want.

Let's say the person you need to move is the Mayor. You first have to understand what they have power over. This includes what decisions, what bodies, what individuals – especially as it relates to your demand.

You also want to know who has power over the Mayor. When you get stuck and can't move them, these secondary targets could, if properly

motivated, push the Mayor to say yes to your demands. Also, these people with power over the Mayor may have a vested interest in blocking your demands. You want to know all of this.

You want to know what motivates the decision-maker. People in power often want one thing, more power. Their aspiration might be re-election, a governing majority, a merger or acquisition they are trying to finalize.

You also need to know what decision-makers most don't want. Do they most want to avoid bad press, a falling out with a specific constituency, a drop in quarterly earnings?

If they are someone you are not able to align with, and are in fact an adversary, you need to be seen as an organization that can block what they want, or bring closer what they don't. If you are able to do either and they recognize that, their motivation to negotiate increases, as does your chance of winning.

This can sound combative. It often is, but it doesn't have to be. If the decision-maker you seek to move is willing to come to the table, you will still want to know all of these things, but you will be more likely to deliver exactly what is they want to land a win. That might be votes, good press, a needed constituency.

Regardless, develop your power analysis, then your strategy, then your tactics.

The Action is the Reaction. We do actions to spur a reaction. That can be one that we intend, or some random ass shit.

When devising tactics we organizers have a tendency to focus on our action. What we should be most concerned with is the reaction to our action. The reaction we seek could be for the decision-maker to agree to a meeting, a media hit that strengthens our hand, or the decision-maker

overreacting and weakening theirs. Our tactics are more effective when we are clear on the reaction we want.

We've all been in situations where we don't know what to do next, so we just come up with some shit to keep the campaign in motion. I get it, and have done my share of this. But if you can step back and get clear on the reaction you want, you will find the answer, and you will develop more strategic actions.

Sometimes the reaction we seek might be within ourselves. Fifteen years or so ago, eight-hundred National People's Action members did an action on Dan Stein, the head of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, an anti-immigrant organization. They were leading the charge against the DREAM Act, which would have provided a pathway to citizenship for undocumented youth. We did not think we would win anything from Dan Stein. We also knew we had not built the multi-racial, multi-immigration status solidarity needed for the long fight ahead. So, the reaction we wanted was for our immigrant members to experience a new sense of power and to build multi-racial solidarity. So, we packed 20 school buses, went to the FAIR offices, got past security, and took over the organization's board room.

There, a multi-racial leadership team supported undocumented youth who shared testimony in a tense encounter with one of the nation's most prominent anti-immigrant leaders. One undocumented teen from Kansas told her story of being brought to the US by her parents as a toddler, and how this was the only country she knew. She could not receive in state tuition and lived in constant fear of being deported. Stein then said there was a simple solution – for her to go back to Mexico. The leadership team erupted, and the room got hot, very hot. Me and Sulma Arias, who now directs People's Action, looked at each other and thought, we better get out of here.

But that moment, when Dan Stein was such a shit to this young woman, awakened native-born members of the organization to the challenges faced by undocumented youth, and the cold-heartedness of the anti-immigrant movement. As we gathered outside, it felt as if our immigrant members were all but walking on air. They had just gone face to face with a man hell-bent on removing them from the country, and for a moment, they had the power, and they were not alone.

When we win, tell the story. Your organization's members have little time, and more choices than ever of what to do with it. You need them to decide the campaign is something to prioritize. One way we do that is by telling the story. Our story needs to become binge worthy.

People love a story. A strong campaign has all the elements of a good one. We have a protagonist. That's us. An antagonist. The bad guy. We have the initial action. That is the shitty stuff the bad guy did to start the whole thing. We then have conflict – the people fighting back. And if all goes well, we have the resolution we want.

Having all the elements of a good story doesn't mean much if we aren't telling it. Telling the story is especially important when we win. People are hunting for hope, and every win is a chance to help them find it.

I first learned to organize in a time when we had flyers, printed newsletters, and word of mouth as the means of telling our story. So, we worked with what we had.

In the lead up to a meeting or action we had a theory that people needed to hear about the event at least five times. Flyers, a door knock, signs in the neighborhood, a phone call, and another door knock. If you didn't come to the action it was not for lack of hearing about it.

The same goes for when we won. Following a victory, big or small, we'd be up the next day making flyers, and that afternoon walking the

neighborhood with members to spread the word.

Don't be precious about it. It's easy to overthink things. Hugh Espey, longtime organizer with Iowa CCI, often sends out two sentence personalized emails sharing news of a recent win. These are down and dirty, but they go the job done. In fact, their brevity is part of what works.

As we launch new campaigns from higher ground, let's tell the story of the fight, and the wins.

The right in on the attack. They are coming hard, and will come harder. These are dark times and the opposition thrives on cynicism, is counting on defeatism. We counter that not by scouring the web for bad news, throwing hail Marys, or being too pure to be in the fight. We counter by listening, organizing, and rebuilding from the ground up.

I just did 40 one-on-ones with working class folks in the Midwest and I met people who were ready to fight, who wanted to win, and who did not have their head in the clouds, or in the sand. They all felt there was too much at stake for either.

You are not a passive observer, but an organizer. An organizer in one of the most consequential periods in our history. Carve out a piece of the work, build campaigns around that, and help more people get out of their heads, into the streets and to the table.

You are here to stir the pot. To take the crisis to those who created it. To transform hearts and minds, on the way toward transforming how the whole thing works.

An organizing revival requires campaigns. If we launch a period of great campaigns that start with listening, teach people how to cut an issue, to do a good power analysis, and to design actions to spur the reactions we want and need, I like our chances.



About **George Goehl**

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