Fighting Shape: An Assessment of U.S. Organizing

An interim report from
the Strengthening Organizing
Project of Future Currents

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A Note to Readers

The Strengthening Organizing Project, facilitated by Future Currents (formerly, Social and Economic Justice Leaders Project), is digging in to assess the state of organizing in this country, and to plant some of the seeds for its renovation. We are talking to 200 leading organizers in the field through one-on-one interviews, learning and discussion sessions, and deep-dive cohort retreats. We are a little over halfway through the process, and this interim report captures what we have heard and learned to date. We offer it as a draft, intended to spark more and deeper conversations.

Often invisible to the untrained observer – and often unstated in the media – is the extent to which each and every moment of societal transformation in the United States has depended upon grassroots organizing. Behind Brown v. Board of Education was the organized uprising of thousands of Black people and their allies. Behind successful calls to #CancelRent during the pandemic were community organizations across the country that had spent dozens of years supporting tenant leaders who helped the hashtag catch fire and who won concrete policies to protect tenants from eviction. During the years of resistance under Trump, and at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, community and labor organizers successfully battled many of the worst disasters facing vulnerable communities. The quality and commitment of talent in the field today creates a truly remarkable opportunity to create space to digest the learnings of recent decades and to finally invest in sustaining existing work, testing new approaches and enabling the best of them to scale.

You may notice as you peruse this document that we touch on bright spots briefly but focus primarily on the challenges facing the field today. Our aim at this stage of the project is to surface the factors impeding organizing today so that the field and funders can grapple together with how to address them. We ask you to engage with this draft and ask yourself: What have we missed? What additional clarity can you add?

Please submit your reactions here.

A Definition of Direct Action

In this paper, the term "direct action" refers to nonviolent action that seeks to achieve an end directly and by the most immediately effective means (such as a boycott, strike, demonstration, or other public forms of protest).

Executive Summary

Organizers spoke to real victories in a moment of both crisis and opportunity. The field is still learning how to engage with movement upsurges, but huge numbers of experienced organizers have lived through more than one movement upsurge moment and developed methods for combining organic energy with purposeful strategy to deliver major impact. New experiments abound, and many interviewees mentioned being inspired by the recent increase in worker organizing. Organizers also express an unprecedented openness to sharing their successes and failures in the interest of learning with others. In short, we see a lot bubbling in the field that, if resourced and nurtured, might shift what is possible in this country.

However, interviewees almost unanimously agreed that the field is not in the condition to address the crises and opportunities before us. Despite the bright spots that abound, many worried that organizing as a craft has grown weak. We must act decisively – with creativity, smarts, and scaled resources – to revitalize the craft of organizing to meet the future.

Internal Dynamics and Challenges Inhibiting Powerful Organizing

Many obstacles are related to resource scarcity but interviewees agreed that funding alone will not address all the challenges facing the field. The following are the top themes articulated that require shifts within organizing practitioners' control.

1. Organizing strategies lack a clear analysis of power, especially economic power.

This weakness in the field's power analysis likely stems from a range of related challenges, such as insufficient research and planning to contend with complex networks of economic power. And organizers, anticipating what is likely to result in fundable work, go only as deep in their power analysis as is necessary to resource that work.

2. Organizing has insufficient scale and depth.

Organizers are spending their time on activities that aren't base-building, and they are repeatedly mobilizing the same people rather than expanding the universe of the organized. The membership of many organizations has either decreased or plateaued. Most interviewees appreciated the need for both depth and scale and asserted that the field has not yet learned how to achieve one without sacrificing the other.

3. Organizations are struggling to maximize the potential of movement moments.

Popular uprisings are now a recurring part of the organizing landscape. Interviewees stated repeatedly, however, that organizers and the field generally have not found an effective way to relate to these movement moments. Most organizations lack the capacity to absorb people from mass mobilizations, sometimes due to a demographic mismatch with their existing base. And a complex set of dynamics impacts whether we actually secure concrete victories and build lasting power. Interviewees were hungry for time to extract lessons from actual experience.

4. Base-building practices lack standards and rigor.

Most agree that we have lost accountability mechanisms in our base-building practices. However, some also worried that the call for "rigor" was sometimes coded language used by organizers who are nostalgic for the old and dismissive of new experimentation.

5. There is insufficient experimentation with new models of organizing.

Organizers mentioned a reluctance to take on big-risk fights and the failures that necessarily come with ambitious experimentation, noting structural incentives — particularly from philanthropy — to hew to familiar practices and smaller fights where victory is easier to claim.

6. Difficulty building real power via electoral work.

Many agree that building political power is an essential part of organizing work but many interviewees have struggled to convert those who are mobilized by elections into real members of their organizations. Some interviewees underscored this conversion is only possible with high-level organizers overseeing recruitment and streamlined systems to ensure accurate tracking and timely follow up.

7. Groups are struggling to organize in digitally-mediated spaces.

Interviewees held widely divergent views on digital organizing. Some define digital organizing as the use of digital spaces for gathering; others see it as a tool for online-to-offline mobilization. Some fear that digital organizing facilitates spectatorship rather than genuine participation. Organizers currently lack spaces for frank discussion and learning around these questions.

8. The pipeline of organizing talent is too small.

Perhaps the clearest point of consensus across all the interviews is that the organizing field is experiencing a critical lack of developed talent, particularly in roles requiring significant experience. Many organizers saw themselves or others end up in positions they were unprepared to hold effectively. A shrinking training infrastructure is a major issue, as is retention. Organizers routinely complained of burnout related to exhaustion, internal organizational strife, and discouragement about their impact.

9. Direct action is used ineffectively.

Interviewees spoke often about the need to employ direct action more frequently and effectively. Some seasoned organizers are frustrated that direct action today tends to be symbolic rather than structurally disruptive. Others worry that today's approaches to direct action tend to express the outrage of existing activists without a plan to communicate with and bring in constituencies who don't already agree with us.

10. Experienced organizers are overwhelmed by internal organizational work.

Senior organizers end up prioritizing management and fundraising over external- or membership-facing efforts to realize their organization's purpose. Organizations have been engaged in internal reckonings around racial justice, issues of hierarchy, and appropriate workload expectations. The rise in staff unionization has had a positive impact but also has created additional responsibilities and steep learning curves for workers and management alike.

11. Organizers are misaligned about how to coordinate at the national level.

Many interviewees expressed the view that the field is not positioned to move together at the national level to meet the seismic challenges of our current moment. Some expressed an interest in revisiting the ways that organizations collaborate through national networks while others underscored the need to explore alternative formations such as a "united front" or ecosystemic alliance.

12. The qualities and responsibilities of "leaders" are contested.

Many believe the field has lost a commitment to leader identification, citing organizations that treat activists or members as "leaders" even if they do not have "followers." Most labor and Alinskyite organizations expect staff to play a behind-the-scenes role of coordinating members and developing them to be leaders, while protest movements often equate spokespeople with leaders, contributing to the rise of "influencer culture." Organizers spoke often of the need for more clarity and training for both member-leader and staff-organizer roles.

The Role of Philanthropy

Interviewees recognized the meaningful improvements made by many foundations, such as the shift away from program-specific funding toward general-operating grants. Our interviews surfaced the following remaining obstacles that, if addressed, could open the way to powerful organizing.

1. Philanthropy is not funding organizing at anywhere near a sufficient scale. There was broad consensus that for organizing efforts to be both ambitious and successful, philanthropy will have to invest far more resources in staffing larger operations. The gap between the funding needed and the funding available is vast.

2. Philanthropy largely dictates organizing priorities, instead of the field identifying and driving those priorities. Organizations contort their staff and their organizing to fit these priorities in order to sustain the work.

3. Philanthropic processes are rarely oriented to supporting high-quality organizing. Philanthropy funnels more money to other social change activities than to organizing, even though organizing builds power to shift what is possible in other arenas. Most funders lack familiarity with how to identify good organizing, and most grant-making uses metrics that actually pull the field away from high-quality organizing.

4. Funding tends to prioritize short term, issue-focused and elections-focused grants. The biggest money available to the field flows to electoral work — oftentimes late in key electoral cycles — and then dries up. Grants for issue campaigns prioritize modest legislative victories over long-term work toward major structural reforms. And funding cycles are too short to allow for implementation of wins, much less long-term base-building.

5. Scarce funding creates an atmosphere of competition that breeds animosity between organizations.

6. Philanthropy tends to elevate a certain kind of charismatic influencer, rather than leaders with followers or people who know how to build organizations that achieve excellence in the craft of organizing.

7. Philanthropy is skittish about disruption, nonviolent direct action, and challenging the economic power of corporations and super-wealthy individuals with disproportionate political influence. Foundations avoid collaboration with labor, discouraging powerful alignment-building across the field.

Introduction

In the field of community and worker organizing, there is a growing drumbeat of frustrated voices saying we're at a pivotal moment for the craft of organizing. Faced with authoritarianism and white nationalism, climate disaster, public health crises, and continuously growing racial and economic inequality, the optimism that is the lifeblood of bold organizing is threatened on multiple fronts.

Movement organizations have risen to the occasion, leading rapid-response efforts, facilitating mutual aid, and driving campaigns to advance worker and immigrant rights, voting rights, and more. But we are far from having the power and scale we need to win. How do we deal with a reality in which the very structures of democracy are under threat? How do we step into the openings created by neoliberalism's failures? How do we revitalize and reimagine the organizing traditions that work while inventing new ways of power-building to meet current or future conditions with rigor and creativity?

The Strengthening Organizing Project, which Future Currents (formerly Social and Economic Justice Leaders Project) facilitates, is digging in to assess the state of organizing in this country and plant some of the seeds for its renovation. Since the beginning of 2023, we have been talking to 200 leading organizers in the field through one-on-one interviews, learning and discussion sessions, and deep-dive cohort retreats. The goal is to get real in assessing the current state of organizing, learn from current models, and strategize about how to fill the gaps created by the new conditions we are facing. Together, we will mine all corners of the movement for lessons and begin to reinvigorate the craft.

We are a little over halfway through a two-year process, and this interim report captures what we have heard and learned to date. We offer it as a discussion document intended to spark deeper conversations that will, in turn, sharpen this initial assessment. In the process, we hope to make possible transformational learning involving organizers from every lineage, network, approach, and geography.

What Do We Mean by Models or Lineages of Organizing?

Organizing is a craft. Over time, the field has developed different versions of the craft, each with their own norms and day-to-day practices. Key theorist-practitioners, training institutions, and grassroots organizations have crystallized those norms and practices into traditions that we are calling "lineages" or "models" of organizing. Although they are slightly different, we use the terms "lineage" and "model" interchangeably in this report to refer to a cluster of practices transmitted across organizations that expresses, implicitly or explicitly, a set of assumptions about our material conditions and hypotheses of how to change them. Most organizations create combinations of practices drawn from different sources but tend to lean more heavily on one model than another.

In this project, we discovered that a major portion of the experienced organizers we contacted do not think in terms of an organizing lineage. Even after we explained what we meant by the term, some named historical references or inspirational figures (such as the Civil Rights Movement generally, or Bayard Rustin or Ella Baker specifically) that evoke guiding values and commitments more than a body of specific practices. We believe that a shared language of different approaches or models would help practitioners in the field to learn from each other and upgrade their craft.

Building the Power to Win the Future — How Are We Doing?

So, what is the state of organizing? That is one of the fundamental questions with which we began every interview. The answers were almost unanimous: organizing today is weak, but bright spots and opportunities abound.

Bright Spots

Respondents broadly agreed that we are in an era with new challenges but one that also affords tremendous opportunity and energy. Many organizers spoke to real victories and successes in their own work and acknowledged bright spots in other traditions or sectors.

During the COVID pandemic, a brutal experience for all and especially for marginalized populations, movement energy emerged with the potential to transform society and our economy. After nearly a decade of organizing around highly-publicized police murders of Black people, the movement for racial justice had built scaffolding to support and influence mass protests in response to George Floyd's horrific murder in spring 2020. The demand to defund the police went viral, and millions took to the streets that summer, activating broad swathes of the American public to march, donate, read, and reflect about the origins of policing in the United States and the need to invest in resources that actually increase public safety.

Many interviewees mentioned being inspired — and union organizers overwhelmed and thrilled — by the recent upsurge in worker organizing, from Starbucks to Amazon. The Writers Guild of America went on strike from spring to fall 2023, achieving a powerful victory to disrupt corporate power in entertainment. The United Auto Workers (UAW), under new progressive leadership, won a historic strike in which it demanded raises commensurate with auto executives' recent profit gains. For many organizers, this is the first time in their lives that visible national labor leadership has oriented so effectively to engage the broader public, galvanizing popular support for strikes through speeches and advertisements.

Interviewees named dozens of specific bold or victorious campaigns that are inspirations for the field, from successfully expanding Medicaid in North Carolina to securing $150 million for building homes in Black and Latine Houston communities, to removing the police from schools in Milwaukee through youth organizing. Organizers have repeatedly expressed a hunger to learn more from cities like Chicago and states like Minnesota, where grassroots groups have achieved real governing power and other transformational victories through long-term alliance-building.

And new experiments abound, from organizing fandom communities through events like "Real Housewives" watch parties to organizing through drag shows in Georgia.

To add to what organizers stated in our interviews, we note two additional realities that have the potential to revolutionize what the field can achieve:

First, huge numbers of experienced organizers active in the field at this moment have lived through more than one movement upsurge moment in their careers. The field is still learning how to engage with upsurges, and our time is ripe for extracting and sharing lessons from these experiences. From Occupy Wall Street to the uprisings under Donald Trump's presidency, from the Amazon HQ2 fight in Queens to the Gaza ceasefire movement ongoing today, experienced organizers have combined organic energy and purposeful strategy to deliver major impact. If the field can find space and time to focus on maximizing the power-building possibilities of movement moments, tremendous advancement in the craft of organizing is possible.

Second, we are finding an unprecedented degree of collaborative good will among experienced organizers in the field. Organizers are setting aside the compulsion to defend their current organizations or models and expressing openness about their successes and failures in the interest of learning with others. Despite long-standing organizational rivalries, exacerbated by competition for scarce resources, the desire to collaborate is palpable and gives us hope that this is a moment with real potential to support the creative revitalization of the craft.

In short, we see a lot bubbling in the field that, if resourced and nurtured, might shift what is possible in this country.

The Nature of the Crisis

Almost all the organizers we interviewed believe that the field of organizing overall is not ready to meet the challenges of today, let alone the ominous threats likely to arise in future years.

The general assessment is that our inability to fully meet this moment is a combination of challenges imposed by **external forces** that trip us up and **internal forces** that are largely within organizers' ability to change. Interviewees were concerned that the "islands of strength" in organizing are far too disconnected, isolated, and under-resourced; our organizations and their leaders are exhausted and often in a state of despair; our talent pipeline is nowhere near up to the task; and we have not had the time or emotional space to learn adequately from the past decade or ready ourselves for the next one.

Before diving into the problems that are within reach for organizers and philanthropy to address, we offer a snapshot of the forces outside organizers' control that they believe are shaping their work today.

External Challenges: A Polycrisis

Observers of the global economy have recently turned to the term "polycrisis" to describe the converging economic, environmental, and political disruptions that have produced a heightened sense of fear about the future in many corners of the world.

Among the many external conditions and challenges that interviewers identified, four central themes emerged.

1. The challenges of a rapidly changing economy

At the outset of this project, the core team embraced an analysis that many of our organizing practices emerged in response to apolitical and social conditions quite different from our own. As Jonathan Matthew Smucker has pointed out, many of the dominant organizing models in use today emerged generations ago, particularly in response to the New Deal consensus of the 1930s. Those models were amended by the social movements of the 1950s and 1960s to expand that consensus through the Great Society program, and evolved again in the neoliberal period to defend what remained of that consensus. The organizing traditions extant today were built on the assumption that an ever-expanding economy, a willingness among employers and investors to share that growth with others through wages and taxes, and a government committed to some modest oversight of the economy and the distribution of wealth could ensure wide access to the comforts and protections promised to the middle class. For many reasons today, this consensus has collapsed, producing rising inequality and disparities of economic and political power. Amidst that collapse, the organizing models we have inherited — and the assumptions on which they are based — are facing new scrutiny today.

On many fronts, we are finding ourselves on new terrain, rooted in a series of fundamental shifts in the economy. Our economy and structures of financial governance have shifted radically since the 1970s: corporate consolidation has reached unprecedented levels of international monopoly. Private equity controls critical arenas, including residential housing, logistics, health care, and retail. They demand short-term profits to appease investors, often at the expense of workers and consumers. All of this shifts the locus of decision-making (and thus organizing) from local communities and known corporate actors to often-hidden and distant Wall Street financiers. The gig economy favors a contingent and insecure labor force, and privatization continues to hollow out what remains of the social safety net, including cash assistance and Medicare. Tax cuts, spending caps, and demands for fiscal reform have thrown state and local governments into a permanent state of austerity, while federal military spending and funding for policing, prisons, and migrant detention continue unabated. Finally, complex technology has permeated nearly every realm of life, with AI promising to transform both the labor force and the media in the years to come.

All of this poses new challenges to organizers today.

2. The growth and political power of authoritarians

An array of authoritarian groups has executed a cohesive, values-aligned, and decades-long strategy that has undermined historic progressive gains, redefined the terms of debate, and resulted in major structural reforms to the democratic process. Their success securing key positions within all branches of government (including offices that administer and oversee elections) shapes how we organize and what we can win. As one interviewee noted, "The courts are taking away all of our wins. We aren't ready to live in a place where all institutions are captured." Organizers expressed confusion about how to understand and relate strategically to the right, asking: "Where are the cracks in the opposition? What are their plans? What wedge issues are they likely to use to build support in the grassroots and attract new supporters?"

> "In all of the years I have been doing this as a Black man I've never really felt that unsafe. I've engaged in civil disobedience and been roughed up by the cops, but I don't think I've ever thought about being the victim of violence like I do now."

3. Historic challenges of organizing amidst a pandemic

Interviewees agreed that the context of base-building, membership recruitment, and leadership development shifted dramatically with the onset of the pandemic. The pandemic and the necessary public health restrictions on public gatherings challenged organizations that depend on in-person relationship-building, so organizers had fewer opportunities for in-person gatherings and powerful one-on-one conversations. The new online tools they found could not entirely take the place of in-person organizing.

Some base-building organizations were unable to meet in person for an unprecedented length of time. Student organizations that already contend with turnover lost a core part of their pipeline, as new students often went unorganized in the first two years of the pandemic. Many base-building organizations that adapted to organizing online struggled to get back to offline activities such as meetings, retreats, and door-knocking. For other organizations that could not pivot as fully to online organizing (such as those organizing workers in the workplace, tenants in housing units, people with less internet access, and older people), attrition was even greater. And as COVID dramatically increased the number of people facing chronic health conditions, progressive organizations also struggled internally to find consensus on workplace policies that would both enable organizing and protect organizers and members.

Meeting members' and communities' immediate needs at the onset of the pandemic strained the resources of many groups, as they scrambled to assemble rapid-response and mutual aid programs to address these conditions. At the same time, many organizations reported having to spend increasing amounts of time and energy addressing internal conflicts and disruptions among staff and leadership. In the face of tremendous need and despair, many organizational leaders experienced a growing sense that the needs and demands they faced far outpaced their individual and collective capacity.

All of this has left many leaders feeling overwhelmed unconvinced that their collective work is producing the systemic change we need. Many interviewees acknowledged the need to dramatically increase their capacity and efforts to meet the needs of the moment but are stymied by a collective sense of exhaustion that can make it difficult even to get people to volunteer and take on basic organizing duties.

The Definition of Organizing

When we launched the Strengthening Organizing Project, we had heard informally that organizers don't agree on what organizing is. We found that virtually all our interviewees believe that organizing, most fundamentally, involves facilitating people to take action in a collective struggle. Most also included the following elements:

- **Building a base** of people who are harmed by conditions of oppression or injustice.
- **Taking collective action** as the primary means through which ordinary people can exert leverage over those with the power to change oppressive conditions.
- **Developing leaders and leadership,** covering core organizing skills and practices as well as political education to support the base in understanding root causes of oppression and how to transform it.
- **Shifting the balance of power** to those directly harmed by oppression and deprivation in a way that improves the material conditions in which they live.

The Internal Dynamics and Challenges Inhibiting Powerful Organizing

We will turn later in this report to the ways that funding dynamics and limitations impede the field's ability to build transformational power. But many interviewees agree that funding alone will not resolve the challenges facing the field. The following are the key themes articulated that may require additional financial resources but will also require shifts in the approaches of organizing practitioners themselves.

1. Weak understanding of power, especially economic power, to ground strategy

Across the field, organizers observed that the field as a whole "lacks power." While all organizers invoke the importance of building power, it is not always clear what analysis of power undergirds different organizations' approaches, how it varies across the ecosystem, and how organizers measure the power they have — and the power they are up against. As one respondent explained, "We don't understand how power works right now."

Without a clear understanding of power, our strategies — and the very practice of strategizing — suffer. As one organizer observed, "People don't have a plan. There's less strategy. There's no long term. What are we building and what's going to be the outcome? It seems like we just kind of do it day by day." They ask, "What is the sum of the parts? What is this all building toward?" Absent such a shared strategy and agenda, organizations can feel like they are operating in a climate of "everybody for themselves."

This weakness in the field's power analysis likely stems from a range of related challenges. Some interviewees identified an absence of ideological coherence in their organizing work, a lack of a strategic throughline that would connect an analysis of the problem with a theory of power and a strategic hypothesis about how to solve the problem and achieve visionary reform. Our visions are vague; without a path to achieve them, organizations are driven to proprietary North Stars. Even a union president admitted that they have no real meaningful understanding of how economic and political power work outside of their sector and their immediate geography. Senior organizers' bandwidth is drawn into fundraising and management of internal dynamics rather than apprenticing junior colleagues.

Further, many observed that we are neither contesting the strategies of opposing groups nor effective at finding cracks or wedges to split the opposition. "We don't have a strong analysis of the opposition's infrastructure, and therefore we don't have a strategic understanding of the power and tactics that we need to contest and win." One consequence of this may be that, as one interviewee put it, "We are on the menu, not creating the menu."

> "We do not have a strategy that adds up to what we want to win."

While most agree that transforming material conditions is foundational to organizing, interviewees diverged about whether all campaigns must result in immediate wins to be successful. Some argue that only by winning concrete changes in policy or legislation can a base experience a sense of its power that will allow it to pursue larger change. Others argue for bold demands that may not be winnable in the short term but can still energize a broad swath of people, leading to transformative change in the medium to long term.

> “We have a painful lack of sophisticated research and understanding of how power works, especially economic power.”

2. Insufficient scale and compromised depth in organizing

We heard a clear consensus that the reach of base-building efforts is just insufficient: the field simply isn’t doing enough organizing and hasn’t been for a long time. Some emphasized that the field is doing too little to connect people who do not (yet) share the full range of typical progressive viewpoints. Many agreed on the strategic need to organize those who work within particular economic sectors or live in areas that are poised for maximum influence and leverage. But they perceive real ambivalence, particularly among younger generations politicized by protest movements, about whether the work of organizing must include reaching out to those who are directly harmed by injustice and strategically located but lack progressive views. Interestingly, only a few people explicitly stated that organizing must always prioritize involving new people. Most interviewees may have held this value implicitly, but only a small number insisted — in the words of one respondent — that organizing is “how one involves, engages, and moves people that are not currently in the movement … it’s about getting new and increasing numbers of people to be actively involved and to take leadership roles.”

Interviewees agreed that the scale of organizing and the size of the grassroots base has a direct impact on the power that organizing can achieve. As one respondent explained, “We don’t have enough people power to be able to create the changes that we want.” But it is unclear to most organizers how many people they need in a given moment: Identifying the number required for victory is relatively straightforward in electoral campaigns or collective bargaining efforts, but it is less clear in grassroots issue campaigns or those premised on a larger strategy beyond a single campaign. While there is widespread agreement that scale is important, there is also considerable disagreement about how such scale can be achieved, and some organizers feel that the drive for scale has resulted in many organizers sacrificing depth. At some point, organizing at scale can become so thin in terms of the relationships built, leadership developed, and ability to change the lives of those involved that it becomes more akin to mass communications.

> “Our scale doesn’t match where the power goes — i.e., basic geographic scaling without an analysis of how corporate power works.”

Most interviewees appreciated the need for both depth and scale but tended to emphasize one as a priority over the other. Some argued that scale — reaching and activating large numbers — is the highest imperative in organizing and that new technologies and digital tools are key to reaching large numbers of people. Others insisted that depth — building thick relationships with high levels of accountability and frequent touchpoints — is the higher priority. From this perspective, digital tools that are focused on mobilizing large numbers of people can seem superficial. As another organizer observed, “I think that there’s been a larger societal shift away from depth of relationships and civic institutions to ‘high connectivity, low relationship.’ We have the ability to be connected with more people faster than ever, but our depth of relationships is lower. And so I think that, as a society, we’re experiencing that sort of shift, and we have to combat that.”

3. Failure to maximize the power-building potential of movement moments

The past two decades have been marked by a series of movement moments or upsurge moments — rapid mobilizations of large numbers of people in response to sudden events and crises, such as Occupy Wall Street, the response to the Trump Muslim ban, uprisings following George Floyd's murder, or ceasefire organizing in response to Israel's assault on Gaza. This is a global phenomenon: As journalist Vincent Bevins has written, "By 2020, after street battles from Chile to Hong Kong, the world had experienced more mass protest in the previous decade than at any other point in human history, exceeding the famous global cycle of contention in the 1960s." Popular uprisings are now a recurring part of the organizing landscape.

> "Social movements and uprisings are now part of the landscape but we aren't sure how to relate to them."

Interviewees stated repeatedly, however, that organizers and the field generally have not found an effective way to relate to these movement moments. Most organizations lack the infrastructure to absorb people from mass mobilizations. One organizer explained that while organizations and movements may typically focus on organizing a particular population or constituency, "a lot of other people who maybe didn't fit into that category got really activated and didn't really have anywhere to go. Or organizations weren't ready to adapt, to change, to absorb them. I think the same thing is true for the George Floyd uprising. People were really politicized against police brutality, but maybe not in the traditional base of groups. [We need the] tools to absorb those people really quickly." Organizers are asking themselves: What should base-building groups do when millions of people are activated who don't come from the neighborhoods, populations, or workplaces where they typically build their base?

The interviews surfaced questions that went beyond the scope of a single organization and pointed toward the base-building ecosystem as a whole. What constituencies are existing organizations poised to absorb? What is the natural cap that organizations have on committee and membership sizes? What is the cost of exceeding those caps? What do leaders lose control over when they scale beyond the cap, and what has experience shown us is likely to go wrong? We suspect that most organizers simply haven't had sufficient time to dig into these complex questions.

Interviewees differ somewhat on beliefs about what external threats mean for whom and how we organize. For instance, if authoritarianism is a political threat, whom must we organize to overcome it? Those most harmed? Those in the best structural position to stop it? What implications does this have for the base-building of existing organizations — and, perhaps, the need for new organizations? Some organizers believe we need a moratorium on new organizations, while others believe we need to be willing to start fresh to experiment boldly.

4. Weakened rigor in base-building practices

Most interviewees agreed that we have lost rigor and accountability mechanisms in our base-building practices. Many interviewees contend that the field must return to certain fundamentals of organizing, referring to the practices of the in-person one-on-one, mapping a workplace or constituency, identifying and developing leaders, developing campaign strategy grounded in a clear power analysis, and leading effective nonviolent direct action.

Rigorous organizing practice was sometimes associated with local, place- and worksite-based organizing. For example, one interviewee argued that funders "need to talk to hyper-local organizations, because those are folks who get to the root of the problems." For this organizer, remaining "close to the ground" was the hallmark of rigorous organizing. Similarly, an organizer who works on local housing issues argued that "the focus of organizing on national politics … is just a waste of time because, you know, our

national politics are so dysfunctional. We believe in the Greek concept of metis, which is local knowledge." They contend that national think tanks and policy organizations disconnected from such local knowledge fail to generate policy solutions and demands that will substantively address many issues.

But there is not consensus on how such rigor is defined and practiced, and other interviewees expressed concern over the assumption that local organizing is inherently more rigorous. Several organizers who work at broader scales expressed this, with one observing, "I see so many local organizers that just stay committed to their cities." While such organizing is invaluable, it can miss opportunities to "join forces with our neighbors in other places, learn from them, and collaborate."

> "There is a crisis of confusion about what organizing is and a very U.S. infatuation with the new, with constant creativity."

Some interviewees worried that the call for rigor was coded language used by organizers who are dismissive of new experimentation and more "creative" organizing approaches. These interviewees are concerned that organizing methods that proved effective at one scale (for instance, organizing neighborhood residents to persuade the mayor to open a migrant shelter) may be less effective at another (for instance, where federal government approval is required to change border policy or grant citizenship). From this perspective, a return to pre-existing definitions of rigor alone is inadequate. Instead, these organizers call for innovative organizing methodologies capable of building a new left-liberal consensus to stop the rise of authoritarianism and the capture of semi-democratic institutions by undemocratic forces.

5. Difficulty building real power via electoral work

Many interviewees expressed real ambivalence over the promise — versus the actual impact — of electoral work. While electoral work often receives the greatest philanthropic investment and donor support compared to other forms of organizing, a growing number of leaders feel trapped by the necessity to do the short-term work of voter registration and mobilization. The practices used in electoral work are often insufficient to develop an organizer's full skill set, and the discussions with members about power-building are incomplete when limited by the framework of an urgent electoral cycle. Electoral work uses a significant number of organizer and mobilizer hours each year — energy that might otherwise go to deeper organizing.

One veteran organizer argued that "ten to fifteen years ago, there were not as many grassroots organizing groups who had electoral infrastructure." At that time, organizations doing electoral work made the pitch to funders that organizing groups are "the cheaper place to invest money, because we already do this work out in communities." Today, there is considerably more funding allocated to the infrastructure for voter contact. But organizers worry that the result of this funding and "all the transactional and electoral realities of boom and bust investments in the field" is that it "hollows out organizations" that are now incentivized to chase electoral money at the expense of "democracy building and practice of organizing." Many organizers expressed frustration about the amount of time they spend working on elections — and the fact that elections don't always expand or strengthen the base of members — but were unsure how to refocus on organizing without sacrificing either key funding from philanthropy or political power that is a crucial condition for achieving major structural reforms.

> “There is a lot of over obsession with trying to go back to organizing models… We’re in a moment of such cultural and institutional and realtional difference, especially post-pandemic. Communities are operating differently but we never actually changed the structures in which we organize.”

6. Groups are struggling to organize in digitally -mediated spaces

As far as new tools for organizing, our respondents held widely divergent views on digital organizing — what it is, how useful it is, how to use it, and how it affects organizing in general. Some see digital organizing as the use of digital spaces for gathering; some see it as a medium of intra-movement coordination; and others see it as a tool for online-to-offline mobilization. Several expressed confusion about what online-to-offline organizing looks like in practice and what the results of it have been.

Some interviewees believe we rely on social media too much, while others believe we don’t use it enough. Some fear that digital organizing facilitates spectatorship rather than genuine participation: “We’re not trying to build fans. We’re trying to build base. And I feel like there’s a lot of people who want to be fans of organizing work but they don’t actually [want to] lift a finger and go out the door to talk to their neighbor.” Others believe genuine participation and belonging are possible online: “We actually need to be building digital belonging, or belonging in the digital arena, in the same ways that we build belonging in person … We’ve not kept our thumb on the innovations that are happening in the way people actually build belonging through participation. Like, people go to church online now. They watch it literally on their phone … I think we have struggled with that.”

Others suspect that lack of rigor and skill in our in-person organizing is only compounded by digital organizing. One interviewee warned, “We can’t just skip over” the basic organizing steps that lead to building community. “If you don’t know how to have a one-on-one conversation, and then be able to assess if that was a good conversation, a bad conversation, or if this is someone that is not at all with you — how can you do that through texts? I think we just can’t jump over that.”

Organizers clearly lack spaces for frank discussion, learning and experimentation around these questions.

7. Crisis in the organizing talent pipeline

Perhaps the clearest point of consensus across all the interviews is that the organizing field is experiencing a critical lack of developed talent at all levels of organizing, particularly the levels of lead organizer, organizing director, and other roles that require significant skill and experience. Because the pool of high-skill talent is so limited, many organizers saw themselves or others end up in positions they were unprepared to hold effectively.

As one organizer put it, there is “a massive pipeline problem of organizing leaders, and the people who are the best organizers of our generation became executive directors and are running programs.” They point out that groups also “need high-level talent focused on leading the organizing, and I think it’s become a self-perpetuating cycle where we pulled the people who could train people. We don’t have the pipeline, so we’re missing directors, we’re missing coordinators, we’re missing leads, and we’re missing senior organizers … The pipeline is just, like, drying up.”

> “We’re not doing enough political education. We don’t have a bench of people who can do it. We aren’t taking time to do it.”

Several factors play into the talent pipeline crisis, much of it centering on a lack of training itself. While millions have been activated over the last decade through Occupy, the Movement for Black Lives, the Bernie Sanders campaign, the Women's March, and the recent mobilizations around Gaza, the field has not yet figured out how to find, hire, and train the best leaders emerging from those moments. Doing so would require organizations to have robust training programs that orient leaders from activism to organizing and from loose formations to more structured, permanent organizations. This includes training for volunteers, staff, and volunteers transitioning to staff roles, a transition that remains ill-defined and undersupported inside our organizations.

> "There is not enough training — and what exists is sending people off to an experience, not being guided and supervised closely by someone who has lived through challenging campaigns."

What would be the content of this training? If 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. As one longtime organizer put it, "A lot of folks have not come up being trained in that approach to the work. I think what passes for strategic thinking these days lacks a certain kind of power analysis. We all fall into it … I say that with some humility and understand that people are trying, but there isn't a culture where we have a shared political analysis about the power that needs to be built." They said they need more political education and more critical thinking about organizing itself, situating what they do in historical context and evaluating their results.

Interviewees also mentioned that to integrate the lessons of training, more people are needed to function as mentors who coach organizers and shadow them in the day-to-day work. This would require us to pace the work differently and protect more space for supervisors and mentors to model skills and practices and offer feedback and coaching to newer organizers.

Some interviewees noticed that many of the field's most successful and influential organizers in place today have emerged from a few centers of organizing and even from specific campaigns, such as the national Justice for Janitors organizing launched in the early 1990s. Yet, too few organizers currently in the field have had those kinds of opportunities to learn and receive training while embedded in a sophisticated, large-scale campaign. To build this collective fluency among a critical mass of young organizers, campaigns would have to foreground training, transferring organizing skills and creating intentional learning experiences among groups of new organizers.

Retention is also a perennial problem, perhaps made more acute by COVID and other external factors. Retention problems impact not only organizations but also the entire field's craft and creativity. Organizers routinely complain of burnout related to exhaustion, internal organizational strife, discouragement about their impact, and a lack of opportunities for deep learning and development. Senior staff are often so exhausted from running even small- to mid-sized organizations that they leave organizational leadership entirely instead of transitioning into new roles or building something at the next level of scale. When we fail to retain experienced organizers, we sever the pipeline of organizing mentors and hamper real sophistication in the field. Interviewees said organizations also need to strengthen finance and human resources infrastructure to create a pipeline of expert senior staff to help in those capacities.

8. Ineffective use of direct action

Interviewees spoke often about the need to employ nonviolent direct action more frequently and effectively. Staff may be following cautious legal guidance in a time of heightened scrutiny, responding to concerns from funders who demand strict adherence to legal guidelines, or be fearful themselves of confrontation with police or decision-makers.

One interviewee stated, "I just feel like we've lost the art of direct action," citing the example of the early suffragette movement that was deeply flawed in its treatment of race but forced confrontation with authorities. The interviewee pointed out, "[Some of those activists] got fucking force-fed. They got trampled by horses. If we were trying to tell people this could be an outcome, no one would do it … Where has that gone? Because that also is to me one of the most powerful tools we've ever had … I don't see real action anymore. I do not see real risk. And again, I think that's more because the professional side squashes it."

When direct action is employed, how we employ it is a matter of debate. One seasoned organizer was frustrated that direct action today "is always symbolic. And we suck at telling a visual story of people taking action. We post photos of memes but we are very much losing, I think, on the visual storytelling of people organizing and taking action, because we have very little discipline." The same organizer worried that most direct action today does not disrupt power in a structural sense, as a labor strike does when it stops production. On the whole, our direct actions are currently animated more by a need to express outrage than strategic attempts to shape the public narrative, earn media attention, move targets or impose real costs.

One concern interviewees had about this "expressive" mode of direct action is that it is less likely to bring in constituencies who don't already agree with us. Some organizers worry about direct action using maximalist demands for sweeping changes that do not yet have the support of a deep, wide base; polarizing against elected officials who are progressive on many issues but not the issue at hand; and employing tactics that the public might regard as destructive. We see the need for much more

study, training, and generative debate to help practitioners with different viewpoints learn with each other, challenge each other, and ground their practices in a larger strategic rationale.

> "Another reason direct action is not working is because spectacle and capturing media attention was so essential… Now we are so inundated by protests from every corner of society that we are protested out."

9. Experienced organizers overwhelmed by internal organizational work

Many interviewees stated that senior staff end up prioritizing staff management and fundraising over external- or membership-facing efforts to realize their organization's purpose. Organizations have been undergoing significant cultural shifts around issues of self-care and workload among staff and have been engaged in internal reckoning around issues of racial justice and hierarchy. Many cited Maurice Mitchell's article about the organizational tensions that have overwhelmed leaders who might otherwise be strategizing and charting the course for their organizations through challenging political terrain.

As a field, organizing has professionalized, and staff-driven models of organizing dominate. We heard strong disagreement about the value — and necessity — of this professionalization. There is disagreement in organizations about which responsibilities staff rather than volunteers or members need to hold. Interviewees also reported internal misalignment, often along generational lines, about the appropriate staff duties and workload in base-building organizations. Although older staff tend to hold the highest-ranking positions in organizations, and were a substantial portion of interviewees, we were unable to sufficiently explore what is preventing those high-ranking staff from institutionalizing their expectations of younger, more junior staff.

One organizer with over 30 years of experience explained the dynamics this way: "So many organizations have a whole [set of] people my age who came into leadership and were around when the nonprofit wasn't a sector. And we were organizing and then got a grant to organize, and we were like 'Oh shit, I might not have to work another job, this is great. I'm gonna go so hard!' … There was genuine organizing going on at that time. And I feel like I made sacrifices for organizing that I understood. I think there's a whole generation that we have not convinced about a strategy — why organizing matters, why it makes difference to things they care about."

Staff unionization within organizing groups has accelerated in recent years. Those unionization efforts created a pathway for staff grievances to be adjudicated but learning to engage in collective bargaining has created additional responsibilities for workers and management alike. Many organizations have also been grappling with the ways that the oppressive dynamics they seek to change in the wider world are mirrored interpersonally and structurally inside of progressive organizations. Internal conflict has laid bare problems in management, HR infrastructure, accountability mechanisms, training, waning excitement around vision and strategy, and decision-making structures. This cluster of dynamics is the subject of a variety of initiatives like Beyond Neutrality and All Due Respect.

> "I need my time on the ground. And I'm not sure how many of my peers are actually on the ground organizing. I'm still organizing."

10. Misalignment over how to coordinate on the national level

Many interviewees expressed the view that the field is not positioned to move together at the national level to meet the challenges of the current moment. Some suggested that organizations need to coordinate differently to strengthen efforts to pass federal policy and legislation.

Local- and state-level interviewees articulated some needs that national networks often meet successfully, including training and crisis intervention for organizations in peril. National networks also coordinate the distribution of substantial resources to organizations in their affiliation circles. Some interviewees saw this as crucial.

But others expressed an interest in revisiting the ways that organizations currently collaborate through national networks. Some interviewees argued that current networks have built large national staff teams with funding that could flow to affiliates instead. They sometimes expressed concern that networks often replicate some of philanthropy's shortcomings, including prioritizing issues that have not emerged organically from the base.

Several interviewees remarked on the absence of clear strategies for collaboration across models and approaches to organizing ("ecosystemic collaboration") as opposed to cross-organizational collaboration in coalitions in which all organizations share the same model of organizing. Without a clear model for ecosystemic collaboration, many organizers reported feeling scattered and spread thin by working in organizations that were often attempting to be the ecosystem rather than serve as one essential part of it. There is no clear place within the organizing field to anchor the creation of ecosystemic collaboration and strategy across lineages of organizing.

> "We assume that the right is out-organizing us because they have more money. And they do. But they also have unity of vision. There's 100 million visions that exist on literally thousands of Google Docs that no one will see... We are building toward the same thing in the next-hundred-years sense, but it doesn't feel like we're building toward the same thing in the next five years or in the next 10 years."

11. Contested Definitions and Roles for Leaders

A majority of interviewees mentioned leadership as a crucial element of base-building, but a point of frustration for many was the role — and definition — of a leader. Two related themes emerged:

1. Many believe we have lost rigor around leader identification. Some lineages of organizing, like the Industrial Areas Foundation and many labor unions, train organizers explicitly to identify leaders as those who have "followers." They distinguish leaders defined in this way from activists who are willing to take personal risk and get involved but do not have the same ability to influence others.

2. Many interviewees also pointed to disagreements about a leader's responsibilities. Most labor and Alinskyite organizations expect staff to play a behind-the-scenes role of coordinating members and developing them to be spokespeople, recruiting leaders and decision-makers; spokespeople are sharply distinguished

from organizers. By contrast, protest movements often equate spokespeople with organizational leaders, contributing to the rise of "influencer culture" on the left. When organizations hire people politicized by protest movements, they are likely to encounter tensions over roles and expectations. This intersects with real, long-standing disagreements in the field about whether an organizer must stand at the back of the room instead of speaking on the megaphone, particularly when that organizer comes from the base of the organization.

We suspect that tensions around leadership relate to distinctions between organizing models that place different emphasis on targets and recruitment methods. Alinskyite organizing generally targets specific decision-makers, encouraging a type of leadership that is less suited for mass media, while protest movements use traditional and social media to galvanize the public. Most labor organizing is behind-the-scenes even though strikes, like those of Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and the UAW, sometimes elevate labor leaders into the national spotlight. The proliferation of organizing strategies in the 21st century reveals how leadership and strategy are intimately related.

As one organizer put it, "Depending on what your theory of change is, you define organizing in a particular way. I believe that we need strong mass movements and strong institutions. I have evolved from the dogmatic type to really value activism as well. I know, people are like, 'Oh, that's not organizing.' I agree. It's not organizing. But it is sparking movement moments and ultimately what we're doing is engaging people to tap into their own courage and appetite for transformation."

"What I think is very refreshing is that the debate about what is organizing versus activism seems to have actually quieted. I'm just here for people taking action, whatever that looks like. I thought that that was not a very useful debate, unless it was coupled with more robust training and resources."

“I also think we have to stop creating social justice celebrities and only rewarding them for being a celebrity. You know, it’s like if LeBron James came out and said, ‘Hey, this is strategy for Ohio.’ LeBron is not a practitioner. He is a ballplayer, right. Let him talk about basketball. But because he’s a celebrity, people would listen.”

The Role of Philanthropy

Our interviewers spoke at length about the role of resources in shaping the craft of organizing in this moment. A number of interviewees hail from labor unions or other organizations that are partly or fully resourced though independent revenue. However, the vast majority of our interviewees work in organizations that are substantially, if not entirely, funded with grants from private philanthropy. Some of the organizations supplement this philanthropic support with government funding, member dues, individual donations, fee-for-service models, or other funding streams.

This section summarizes interviewees' suggestions about the ways that private and institutional foundations can improve their practices to help catalyze more powerful organizing in the field. Interviewees recognized the meaningful improvements that many foundations have made, such as moving more resources through general operating funding to facilitate organizing. Our interviews sought to surface other ideas for improvement that would enable powerful organizing.

The following themes emerged most clearly from our interviews:

1. Painfully insufficient resources for organizing

Philanthropy isn't funding organizing at anywhere near sufficient scale. There was broad consensus that the gap between what it would cost to do bigger, fully-staffed organizing and the funding available is vast. Grassroots organizations today are not organizing against a local landlord, mayor or employer but against sprawling publicly-traded companies and investment firms as well as networks of anti-democracy advocacy groups backed by billionaire funders. And while corporations and their allies benefit from billions of dollars in public and private investments in hundreds of business, schools, law schools, and professional programs to meet their personnel and talent needs, organizers have no equivalent training and development infrastructure from which to draw.

Several interviewees noted that the field has more money for organizing — and more people with the title of "organizer" — than ever before, but we have not seen a corresponding increase in people power. This observation points to a need to match financial resources with coordination to refine strategy and address the dynamics within organizers' control that are impeding power-building.

> "Funding is too many commitments for too little resources. It feels like foundations are actually giving five percent or less of what we would need to really do the work... And it's not keeping up with unions in nonprofit workplaces or salaries of organizers."

2. Distorted organizing priorities

Philanthropy largely dictates organizing priorities, instead of the field identifying and driving those priorities. These shifting priorities have resulted in what one interviewee described as "funder yoga," whereby organizations contort their staff and their organizing to just be able to sustain the work. One interviewee described this as "a hamster wheel where organizers are forced to hustle to make the funding fit into a power-building strategy."

3. Philanthropic processes inhibiting quality

Philanthropic processes are rarely oriented to supporting high-quality organizing. Few funders come from organizing backgrounds and philanthropy funnels more money to direct services, narrative, and electoral work than to the

organizing that builds the power to shift what is possible in all these arenas. Most funders lack familiarity with how to identify good organizing, and most processes for grant-making require reporting and assessment on metrics that are not indicative of high-quality organizing.

4. Issue and electoral focus weakening base building

Interviewees agreed that the biggest money available to the field flows to electoral work — but too late and with far too many rigid limitations to enable high-quality organizing — and then dries up when that election is done. Grants centered on specific issue campaigns prioritize modest legislative victories over the long-term work to build power to win major structural reforms. These grants rarely fully fund the campaigns they are designed to support and are far too small to allow for deeper and longer-term power-building.

> "The amount of time and energy devoted to electoral organizing has not moved the needle. It has been difficult to get people to buy in — they are feeling dismayed and let down."

5. Short term funding cycles

Funding cycles are also too short to allow for implementation of issue wins, much less long-term base-building or more transformational work. After a legislative or policy win, our opponents are hard at work penalizing the elected officials and others who helped us get to victory. Organizers do not have the resources to overcome backlash from the opposition and see the campaign through to completion.

6. Tendency to elevate charismatic leaders

The process of competing for grants, in part by leveraging a personal or organizational brand profile, tends to result in the elevation and resourcing of a certain kind of charismatic executive — not necessarily a leader with followers nor someone with a powerful background in the craft of organizing. Powerful spokespeople and leaders with a public presence are valuable to organizing groups. However, interviewees felt that funders often do not know how to recognize the leaders who have organizing or organization-building chops if those chops are not paired with a swashbuckling presence. Many interviewees felt that this is in direct contradiction to organizing principles that mandate centering the leadership of the organization's members.

> "There's just tremendous pressure on new organizers that they should be celebrities and public people... 30 years ago, it was the reverse — the pressure was to not be a public person. The pressure on you was, you get evaluated by the leaders that you develop in the organization, not whether you personally have 20,000 followers or are in the media. And that change has also been fueled by funders."

7. Suppressing key strategies

Philanthropy is skittish about disruption, nonviolent direct action, and challenging the economic power of corporations and super-wealthy individuals with disproportionate political influence. One interviewee captured a consensus opinion when she said, "More funders need to get over the apprehension of challenging their existence, and capital, you know, and just recognize that the only way we're going to advance structural change is through building power." Foundations have also historically shied away from aligning with labor to achieve shared priorities, stymying efforts to strengthen collaboration across labor and community organizing in their collective efforts to rein in corporate power.

> "Workers have to be in motion for us to, you know, present a credible threat to the powers that be, and so the fact that philanthropy is not talking to labor in a substantive way is a big problem. I am just outraged about the wrong experts being brought into philanthropic democracy spaces to advise. We have to figure out a way to make labor a partner."

Conclusion

Our interviewees consistently stated they felt ill-prepared to contend with fascism and the capture of democratic institutions. They also shared concerns about artificial intelligence, the climate crisis and corresponding apartheid, and rollbacks on civil rights for all oppressed groups. For all the initiatives that study the conservative movement, organizers do not feel any better prepared to overcome it. One said: "There is a Heritage Foundation manifesto to deconstruct government [Project 2025]. Are we prepared for that?" Others noted that we are not prepared to deal with chronic crises that have been in our midst for decades, including corporate consolidation, a shrinking labor movement, and the dismantling of Indian tribal sovereignty.

We offer this interim report as a discussion paper. The second half of the Strengthening Organizing Project will convene organizers across the ecosystem to identify what is missing from this interim analysis and workshop solutions to the challenges identified here. Conversations will focus on how to sharpen our understanding of power, how to strategize within and across different lineages of organizing, who and how many people we collectively need to organize, and how to develop the leadership and rigor of a progressive movement that has grown dramatically in size but not necessarily in skill. The project will also facilitate organizers through the core contradictions and debates they highlighted in the interviews, including around the tradeoffs of scale and depth, professionalization and sacrifice, the need for political power and the demands of electoral campaigns, the necessity of charismatic leadership in movement-building alongside many other essential styles of leadership. Through learning sessions, retreats, and ongoing interviews, Strengthening Organizing will refine the field's diagnosis of the challenges we are facing, clarifying where the field is weak and where it is strong, where existing efforts need more rigor and resources, and where new experimentation is needed. This project will bring together hundreds of ambitious organizers who are eager to revisit their assumptions, learn from each other's hard-won successes and failures, and chart a path forward for 21st-century organizing.

Appendix A: About the Authors

Authors and the Strengthening Organizing Core Team

Connie Razza: Connie Razza is the executive director of Future Currents (formerly Social and Economic Justice Leaders Project), a movement utility that creates space for movement leaders and social justice organizations to prepare for the future we might face, build resilient relationships to confront crises and opportunities together, and develop strategies to achieve the future we deserve. Before joining Future Currents, Connie built the strategic research department and served as chief of campaigns at the Center for Popular Democracy. She also served as the vice president of policy and research at Demos, a senior policy analyst for health issues at the New York City Council, and a union organizer and strategic research campaigner. She currently chairs the Movement Oversight Committee for the Powering a New Economy Fund and the National Employment Law Project board.

Cristina Jiménez: Cristina Jiménez Moreta is an award-winning community organizer, political strategist, and a leading voice in movements for social justice. She is co-founder and former executive director of United We Dream, the largest immigrant youth-led organization in the country. She is currently a distinguished lecturer with the City College of New York's Colin Powell School at the City of University of New York and co-chair of the Leadership for Democracy and Social Justice. In recognition of her work as a community organizer and movement strategist, Cristina has received a 2017 MacArthur Fellowship, the Four Freedoms Award, and a spot on the 2018 TIME 100 Most Influential People List.

Crystal Zermeño: Crystal Zermeño has worked for 24 years in labor, politics, and community organizing with expertise in strategic corporate campaigning and electoral base-building and organizing. Most recently she served in various capacities with the Texas Organizing Project, working for 10 years with community leaders to build a progressive voting block and road map to change the Texas electorate. She has worked for the Service Employees International Union; PowerPAC.org; the Center for Popular Democracy; and various political campaigns, including Beto for Texas, several California races, and independent expenditure campaigns in the Southwest. Crystal is a native of Houston and a graduate of Stanford University and is on the board of PowerPAC.org and United for Respect.

Deborah Axt: Deborah Axt is a coach and strategy consultant for movement organizations and their leaders. After a previous life as a union organizer, Deb spent two decades helping to build the membership-based Make the Road New York, its sister 501C4, and eventually second-generation Make the Road organizations across the country. Deb helped lead the use of survival services and litigation together with organizing, create new models combining the best of community and labor organizing methods, and experiment with ways that structured power-building organizations can bring their particular strengths to movement upsurge moments. Deb co-led Make the Road through the Trump era and the height of the pandemic and co-led dozens of campaigns, like those that blocked Amazon from building its HQ2 in New York. And she established a $2.1 billion Excluded Workers fund to support New Yorkers barred from unemployment and COVID relief.

Lissy Romanow: Lissy Romanow grew up in Massachusetts, where she served as a lead organizer with Neighbor to Neighbor. She became interested in social movements while working as a trainer with the Ayni Institute and helped launch Momentum, a training organization dedicated to building social movement organizations for the 21st century. After serving as its executive director for five years, she is now conducting research for a book on the historical evolution of organizing methods in the U.S. She is thrilled to be working with the Strengthening Organizing team to bridge the realms of research and organizing.

Nsé Ufot: Nsé Ufot is the founder of New South super PAC and founding CEO of the New Georgia Project (NGP), a nonpartisan, civic engagement nonprofit organization started by leader Stacey Abrams in 2013. Under Nse's leadership, NGP helped over 700,000 Georgians register to vote. Each year, NGP organizers and volunteers have millions of high-quality, face-to-face conversations with young Georgians, Georgians of color, women, and femmes. Its organizing efforts combined with producing popular mobile video games, the bold and aggressive political research agenda Ufot led, and the smart ways in which NGP leveraged culture and cultural organizing. That led to a historic increase in voter participation and earned NGP credit for "flipping Georgia" in the 2020 presidential elections and helping Georgians elect their first African American and Jewish U.S. Senators.

Travon Anderson: Travon Anderson's roots are deeply grounded in the arts and racial justice. He is the project manager for Strengthening Organizing at Future Currents, with over seven years of experience in project management, thought partnership, operations, and organizational development. He takes pride in being systems-oriented and being most adept at managing personal relationships with colleagues and key stakeholders. He is happy to have recently joined this team of brilliant minds and is excited to support them in bringing their ideas to life.

Academic Partner Team

Daniel Martinez HoSang: Daniel Martinez HoSang is professor of American Studies and Political Science at Yale University and the author, co-author, or co-editor of six books on racial justice, social movements, and racial politics, including most recently "A Wider Type of Freedom: How Struggles for Racial Justice Liberate Everyone." A long-time community organizer and trainer, he is a steering committee member of the Anti-Racist Teaching & Learning Collective in Connecticut.

Zoe Lee-Park: Zoe Lee-Park is a Master of Environmental Science student at the Yale School of the Environment. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Legal Studies and a Bachelor of Science in Society and Environment from the University of California, Berkeley. She has led and supported environmental justice initiatives at the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the NAACP.

Sophia Lindner: Sophie Linder is a doctoral student in the Sociology and African American Studies departments at Yale University. Her research focuses on relationships between race, cultural narrative, and national belonging, with attention to African diasporic populations and their navigation of these relationships.

Appendix B: Methodology

Between January and November 2023, the five member Future Currents core team conducted over 100 interviews for this report, predominantly via Zoom.

After a first round of interviews determined interviewees' perceived areas of interest regarding the state of organizing, the team consolidated these topics into a flexible interview guide for a second round of more substantial inquiry.

As a whole, organizers with extensive experience — often in the role of executive director, organizing director, or lead organizer — are heavily represented in the group and ensured the report would capture perspectives honed from years of direct organizing experience. The interview pool was also limited to organizers who are based in the U.S. and focus predominantly on domestic issues.

Future interview-based research projects would benefit from additional groups of organizers who are newer to the field as well as those who work on and address issues outside the United States.

The demographic characteristics of the interviewees are summarized in the charts below, including short notes that explain the process through which particular aggregated totals were reached.

Years in Organizing:

Years in organizing maximized the numerical answer to whichever number was reported (e.g., “7-8 years” to 8; “over 30 years” to 30). The years in organizing range from 5 to 60, with an average of about 22 years.

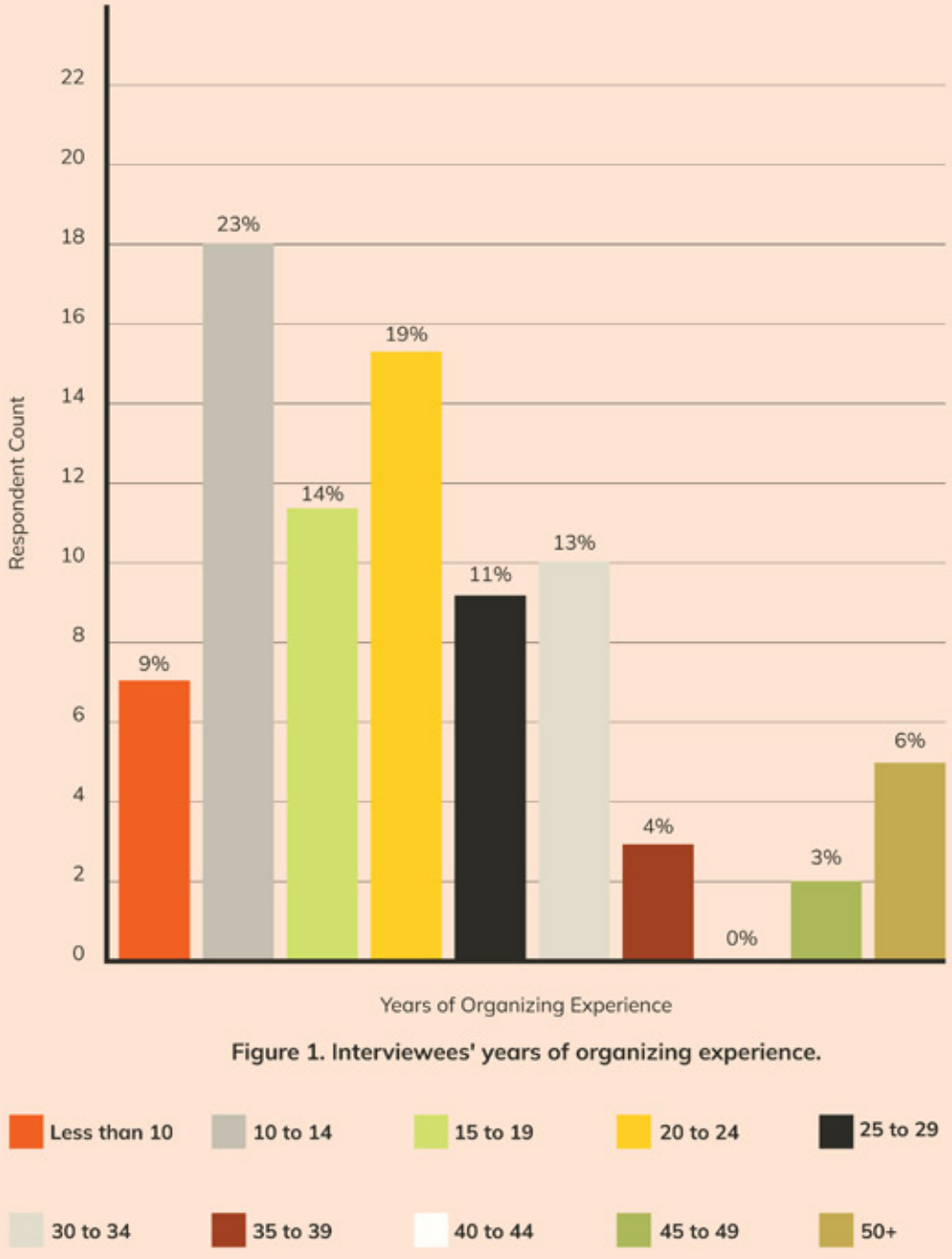


Figure 1. Interviewees' years of organizing experience.

Organizational lineage:

Organizational lineage was grouped into constituency- and identity-based (29%), institution- and faith-based (4%), labor-based (5%), movement-based (15%), place- and issue-based (29%), and workplace- and worker-based (18%). These categories were grouped upon smaller reported categories such as disability-based, congregation-based, and progressive labor-based. Constituency/identity and place/issue combined comprise just over half of the sample (58%).

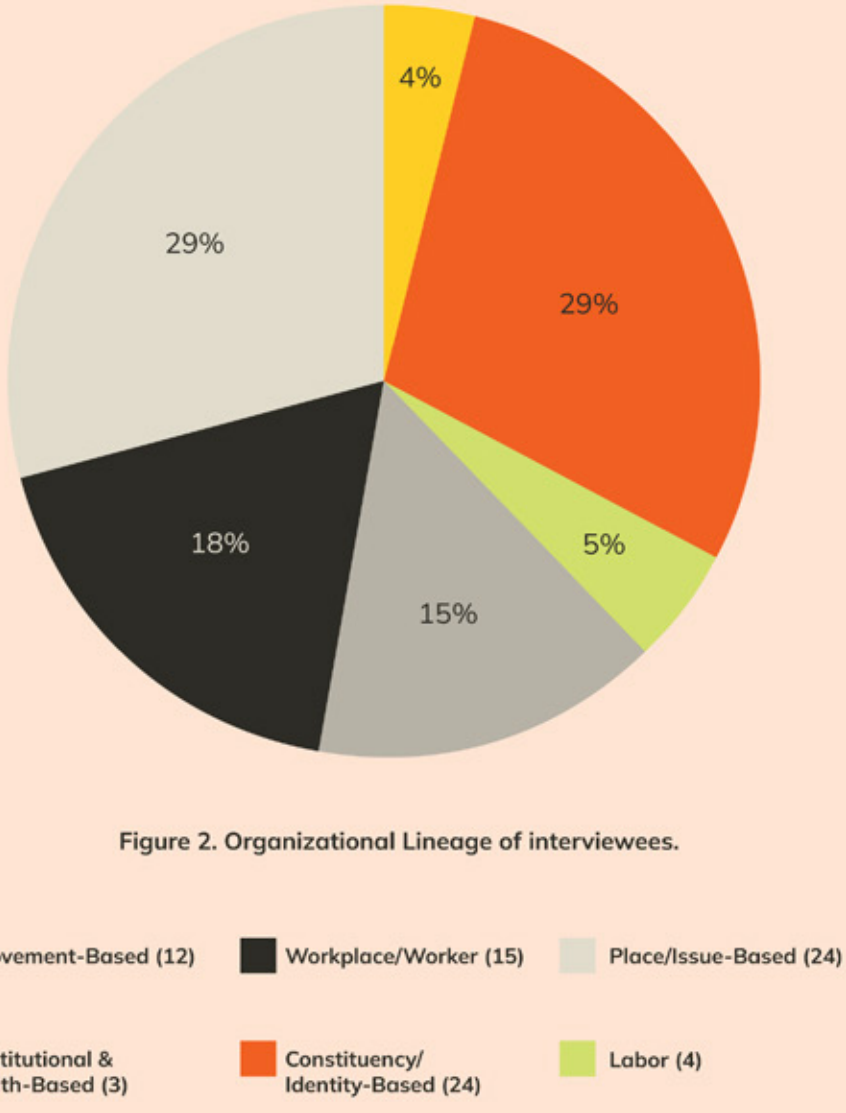


Figure 2. Organizational Lineage of interviewees.

Region:

Region grouped the reported answers on local, state, and national levels into five categories, with the following percentage per category: California/West Coast (10%), Midwest (11%), Northeast (15%), South (15%), Southwest (8%), and National (41%). The national scope's large majority represents nearly half of the sample, equivalent to the Northeast, South, and Midwest combined.

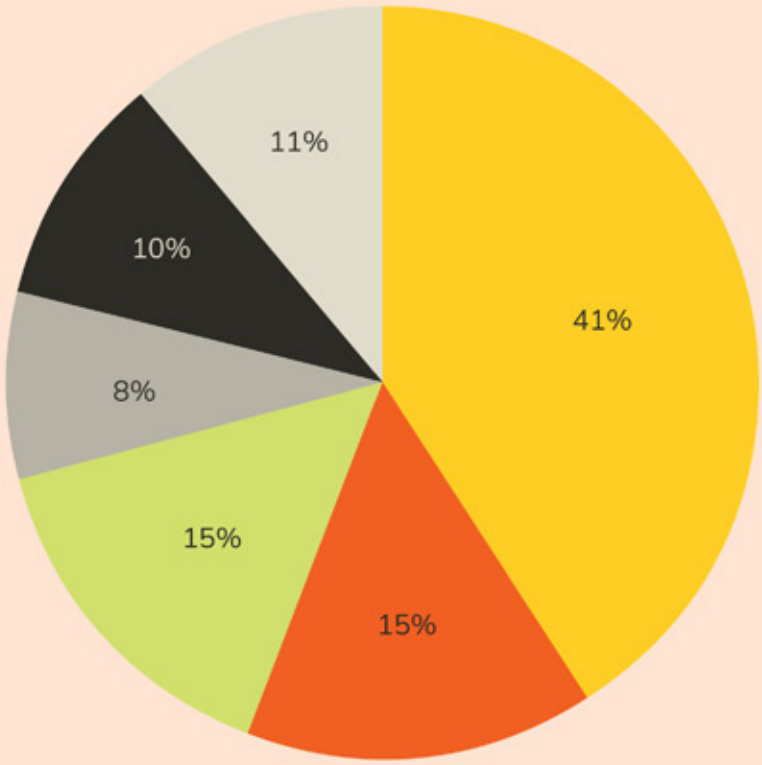
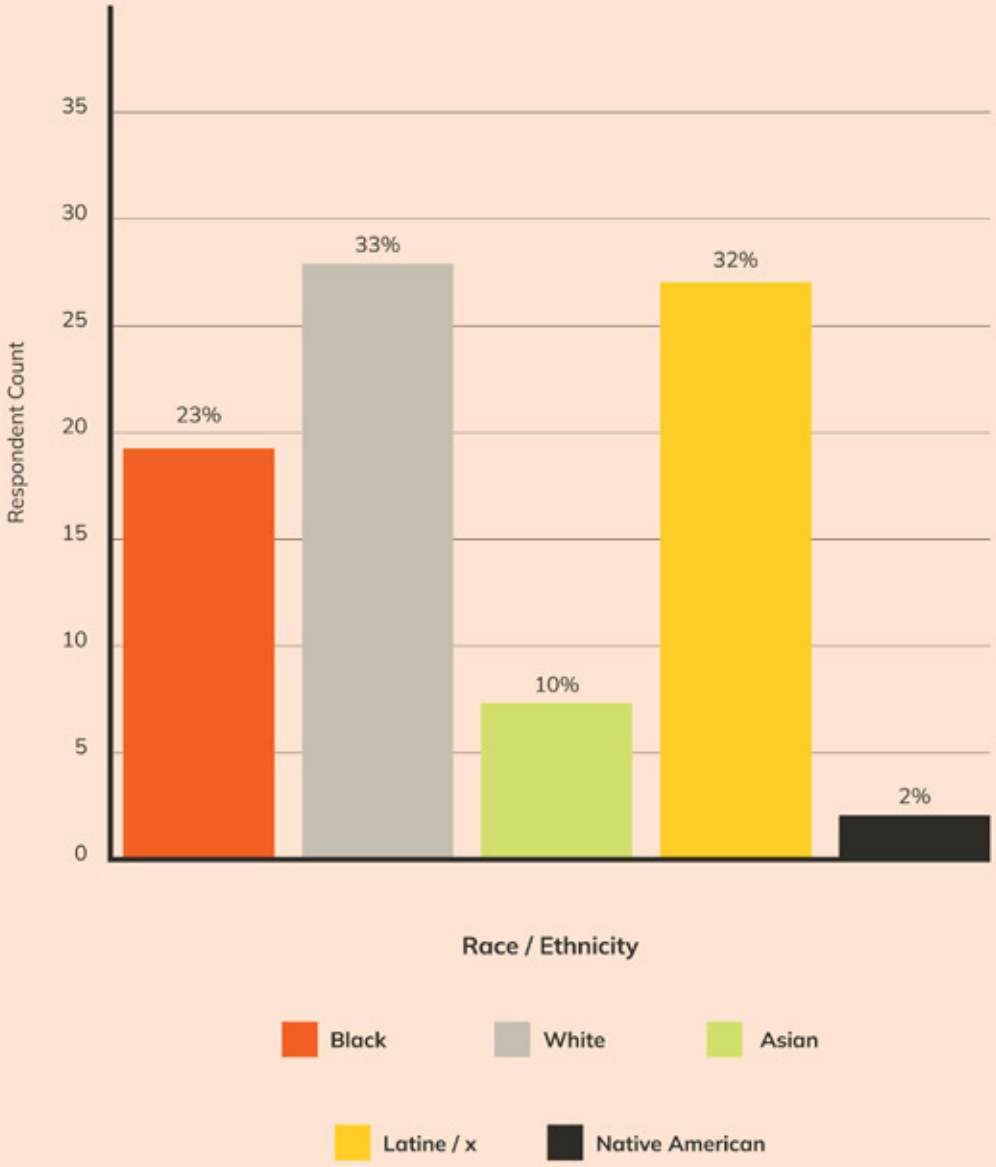


Figure 4. Organizations' regional scope.

Race:

Race's reported answers answered in varying levels of specificity and combination in ethnicity and nationality, including Jewish and Middle Eastern ethnic and religious identification. They were grouped into overlapping categories of Black (23%), White (33%), Asian (22%), Latine/x (32%), and Native American (2%). Latines had the highest rate of multiple identification, with 5/27 (18.5%) also identifying with another race.



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About Future Currents

Future Currents creates the spaces for movement organizations to build resilient relationships, tackle pressing challenges, prepare for possible conditions, and map our way to the future we deserve. We focus on the knotty, chronic, systemic, and often scary obstacles in our daily lives, including authoritarian threats to our democracy, the shifting economic paradigm, and the effort within movements to retool and reshape to meet changing conditions. Our mix of creative methods are key to sparking new understandings, analyses, and strategies that open up the potential for long-term change. Future Currents is a project of the New Venture Fund, a 501(c)(3) public charity.

About The Strengthening Organizing Project

The Strengthening Organizing Project aims to create a space for organizers across tradition, region, and tenure to get to the real solutions, to learn from the strengths of current and past practices, and to identify the gaps in our practice given the new social, economic, political, and cultural context. The project seeds and nurtures resilient relationships between organizers far beyond existing networks to make possible future breakthroughs in critical infrastructure and organizing practice.

Contact

strengtheningorganizing@futurecurrents.org

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