



Fighting Shape: An Assessment of U.S. Organizing

An interim report from
the Strengthening Organizing
Project of Future Currents



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.

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, 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.



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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.

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