

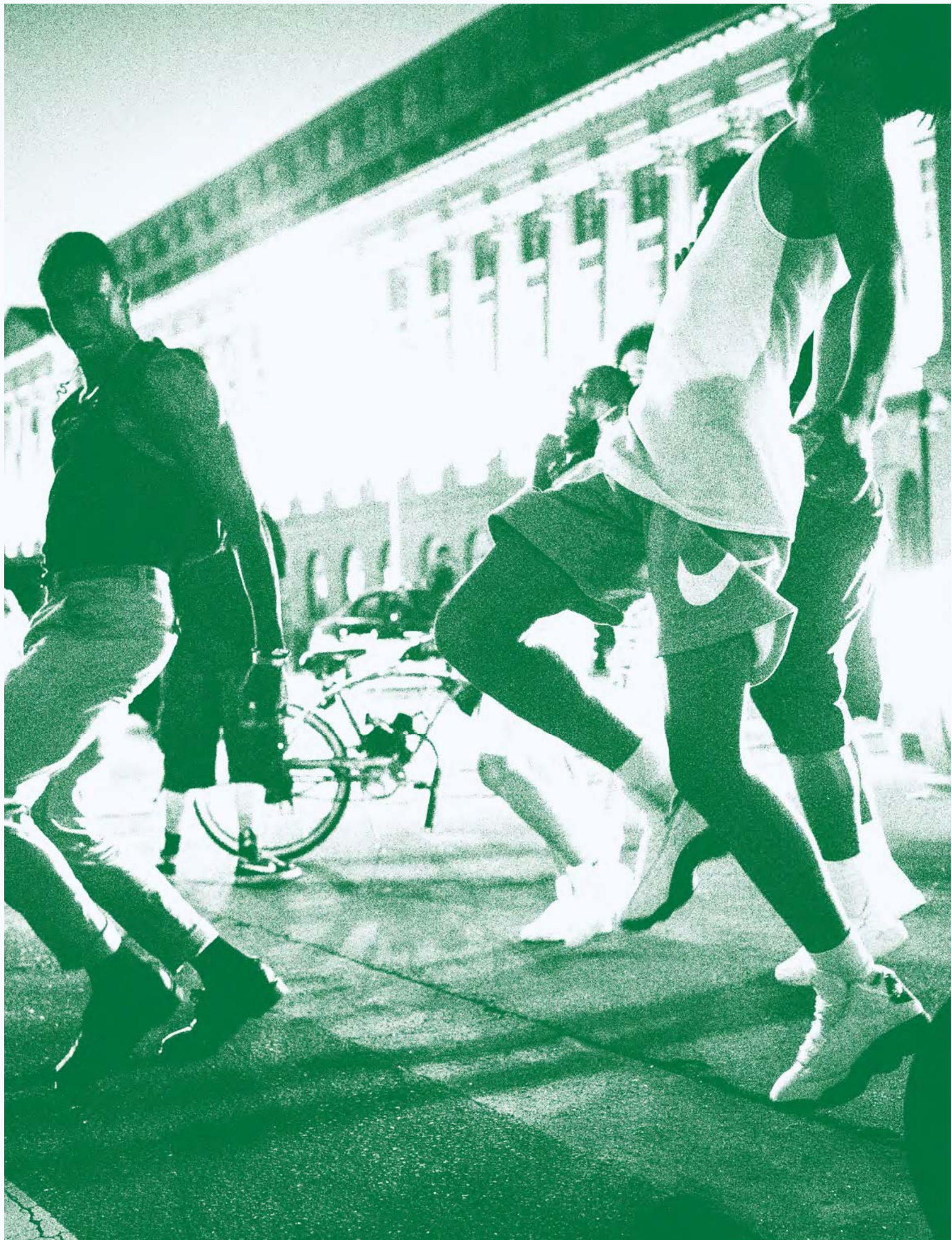


HOPEFUL MONSTERS



MOVEMENT UPSURGES,
MASS PROTEST,
AND SOLIDARITY
IN FLUX

January 2025



**THERE ARE DECADES WHEN NOTHING
HAPPENS AND THERE ARE WEEKS
WHEN DECADES HAPPEN.**

— Vladimir Lenin

**WE DO NOT GROW ABSOLUTELY,
CHRONOLOGICALLY. WE GROW
SOMETIMES IN ONE DIMENSION,
AND NOT IN ANOTHER, UNEVENLY...
THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE
MINGLE AND PULL US BACKWARD,
FORWARD, OR FIX US IN THE
PRESENT. WE ARE MADE UP OF
LAYERS, CELLS, CONSTELLATIONS.**

— Anaïs Nin

SHIT IS FUCKED UP AND BULLSHIT.

— sign seen at Occupy Wall Street

HOPEFUL MONSTERS

*Mass protests make us electrons —
colliding in unexpected and unexplained ways, we reconfigure
ourselves outside of traditional trajectories of change and
constellations of relationships, and reorganize ourselves
to resemble the future.*

By LJ Amsterdam



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Check out the Hopeful Monsters mixtape

INTRO

ORGANIZING IN R/EVOLUTIONARY FLUX



“It can be startling to see someone’s breath, let alone the breathing of a crowd. You usually don’t believe that people extend that far.”

– Jenny Holzer

“The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.”

– Antonio Gramsci

Change is less continuous than we pretend: there are jumps, fluctuations, sudden reorganizations.

Incrementalism, as a theory of change and an organizing orientation, cannot move as fast as we need to win.

Very often wild and unwieldy, a movement upsurge is a wormhole — a shortcut for a long journey — where you enter without knowing precisely where you’ll plop out. These movement moments reveal a topography that defies any suggestion of a smooth, linear direction.

Base-building — deep political education, long-term leadership development, and building coalitions — is the real deal: a true art and a time-tested discipline for creating durable power over time. Movement upsurges — high volumes of protest, dramatizing right and wrong, and accelerating political time — are our laboratories for experimenting with how change happens.

In the early 1970s, Marxist paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould and his collaborator Niles Eldredge disrupted 100 years of accepted scientific sense. Their theory of *punctuated equilibrium* proposed that biological change is in fact not an incremental process (as Charles Darwin claimed), but rather an episodic one. **Change occurs in fits and spurts, often in response to a dramatic change in the external conditions.** Rapid bursts of development are interspaced with long periods of stasis.¹ Species, like the societies we live in, don't need decades to undergo metamorphosis. Sometimes, they need only weeks.

Movement moments — what we are calling “upsurges” — also puncture stasis. Frequently catalyzed by “trigger events” — wars, economic collapses, police brutality, fossil fuel expansions — upsurges drive a wedge into public opinion and ramp up the urgency to act. These “moments of the whirlwind” disrupt linear organizing trajectories.² They are eruptions of energy that can rupture the status quo. Power may suddenly be revealed, reorganized, or up for grabs — in unexpected places and spaces and times.

Iconoclast geneticist Richard Goldschmidt put forward another hypothesis of rapid transformation: one species evolves into a different species through a radical overhaul of its root DNA, rather than by gradually acquiring additional atomistic changes. This overhaul can be so complete and so quick that it potentially incites single-step speciation.³ Goldschmidt dubbed the creatures that emerge from this metamorphosis “*hopeful monsters*.”

A new species, the product of a single-generation revolution.

During upsurges, things that were previously unimaginable quickly become imaginable, possibly even possible.

Movement upsurges are our hopeful monsters — rapid transformations of people, politics, and power.

And they can help us answer questions about how we relate to the catastrophe of neoliberalism, the decline of democracy, the crisis of organizing, the expansion of solidarity, and how we win.



PURPOSE

Together, Future Currents' Direct Action Incubation Lab and [Strengthening Organizing Project](#) asked hundreds of organizers to identify the biggest political moments in their work over the past 15 years. Overwhelmingly, organizers — regardless of issue, lineage, or region — named major movement moments (including the murder of Trayvon Martin, the fight against S.B. 1070, the mobilization around Trump's Muslim Ban) over their organizations' flagship campaigns or policy wins.



Organizers agree that upsurges define our political work and we need them to win. Protest is one of our most potent and plastic tools, so why do we, as organizers, so regularly resent it? Why do we bore ourselves by continuing to approach it in the same way? Why are we unserious about understanding the relationship between upsurges and winning?

Organizers also agree that we urgently need to find ways for structure-based organizing and mass protest moments to coexist. There are mixed opinions about whether upsurges only occur spontaneously or whether they can be engineered, but even though we may not know when the upsurges are coming, we know they *are coming*. And because they repeatedly catch us by surprise, the way we react and relate to each other in those moments is characterized by panic or paralysis.

This report is a call to reckon with our wild and unwieldy “hopeful monsters” rather than see these moments of mass dissent as a disruption to “real organizing.”

For all of us to really rock together in these moments, organizations must lean into playing different roles, embrace specialization, and choose being *functional* over being *at the front*. Upsurges are sometimes collisions, but they can instead be convergences: spaces where different groups are exposed to similar conditions, evolving similar traits, but remaining distinct.

A movement upsurge is a stress test for the ecosystem, and we need to ace it.

“Hopeful Monsters” widens the aperture on upsurges. How can upsurges evolve us toward winning? What can we learn from mass protest that we can apply to organizing beyond moments of the whirlwind? And it considers the ongoing importance of embracing and leveraging dissent, even when it feels frustrating or futile.

We offer four recommendations for organizing dissent for greater effect and impact:

- **OWN OUR NARRATIVE:
DEMONSTRATE MORAL CONSENSUS**
- **MULTIPLY OUR SOLIDARITY:
TURN UP FOR EACH OTHER**
- **EXPAND OUR STRATEGY:
CHANGE THE VENUE**
- **MAXIMIZE OUR POWER:
BUILD OUR BENCH**

The accompanying case studies, co-authored with organizers, concretize these recommendations through actions.

A movement upsurge is a stress test for the ecosystem, and we need to ace it.

PART I: ANALYSIS

WHY WE ARE UPSURGING

*“People need bread
but they seem to be
clamoring for roses.”*

– Scot Nakagawa

Upsurges are periods of action where critical masses of everyday people no longer passively accept the legitimacy of established systems and exert their collective power.

These moments are turbocharged by mass protest, economic disruption, union drives, and new cultural engines. Actions ripple across space and time, often generated by people with no previous action organizing experience or outside the network of nonprofits. Strategist and former Executive Director of Momentum Lissy Romanow says upsurges are moments when “traditional ‘organizer math’ no longer applies: for example, huge swaths of folks turn up at protests without getting a turn out call from an organizer, or large numbers of workers show an affinity for militant tactics. **These moments can lead to massive non-incremental growth in organizations, seismic shifts in public opinion, and substantial openings of legislative possibility.**”⁴

All in weeks, not decades.

The keystone theorist of nonviolent action, Gene Sharp, laid the foundation for a theory of power, struggle, and disruption.⁵ Instead of conceptualizing power as flowing from the top down, Sharp posited that the power of the state is upheld by pillars (for example, government bodies, industries, religion) without which the status quo would collapse. If these institutions withdraw their support, the power structure crumbles and the system falls. The strongest strategies attack the pillars that are both most critical for upholding the system and most vulnerable to your impact.

Nonviolent direct action, civil disobedience, and mass noncooperation are essential tools for knocking pillars out from under the status quo.

Across decades, the [pillars of support](#) tool has helped organizers determine viable points of intervention for campaigns and actions, advancing a theory of change that advocates for mass dissent and disruption as essential to breaking down the system. But some pillars are proving to be immovable or even unrecognizable today. We can feel the sudden nature of the change, and the crisis it creates.

Decaying institutions of democracy and new conglomerations of capital are fusing in seemingly incompatible, weird, and dangerous ways.

Neoliberalism is in such freakish disarray that the traditional pillars of support have become Frankensteins. In their continual shapeshifting, these monsters of authoritarianism, wealth, and white supremacy obfuscate our opportunities for snatching power.

The Left is up against an unrelenting mutation of domination, a mutation moving at sonic speed and easily evading our grasp. We are trying to slay monsters we can barely decipher.

In the early 1970s, at the same time as Gould, Eldredge, and Sharp were writing, massive deregulation and privatization punctuated a new era of economic crisis. As both sides of the political aisle implemented neoliberal policies, demands for social needs were less likely to result in increased provisions, workers' strikes were less likely to be met with concessions, and protest movements were less likely to be answered with legal reforms. Social movements intensified and in response, so did global repression. Political philosopher Michael Hardt describes this repression of popular will as a symptom of the "end of mediation."

Throughout the early and mid-20th century, pillars of governmental and economic power maintained a careful balance: a receptive, interactive function that responded to demands and generated reforms on the one hand, with a guiding function that maintained the overall architecture of power on the other. But the end of mediation meant that "the mechanisms of engagement, negotiation, and reform that had previously been important components of the relationship between power and resistance were now gradually being withdrawn."⁶



Mediation — the membrane between institutional power and civil society — became a sheet of rubber, able to be stretched and contracted but never broken.

Dramatic increases in the consolidation of elite power have resulted in fewer possibilities for dialogue, reform, and incremental change.

It's not just you.

It is, in fact, harder than it used to be to enact change.

So we upsurge.

Countless organizers have told us that they perceive the system to be more recalcitrant, the status quo more static, and the government more unresponsive to public demands — no matter how popular — than ever before.

Yet metamorphic leaps in culture, common sense, everyday language, and some state-level policy wins signal a shift toward a more progressive baseline. Majorities of Americans [support all the meat-and-potato progressive issues](#): minimum wage increases, Medicare for all, rent stabilization, tuition-free colleges, access to abortion, paid parental leave, and increased action on climate change. The magnitude of people turning out to demonstrate their political commitments in action [is greater than ever before](#). Even among those who don't take to the streets, [there is a greater understanding](#) of, and a deeper appreciation for, the purpose of disruptive action. Today's social movements have more resources, infrastructure, and international presence than in any previous generation.⁷ Millennials — radicalized by the Great Recession and incessantly patronizing Boomers — created online organizing and nearly catapulted Bernie Sanders to the presidency. [Seventy percent of Gen Z-ers](#) say they are involved in a social or political cause, and one in three identifies as [“regularly engaged in activism or social justice work.”](#)

If power is in numbers, then we have the numbers.

But “the math isn't mathing.”⁸

And organizers say we don't have a plan that adds up to how we win.⁹

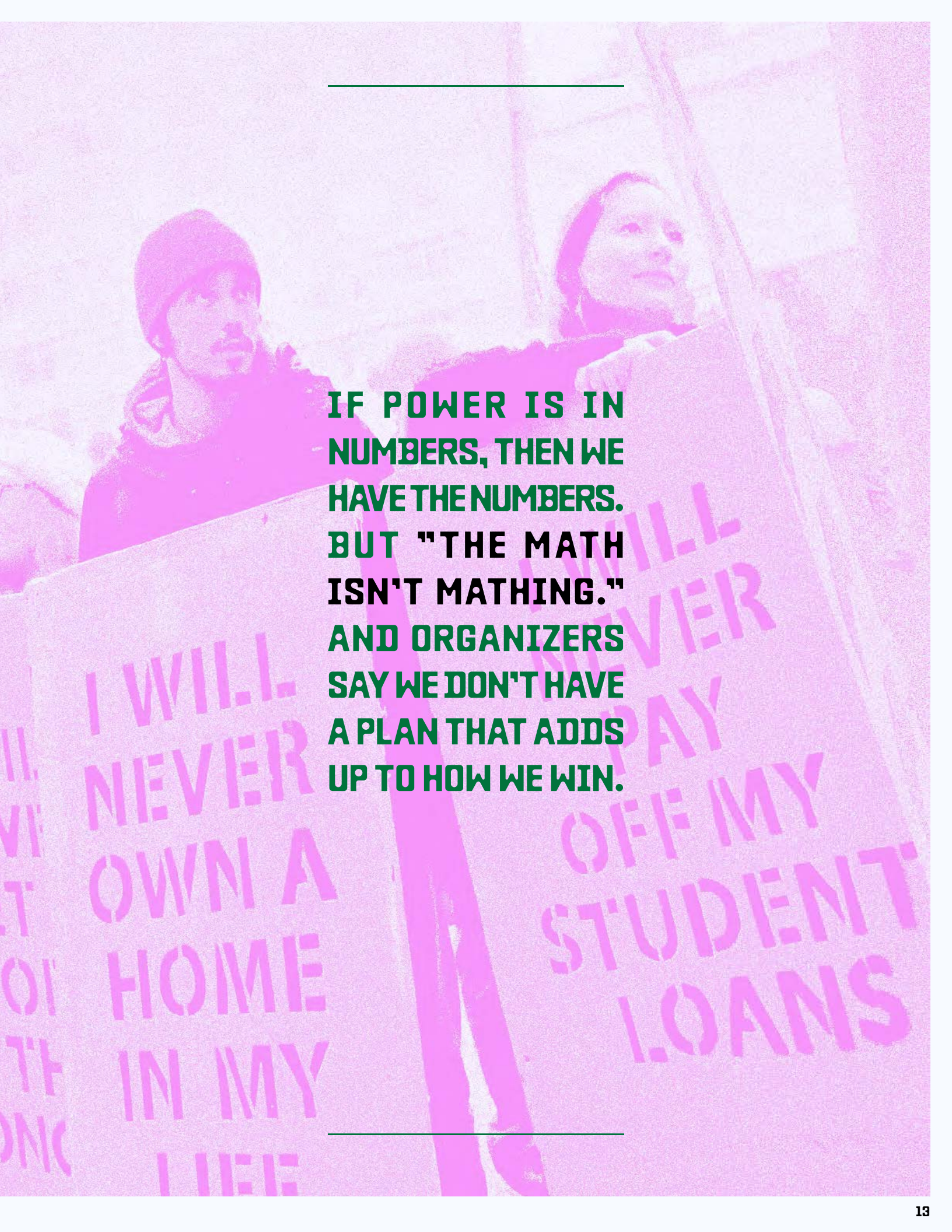
Majorities are losing their efficacy — in the halls of power and in the streets. The calculus has mutated. The violence of our opposition, law enforcement's sympathies with white supremacists, and trumped-up charges for activists have raised the stakes for participating in actions. The rise in anti-protest legislation has us asking whether the First Amendment is even a thing anymore. During the Biden administration, public officials went on record as

[unwilling to be responsive](#) to people's demands — and as we prepare for another Trump administration, we can expect to have little influence on the federal level. We're faced with a gnawing predicament: protest is one of our most powerful tools, huge numbers of people naturally gravitate toward it, but it appears to have diminishing returns.


Most of our organizing traditions are not designed for these conditions. There are more people willing to take action than ever before, but most of our structures cannot absorb them. **Organizers agree that power is in flux in upsurge moments, but it's difficult to analyze it.** Some of our theoretical and popular education tools for understanding action — like the pillars of support — have lost their relevance, so when upsurges hit, we're underprepared for real strategy¹⁰. Many organizers are concerned we're transmitting tactics without analytical application, but even if we were to expand our training and preparation, we'd likely be working with an outdated playbook.¹¹

Upsurges are all about motion. And motion is an imperfect actuality. These moments can be messy. But dissent — mass protest, noncooperation, disruption — can hurl us forward, side to side, and maybe even backwards, toward winning. **We need to hold the fury and to nurture solidarity, in order to explore upsurges' power-building potential.**





**IF POWER IS IN
NUMBERS, THEN WE
HAVE THE NUMBERS.
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MOURN
THE
DEAD,
AND
FIGHT
LIKE
HELL
FOR THE
LIVING

WHY MASS DISSENT MATTERS

*People feel
their power.*

One fundamental benefit of protest is that it connects individuals to something larger than themselves: a collective formation, a shared goal, a vision for the future. A 1999 French anarchist communique, the [Sans Titres Bulletin](#), explained, “Direct action is the expression of the individual’s readiness to fight, to take control of his [sic] life, and to try, directly, to act on the world that surrounds us, to take responsibility for one’s actions and as well for the achievement of the pursued aims.”

People feel their power.

There's debate about whether dissent is a power-building strategy in and of itself. Some say that unless people are absorbed into membership of an organization, they remain unorganized. However, they also say that not only are our organizations ill equipped to absorb people, many do not want to take on folks who don't already fit squarely into their membership. **Mass protest can and does facilitate people coming into something – belonging to something.** Which is why we need to get serious about its ineffable pull and its political purpose even when dissent does not always result in material gains.

*Here's what mass dissent does well.
And why it's worth evolving.*

DISSENT IS A LABORATORY FOR EXPLORING POWER

Upsurges are fits and starts — trials and errors — figuring out how to get us to the future. **When the system cracks open, power can leapfrog past what was previously accepted as the upper bound. We don't know the limits unless we test them.** And because of the shifting terrain of neoliberalism and racial capitalism, even organizers who are deeply grounded in a political analysis and a power map are struggling with how to pry open fissures. Dissent is the advance team: scouting the terrain, poking and prodding to see what reacts, quick to reveal what areas of society will respond with authoritarian backlash or draconian legal measures. Dissent reveals to us where there are critical vulnerabilities and critical opportunities.

DISSENT CASTS LIGHT ON INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES WHILE AFFIRMING OUR COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY

Upsurge moments are often triggered by the failure of an institution, which in turn casts doubt not just on that institution, but the architecture of the state at large. Pillars of society (FEMA or the police, for example) reveal how flimsy they really are when they fail to serve us or simply fail outright. These moments incite a crisis of legitimacy, and when democracy — government of, for, and by the people being governed — breaks down, the public no longer trusts that these institutions will take care of them or govern justly. Public dissent feeds a hunger to express popular will. **Dissent allows for a profound psychic shift in which “democracy” is no longer a concept, but a practice — one that the elite have forgotten and the streets have remembered.** Dissent is activity that simultaneously protects democracy and reimagines it.



DISSENT CHANNELS PEOPLE'S AGENCY AND SPIRIT

Movement upsurges are expressions of agency, though not necessarily of power. In moments like these, organizer Mary Hooks said, “spirit is called to attention:”¹² the metaphysical dimension of agency is potent, which is why even when faced with seemingly impossible odds of changing our conditions, registering our dissent *does something*. At Standing Rock, Kandi Mossett, an organizer with Indigenous Environmental Network, explained the purpose of prayer: prayer is not a literal plea to stop the pipeline, but the act of praying changes us. It changes us into people who are in right relationship with the land and with each other. **Protest is an intervention into inertia: action is an antidote to existential dread, political melancholia, and powerlessness.** In medical crises, first responders often report less secondary trauma than bystanders. In an emergency, they know their roles and their limitations, and the ability to *do something* mitigates feelings of powerlessness at the core of trauma.¹³ Not taking action is not only discouraging us, but may be traumatizing us.

DISSENT CUES UP DISRUPTIVE POWER

While a lot of dissent strives for economic disruption, often the dent our actions are actually making in the flow of capital is pretty small. But protest whips people together in a way that sets them up for solidaristic economic actions. If we're going to flex economic power, we need widespread mass noncooperation. Protest lays the groundwork.

Using upsurges as springboards into solidarity organizing — union drives, debt jubilees, rent strikes — transforms dissent into disruptive power.

While we don't always know when the upsurge will hit, we can have the infrastructure ready on the front end so mass dissent turbocharges folks into these efforts. Once people are out in the streets, they're activated. Many want more than to pound the pavement. Dissent is a portal: organizers can channel folks into power-building projects at a larger scale and a quicker pace. Dissent is a portal: organizers can channel folks into power-building projects at a larger scale and a quicker pace, with the hope of creating a cascade of increasingly disruptive upsurges.





DISSENT REDEFINES “COMMON SENSE.”

Movement moments are especially good at delineating a conflict in terms of right and wrong, and asking people to choose a side. They are incredibly effective at what Marxist philosopher Jacques Rancière called “the distribution of the sensible,” disseminating a new common sense, and often doing it at scale.¹⁴ The economic elite are the “1%.” Migrants are not “illegal,” but rather people who do not have documents. We believe women. **Lissy Romanow says, “this newly accepted common sense widens the chasm between what the people want and what the institutions are willing to concede, therefore increasing the political tension in the system.”¹⁵** However, the creation and distribution of a new common sense is not the same as political education. Upsurge moments are essential for radicalization, but they are not a substitute for ideological development.

DISSENT IS ESSENTIAL TRAINING FOR A UNITED FRONT AGAINST AUTHORITARIANISM

Upsurges are generally moments where the people — organized or not — are expressing values, ideals, and desires, not suggestions for nuts and bolts policy changes. In their report on [pro-democracy strategies for resisting authoritarianism](#), researchers Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks discuss the importance of exercising consistent collective acts of dissent, particularly in the face of growing fascism and authoritarian governments. In conversation with Chenoweth for this report, they talked about the power in the performance of organized collective action, like protest and voting, even when it’s unclear if the act will have an effect on the state.¹⁶ **These tactics are important to demonstrate the presence and persistence of pro-democracy forces, and historically have been one of the few ways to facilitate the type of mass noncooperation needed to hold the line when previously democratic countries slide into authoritarianism.**



PART II: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION



*“We don’t think enough about what are the conditions for people to win. The way it actually works in the real world is: we dissent; they respond; it changes the conditions. We need to adapt to that. Every action has a reaction. How do we broaden our analysis of **response** in strategizing our actions?”*

– Ash-Lee Henderson

Upsurge moments and mass protests evolve the political landscape asymmetrically, often with violent backlash, and in ways that won’t necessarily be visible to us until the future is present.

We may not know when the surges are coming, but they are coming. Can we be nimble, dexterous, swift-footed? Welcoming?

Mary Hooks asked, “In these moments, we have the people; how vain are we to diminish them?”¹⁷

If we are going to alchemize protest into power, we need to get better at organizing dissent now.

RECOMMENDATION 1

OWN THE NARRATIVE: DEMONSTRATE MORAL CONSENSUS

Dissent is by definition an expression of disagreement; a protest is an objection. But many organizers interviewed spoke about how the Left’s muscle memory is disproportionately *anti-this* rather than being *pro-that*. **Dissenting from what we’re against without declaring what we’re for leaves the vision of the future on the table for others to define.** Values are galvanizing. And we cannot cede essential values such as freedom and family to the Right.¹⁸ Re-engineering dissent to demonstrate moral consensus is an opportunity for the Left to push away from the posture of generalized dissent: against everything at all times always, drowning in jargon but failing to *say* anything. Our strategies and tactics of protest can demonstrate what we are for, not just what we are against when we marry dissent and assent.

What upsurge moments and mass protest do uniquely well is demonstrate moral consensus: we, en masse, share an ethos of right and wrong, an ethos so formidable and so foundational to who we are that we will defend it. Our first recommendation is that organizers harness the potency of moral consensus beyond upsurge moments to bind people together, even more so when conditions are challenging: when the political landscape is especially repressive, a unified theory of change is elusive, or the Left is ideologically divided.

Moral consensus is not “alignment,” “messaging,” or talking points. It is a distillation of a worldview into an essential value, without flattening its complexity but also without attending to every atomized detail. It’s akin to what cultural theorist and performance studies scholar Fred Moten calls “the ensemble,”¹⁹ an expression that reverberates at a greater volume because it is the emanation of many: singing in unison brings different registers of voices together to produce a strong, clear resonance. Each voice is in service to the song.

People are drawn to upsurges because they are asking spiritual questions, not seeking policy answers.

In 2016, the world was rocked by a small group of Lakota water protectors from the Standing Rock Sioux Nation in North Dakota with a mantra so clear as to be undeniable: “Water is Life.” The Lakota-led fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) transformed something so elemental — water — into a rallying cry that encoded ideals about interconnection, Indigenous sovereignty, and a spiritual imperative to protect



land. Cy Wagoner (Dine), Creative Resistance Director at [NDN Collective](#), says that the phrase “water is life” has long been used in Native communities; its use at Standing Rock was certainly not the product of a communication team’s strategy session.²⁰ Direct action trainer for [Indigenous Peoples Power Project](#) and [The Ruckus Society](#) Martin Aranydo (Mvskoke, O’Odham, and Pilipino) remembers the phrase “water is life” being on a magnet on his fridge growing up.²¹ “Water is Life” is a cosmology in a capsule — protecting life-giving resources for seven generations to come — and the global embrace of that cosmology demonstrated people’s willingness to follow Indigenous leaders into that future.

Similar to “Water is Life,” the unassailable brilliance of the mantra “Black Lives Matter” is that it is fact. Not a question. Not a request. Not a negation of, or reference to, something else. Truth. The phraseology offers people the metaphysics of a world they want to live in, in the now and beyond; as artist Alisha B. Wormsley asserts, [“There are Black people in the future”](#) — everywhere in both space and time. For many of us, the most moving moments in the mass marches of summer 2020 were the chants to “say her name” or “say his name,” and we did; we said their names. We stood for people — not “Black people in general,” but particular people, particular Black lives.

But size does not equal efficacy. While our interviewees continually referenced these two upsurges as exemplifying moral consensus, the material demands at the core of each — stopping the construction of the pipeline and shifting resources out of police departments and into care services — ultimately went largely unmet, doomed by the ascendant Trump movement. But these outbursts of moral consensus did more than move the Overton window; they fundamentally reframed issues of climate change and policing by rooting them in racial capitalism. These moments established core truths that many signed on to; our work remains to translate that into political power.

Values aren't strategies, but how we approach an issue refracts what we prioritize. We can adapt the spiritual potency of social movements for policy campaigns, choosing fights that simultaneously reveal the moral bankruptcy of our institutions and the integrity of our values. For example, law professor John Whitlow explains that campaigns for rent stabilization in New York demonstrate that “rent is not just an economic issue. The moral dimension to these campaigns is who gets to live in the city.”²² The goal is not to reframe an issue as ethical, it's to expand an issue into a necessity — better yet, an inevitability.

Moral consensus is also an intervention in the algorithm-driven terrain we live in, which requires us to reevaluate the tools we're using. John Sellers, founder of The Other 98%, which operates one of the Left's biggest Facebook pages at 6 million total followers, says, “We're captives of the algorithm. And the algorithm values rage.”²³ This is a feature, not a bug, of the mediascape that circumscribes our daily life, because anger keeps us engaged — in the immediate sense. But long-term, it's not going to work for us to be the party of no. Many organizers we've spoken to are concerned that the reason people are not joining our organizations is because they are inaccessible in rhetoric, practices, or just the overall angry or self-righteous vibe. Are we behaving like algorithms ourselves? Anger may be motivating, but the lack of clarity about what we're *for* may be keeping us in a reactive posture, recycling the same language of ‘resist, defend, protect.’

The upsurge moments where the Left has held anger *with* moral consensus have been weather-changing. When Trump threatened a Muslim ban and people flocked to airports, the expression was simultaneously outraged and pro-immigrant. Countless anti-Amazon campaigns didn't move the needle as much as the formation of the [Amazon union](#) did, as supporters were not caught in a feeling of paralysis against a corporate behemoth but instead captivated by actions that assert dignified labor as an essential value.

Similarly, the Essential and Excluded Workers campaign in New York during the COVID-19 pandemic latched onto the notion of “essential workers,” opening up the definition of “essential” — and \$2 billion in funding — to residents who were not eligible for unemployment benefits, such as day laborers, domestic workers, and *deliveristas*. Moral consensus doesn't have to be earnest; it can be subversive and playful in revealing institutional hypocrisy and absurdity. Protest performance group [Thank God For Abortion](#) hijacks the Right's supposed religious consensus to embarrass and downgrade their assumed superiority.



Assent approaches can help build the bigger “we” by pushing progressives to do something they frequently claim to want to do: engage with people who do not think exactly like us. In these moments, we're not just agreeing on an atomized issue or a policy point: we are actually aligned on a holistic vision of the future. People flooded Wall Street in 2011 and Grand Central Terminal in 2023 because they were angry, *and also* because they saw what was on the other side of that anger: dignity, justice, peace. Let's not underestimate that, or more tragically, miss the organizing opportunity.

RECOMMENDATION 2

MULTIPLY OUR SOLIDARITY:

TURN UP FOR EACH OTHER

Climate catastrophes and COVID-19 have pushed mutual aid — collective choreography to meet each other's needs — from the anarchist fringe to midwestern kitchens. A prologue to punctuated equilibrium and a clapback to social Darwinism, Pyotr Kropotkin's theory of [mutual aid](#) posited that cooperation, not competition, has always been the engine of our species's survival. **Mutual support evolves us beyond merely existing; it is an accelerant of our ethical expansion. If solidarity is our instinct, then collectivizing is our intuition.**

We don't always have to pick a fight. We can pick each other up. Reciprocity builds power, a power that offsets our despair. Collective self-determination wields that power through approaches and actions that tell each other: we're what we've got, and we got this.

In Miami, where 52% of murder victims are Black, The Dream Defenders, an abolitionist organization forged through direct action, initiated the [Healing Justice Center](#), a community-based public safety project that includes a mental health crisis hotline, free counseling, and trainings in life-saving skills. Its goal: to organize people away from the carceral system and into community. As part of a larger intervention in the field to loosen the supposed tension between providing services and organizing, there is excitement for hybrid dissenting and assenting actions.

Some organizers are skeptical of mutual aid-style actions because they claim the approach lacks a robust power analysis or “real” organizing. And it's true that we don't

want to just always care for each other; we *do* want the state to change. These projects, first and foremost, demonstrate that our shared care and abundance are a “fuck you” to the state's austerity, and can serve as an organizing engine that propels our neighbors to put pressure on the state. The goal of targeting each other is to create what philosopher Olúfemi O. Táíwò calls collaborative security. **“You can protect yourself by a) making it dangerous for others or b) harmonizing with the security of others. We can either protect our interests from other people, or protect our interests *with* other people's interests.”**²⁴ Mutual aid projects that may seem small are proof of concept for a profoundly different way of being together; proof of concept for solidarity.

Nsé Ufot described these approaches as “strategies that save lives, not win campaigns.”²⁵ These solidarity strategies center something other than opposition to brute force, and their accompanying tactics are capsules of a worldview based on care. And solidarity is not a word, it's a demonstration: when we are with you, we roll deep. How can we refract this vision through our actions?

When the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022, there was an outpouring of mass demonstrations across the country. More significantly however, there was a proliferation of underground networks of women sharing models of DIY abortion instruments. During one of DAIL's virtual salons, we asked a group of female organizers in red states what kind of direct actions they wanted to take in defense of abortion. Unanimously they agreed: “driving people and pills across state lines.”²⁶ In the urgency of that moment, people wanted to take care of each other first. What we're seeing is that people are prepared to take caring, clandestine actions that entail real risk — and they are excited by the possibilities these open up. These are actions that invigorate us.

Pivoting our tactics toward each other also allows us to abandon what has become the rote task of performing for the media's attention, and instead prioritize what we want the media to convey: that risk. Risk that invites others to reconsider the ethics of their actions, or even join us.





The Civil Rights Movement’s playbook codified using high-risk actions in direct relation to mass media. Since then, risk has traditionally been measured in terms of how likely folks are to get hurt or arrested, supporting a theory of change that sacrificial actions or violence against peaceful protests facilitate sympathies with the underdogs, and that leads people to question the authority of the overdog.²⁷ But the public’s tolerance for violence has risen dramatically over the years, and media attention is no longer a consistently reliable strategy for building leverage against a target because of increasingly consolidated corporate ownership, siloization of audiences, and the maddening reality that many of our targets are simply unscathed by bad coverage.

Many organizers we spoke to said performing resistance for media outlets is exhausting and ineffective. Protesters in Seattle in 1999 coined the chant “the whole world is watching,” and at the time, the implicit significance was that that meant the whole world cared, which in turn meant things would have to change. In today’s mediascape, any kind of causal link between global attention and tangible change has been completely severed. Changing the venue of power diverts energy away from mediagenic public outcry and into meaningful personal connections. Solidarity with people you know, rather than attention from those you don’t.

The Far Right increasingly embraces a base-building approach that plugs the state’s holes. Capitalizing on the profoundly bleak combination of the existential crisis among white men and the financial crisis of corporate abandonment, militia groups in the Pacific Northwest have gained traction by providing services slashed out of state budgets. The Oath Keepers in Oregon won hearts and minds [by building wheelchair ramps](#) for elderly residents at public libraries; in Wyoming, the Laramie chapter of Moms for Liberty bought supplies for teachers and raised

over \$3,000 to clear students’ lunch debt, [garnering widespread media attention](#) and some community goodwill. We can do this better. Straddling mutual aid and direct action, The Debt Collective, a union of debtors, run state-level campaigns to cancel student debt, abolish bail debt, and build tenant unions in order to strike rent debt. Their sister 501(c)(4) project, the [Rolling Jubilee](#), has organized people to contribute money into a fund to pay off each other’s debt, [abolishing \\$32 million in debt](#) since their inception in 2012. Their approach to the housing crisis in California combines eviction defense, know-your-rights trainings, and organizing tenant unions as a collective force to take on state policies around rent and debt.

If we lean into broad solidarity tactics, they become part of the fabric of our communities. And they bring us closer to building institutions of collaborative security with broad social protection. Táíwò’s touchstone example: teachers unions’ [“bargaining for the common good”](#) strategy, where community and union members team up to take on symbiotic structural reforms. Or consider a very humble example of worker-consumer solidarity: when bus drivers in Okayama, Japan went on strike to demand greater job security, they didn’t stop driving; rather, they covered the ticket machines, refused fares from passengers, and won the support of the public — [and stronger contracts](#). Another bold example of worker-consumer solidarity is the United Auto Workers’ plan for a general strike in 2028. Alan Hanson of the UAW explained that although the strategy of the general strike is to align union contracts so they expire on the same day (April 30, 2028), the larger strategy is about leveraging massive economic disruption to demand a benefit much bigger than union contracts, a demand that benefits *all* workers.

Everything for everyone.



RECOMMENDATION 3

EXPAND THE STRATEGY:

CHANGE THE VENUE

Two months into the war in Gaza, [Olúfemi O. Táíwò](#) addressed a small room of listeners desperately seeking relief to their despondency. **“Why did the Black Panthers have the breakfast program? They were doing that [local action] in a moment of great global work. They did that to find a target within the sphere of power they’ve already built.”** His organizing advice: **“There’s been an overreaction away from local action. Don’t live in the political world where we can’t do anything, live in the political arena where we can act and make an impact.”** When power is out of range, change the venue. When decisions are made without you, become the decision-makers.

Regardless of who sits in the White House, our ability to change our lives through political channels is contracting. How do we find targets that are within the sphere of power that we can affect?

Change the venue.

Much of our organizing and social movement strategies and culture rely upon the assumption that the membrane between the state and the people is still permeable, that the system is still set up to respond to us, which is why so many base-building organizations have focused on building electoral power. Many organizers we’ve spoken to simultaneously assume explicitly, or more frequently implicitly, that the state will be responsive to their demands, and also question the validity of building electoral power when national politics feel impenetrable.

On a strategic level, this theory of change neglects the reality that we’re up against a public-private alliance of elite power, increasingly in the hands of an authoritarian faction that is not only unaccountable to organized groups of people, but is holding democracy itself hostage. Some pillars of support, we’re learning, are deadbolted into the ground. While city- and state-level wins provide proof of concept for progressive advances, our government in its current configuration is arguably un-petitionable at the national level. For many organizations, especially those committed to building electoral power, this raises some gnarly questions.

On a tactical level, the assumption that mediation is still possible leads many organizers to push as fast and

hard as possible at the onset of an upsurge. It’s easy to overuse a tactic or go overkill on a target, which inspires a sense of futility and leads participation to dwindle.

What places and spaces, not currently on our organizing map, are ripe for disruptive power?

Social movements launching actions and campaigns against, say, elected officials and megalithic military contractors, or federal bodies and fossil fuel titans, are ultimately directing their energy toward a very small group of people who move easily through the revolving door between public and private institutions. Former United We Dream Executive Director Cristina Jimenez identifies the need for new robust research on economic power that would allow the Left to really unlock the potential for massive disruptive power. **We need better power mapping. Many organizers we spoke to agreed. But we also need a more expansive practice of cartography.**

The system is currently intransigent. We can continue trying to puncture the rubber or we can look for critical vulnerabilities and critical opportunities in unlikely places. We may be ignoring crucial levers and unexpected targets.

In what unexpected places and spaces are wealth and power consolidated? Where are platforms provided?

One example we loved is [P.A.I.N.](#) (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), a group founded by artist Nan Goldin that targeted the Sackler Family, peddlers of OxyContin and architects of a global health calamity that earned them \$35 billion. P.A.I.N.’s demand was that the Sacklers fund opioid addiction treatment programs, but their point of intervention was not the board room or the FDA; it was Sackler-funded wings in [major art museums](#). In addition to the uniqueness of picking museums as a creative point of intervention, P.A.I.N.’s strategy also made the fight personal: rather than go gangbusters on Purdue Pharma, a nameless, faceless corporation, they targeted the Sackler family and their very personal critical vulnerability. When the first generation of Sackler immigrants arrived in NYC, they were rejected from colleges and jobs on account of being Jewish, and even after they had amassed wealth, anti-semitism kept them alienated from high society. What the Sackler family wanted

more than fortune was prestige, which was achieved by the glistening nameplates in museums across the world.²⁸ The purpose of the Sacklers' philanthropy was twofold: to establish themselves as elites and to "art wash" their public image. To register dissent against a crisis of that scale, P.A.I.N. circumvented the corporate dimension of the issue and instead gave the entire epidemic a united enemy, building momentum for legal action that led to the Supreme Court overturning a Purdue Pharma bankruptcy settlement that would have shielded the Sacklers from additional lawsuits.

While the Progressive Left is exploring large-scale strategies for countering authoritarianism, our interviewees were interested in smaller-scale actions that intervene against paralysis and inertia, such as deplatforming Far Right actors. To illustrate our recommendation of changing the venue, we considered how, instead of organizing dissent *for* media attention, we could dissent to *disrupt* the media's attention.

Houston, Texas. May 2016. Ramon Mejia, a member of About Face: Veterans Against the War and an organizer at Grassroots Global Justice, and a crew of activists joined a rally in solidarity with the local Muslim community against the Aryan Renaissance Society, who had been holding open-carry protests using these rallies to create a portfolio of photo and video assets for recruitment.

Many action organizers we spoke to said that they learned during Trump's first administration that humiliation is the Far Right's kryptonite. As Ramon tells it, "a resident living in an apartment above the rally pulled out their child's bubble toy and started raining bubbles down on them. Community members laughed, poked fun at them, and chanted louder. It shifted the energy in our favor. The White Lives Matter group was drowning in bubbles. It completely deflated their energy, and then their camera person stopped taking photos. With defeated faces, it wasn't long before they packed up."²⁹ The resulting photos — of angry white men

surrounded by glistening bubbles — are absurd, and useless for their recruitment purposes. The Right needs attention to grow their ranks, and we can deny them that attention. Actions that organizers and their members can do tomorrow, such as interrupting rightwing media — institutional or informal — register our objection to authoritarianism when authoritarianism at large feels impenetrable.

In a brilliant demonstration of changing the venue on a large scale, the Uncommitted movement reimagined the venue of the ballot box, hijacking its function to transform the 2024 primary election into a direct action. During the 2024 Democratic primary, many wanted to register their dissent against the party's inaction on Israel's war on Gaza. By selecting "uncommitted" or "no preference" in select primaries, voters visibilized the electoral power of the people calling for the U.S. to protect Palestinian life. [Uncommitted explains](#) that they "shifted what once felt like a powerless moment to a clear and unified voice politically engaging with this administration who betrayed their trust."

In one of our virtual salons, we talked to organizers about online organizing to imagine out-of-the-box confrontational digital actions in venues other than the usual ones (e.g. online petitions), many of which are being organized by out-of-the-movement communities.³⁰ Reddit users initiated [a short squeeze of GameStop stock](#) that caused an economic crisis for hedge funds. Young TikTok teens and K-Pop fans registered for thousands of tickets to a Trump rally in Tulsa, [locking out MAGA supporters](#). More inspiration from the youth: at the beginning of COVID-19 lockdowns, students in China learned that the Apple App Store took down apps with less than a two-star rating, so they organized their friends to all rate their homework app as one star. [The app store took the app down.](#)

When we unmoor ourselves from the same-old, same-old of online petitions and Zoom panel discussions, we can readjust our vision to the places and spaces online that have potential to pop off.

Years ago, action jock John Sellers told me that Greenpeace USA led with a strategy he described as "picking a fight with the biggest guy in the bar so everyone else in the bar knows not to fuck with you." We've been targeting the big guys — in the halls of power and in the boardrooms — and they can see us coming. Let's find the organizing equivalent of an unattended loading dock. Let's explore targets beyond state and corporate institutions to expand the landscape of dissent. Field test dissent on city and state levels, unexpected consolidations of wealth, and other arenas of power. Tell us what you find.



RECOMMENDATION 4

MAXIMIZE OUR POWER: BUILD OUR BENCH

While digesting the current movement for Palestine at our Movement Upsurge retreat in July 2023, Ahmad Abuznaid, Executive Director of the [U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights](#), said, “Right now, the Palestinian organizations are doing everything they can, the Jewish organizations are doing all they can, the Muslim organizations are doing all they can, but we currently have no secular organization that can absorb the millions of people who are anti-war. What do we do with them?”³¹

Massive influxes of people make an upsurge surge, but panic, ambivalence, and overwhelm is getting in the way of organizers knowing how to actually organize them. The [Momentum](#) model, which spawned firecracker youth-powered movements like Sunrise and IfNotNow, bridges structure-based organizing and mass protest organizing traditions, training organizers in developing movement “DNA” (values, stances, symbols) so they can give away the culture of a movement to thousands of people, facilitating belonging en masse. But many structure-based organizations are not designed to “give away” their “DNA” in this way. Base-builders have told us that their organizations are structurally unprepared for spontaneous eruptions, and therefore struggle with building onramps for absorption. Combined with the casual assumption that the majority of people participating in upsurges are white, middle-class Liberals — and therefore not a priority to organize because they don’t have real skin in the game — means, that as a field, we lack a robust theory and practice of how different types of organizations should lead in moments of mass protest.

Underneath all of this is the tension between “organizing” and “activism,” the superiority of craft vs. the chaos of spontaneity, a false and unnecessary dichotomy that might mask some real anxiety — political and personal — of being left behind, forgotten, or considered irrelevant. Longtime ‘Free Radical’ and New York City Council Member Sandy Nurse, spoke about this tension: “At the beginning of Occupy, all these longtime grassroots organizations showed up to Zuccotti Park and said, ‘Hey! We’ve been doing this work for a long time! You guys didn’t invent it!’ And yeah, they had been, we acknowledged that, but *this* right now, this is a moment, there is something *else* happening here. It doesn’t detract from or diminish your work, but you also don’t get to own it just because you were

doing good work beforehand. This is something that is bigger than that.”³² If everyone who turned up at a protest was asked, “where the hell were you *before this*?” where would we be now?

Failing to see mass protesters as *also* gig economy workers, single parents, tenants, or holders of massive student debt reflects the self-censorship of our organizing imagination. And creating a dynamic where the only options available for new folks who want to belong to a social movement is either ‘member in a nonprofit organization’ or ‘rando in the street’ doesn’t speak highly of our creativity either.

Rather than lament that people weren’t here before, we can welcome them now.

Action not only brings people in, it also brings them up. Rachel Schragis, movement artist and co-founder of [Look Loud](#), says, “**Nothing is more effective for leadership development than sending new folks out in a small crew to do a banner drop.** Even if it’s just over the side of a highway overpass. At first it seems really scary and they have to figure it out, but then they go and do it and they realize, ‘Wow we just did a thing!’ They did something that was scary and they have instantly leveled up in their political selves.”³³



People are seeking belonging. Marches and petitions only go so far. **If we restructure dissent into an offensive practice, we can build our bench.**

Can upsurges build a “base” without an organization to hold them in?

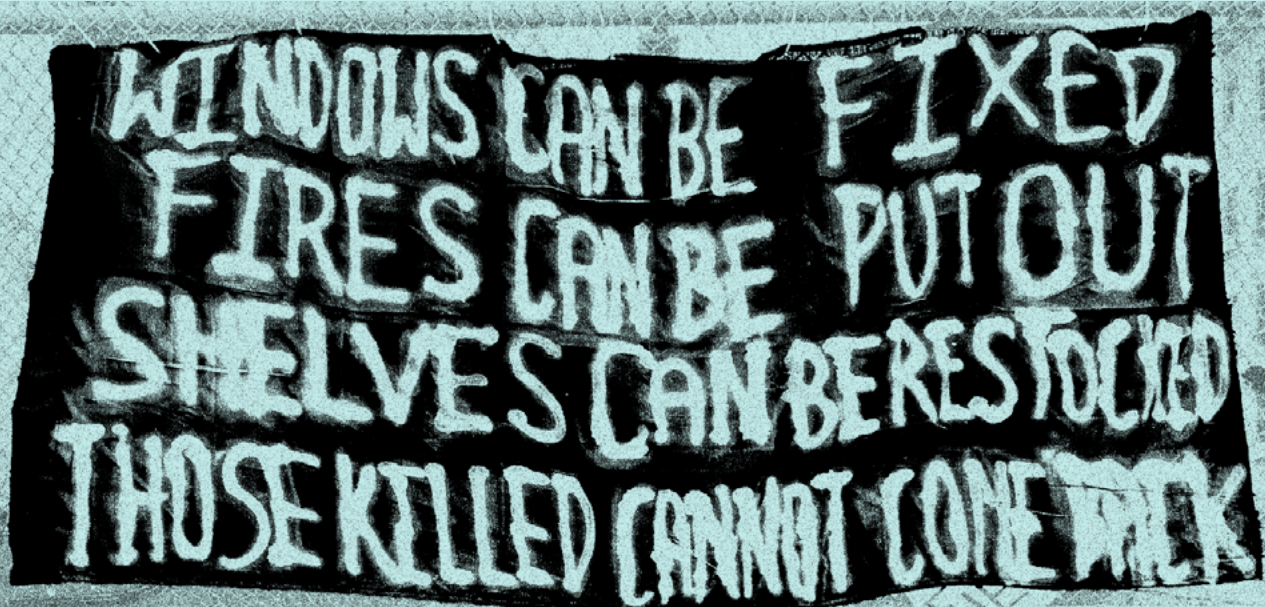
They might, *if* we can let go of the knee-jerk reaction that they must be absorbed into a certain kind of organization. **We can channel protest energy into more proactive formations of action, if we experiment.** Not everyone is going to climb the ladder to being a member leader, but many want something more than just getting an email blast to turn out for the mass march. **Upsurges are begging us to expand our imagination and explore more fluid formations**, both temporary (clearinghouses, spokescouncils) and more lasting (networks, federations). What are the other structures that we can use to take people from uprising to organized community? Mutual aid projects, unions, cooperatives, collectives, cultural hubs...

All these forms need to live together. To build our bench, we need to build out a real ecosystem. An ecosystem is essential to hacking how to translate upsurge moments into durable power. To get to power, we need strategy. To get to strategy, we need an ecosystem. An ecosystem that isn't defined by sector or composed solely of groups with the same skillset. An ecosystem requires diversity of function, form, and specialization. Not everyone has to move every time.

Dancers train their bodies so that some muscles stay anchored while other muscles release. Sustain and release. Knowing when to hold and when to move, that's solidarity.

We haven't yet hacked how to rock together in these upsurges, but we need to figure out how to translate these moments into durable power. Obviously this requires political strategy. **But we also need to get a lot better at the mechanics of upsurges, so we don't rely on muscle memory and limit ourselves to mass marches and monotonous Zoom calls.** Here are some principles that the Direct Action Incubation Lab thinks will help us improve the mechanics of upsurges:

- Form follows function: an ecosystem is based on shared purpose;
- Know your role: diversity of specialization among groups and organizations;
- Symbiosis: political leadership and tactical leadership aren't the same;
- Timelines: who's doing rapid response now, who's up when the surge dies down;
- Centralize choreography: more coordination, less coalition;
- Keep it moving: meet minimum conditions of satisfaction, not total “alignment;”
- Flux: know when to move, when to hold;
- Direct: channel folks' energy into places and spaces beyond simply organizational membership;
- Solidarity. Always.



WINDOWS CAN BE FIXED
FIRES CAN BE PUT OUT
SHELVES CAN BE RESTOCKED
THOSE KILLED CANNOT COME BACK

TAKEAWAYS

DEMONSTRATING MORAL CONSENSUS:

- Allows *us*, not our opponents, to define the future toward which we are working.
- Drives us to get better at translating widespread moral ethos into concrete support for platforms or policies.
- Shapes campaigns to simultaneously reveal the moral bankruptcy of our institutions and the integrity of our values.
- Provides an entry point and a centrifugal force of connection when the political landscape is repressive or the Left is ideologically divided.

TURNING UP FOR EACH OTHER:

- Invites us to choose each other — rather than a fight — as the first step in organizing.
- Reorients our work to care, showing up, and belonging; in lieu of being able to enact legislation, we enact community and collective self-determination.
- Develops strategies for how we can meet our material needs while also highlighting the inability of institutions to do exactly that.
- Builds collaborative security: creating safety through harmony and protecting our interests *with* (not against) other people's interests.

CHANGING THE VENUE:

- Urges us to live in the political arena where we can act and make an impact.
- Re-orient us to work and projects that enable us to affect change, instead of being demobilized by elite power consolidation.
- Requires us to get real about our overreliance on certain political strategies and pushes us to look for new critical vulnerabilities and power-building possibilities.
- Reveals organized bases outside of the nonprofit landscape.

BUILDING OUR BENCH:

- Begs us to expand our ingenuity: our imagination is bigger than our forms of organization.
- Loosens the grip on “absorption” and funnels people into projects and places that don't require intensive oversight from organizers.
- Uses action as a leadership development mechanism and channels energy into escalated disruption.
- Requires we get serious about working in a movement ecosystem, one that values diversity of function, form, specialization, and trust.

CONCLUSION

WELCOMING NEW MONSTERS

Movement movements are times when rules often go out the window and many of us rely on muscle memory, instincts, and improvisation. Given the mind-bending, time-traveling quality of movement moments, it's easy for lessons to go undigested and undertheorized. "Hopeful Monsters" is a call for us to make the space and make the time to unpack what happened, what we did, and why we did it in these weather-changing moments.

Here, we have offered the lessons from these laboratories, our history, and earlier students of direct action to begin reverse-engineering a playbook, to examine what is working in direct action, demonstration, and disruption — to scaffold up larger strategies for tougher disruptive power, deeper solidarity power, and tighter movement choreography.

The following four case studies demonstrate what these four recommendations — demonstrate moral consensus, turn up for each other, change the venue, and build our bench — actually look like in the real world.

We may not know when the upsurges are coming, but we know they are coming.

Our job is to develop the mental elasticity to work hard and with creativity, but also to welcome the newbie hopeful monsters who might have strange, unknown, and previously unimagined (by us, anyway) ways of winning.



PART III: CASE STUDIES FROM THE FIELD



But movement life cycles are parabolas: ups, downs, and turns abound. It's hard to process what we're doing when we're doing it, and often even harder for us to digest and document the moments that burned so hot and so fast after the flame has dampened.

Strategy is the blueprint of social movements. Tactics are its brick and mortar. Sit-ins, shutdowns, and strikes are indices of long and complex arcs of struggle. They are also emblems: actions are what we remember when we remember how we changed the world.

The case studies included here are from actions the Direct Action Incubation Lab supported. Because of the time-traveling energy of upsurges, too often we wrap up our actions with a quick go-around of pluses and deltas, keep on keeping on, and cross our fingers that one day, when all of this (*gestures wildly at everything*) lets up, we'll revisit these firestorm moments to dig deep into all their lessons.

Over the last 18 months, the Direct Action Incubation Lab partnered with groups on the ground and applied our hypotheses across a diversity of dissent contexts — a megawatt international upsurge with high voltage flash points, an international delegation of radical rabbis, brand new, true blue base-building, and a guerrilla, gangbuster direct action experiment. Through these actions, these hypotheses became our recommendations, and we've included four case studies here to show you how we got there. With a nod to David Graeber, who irreverently declared that theory comes and goes but ethnography is forever, each case study captures a time, place, and tactic to illustrate a principle for application.

In the following case studies, multiple voices are woven together to reflect the collaborative spirit of these actions and reflections.

Action:	<i>Jews take over the Cannon Rotunda</i>
Led by:	Jewish Voice for Peace
Location:	Washington D.C.
Date:	October 18, 2024

RECOMMENDATION: DEMONSTRATE MORAL CONSENSUS

*LJ Amsterdam in conversation with [Rabbi Alissa Wise](#),
Founder and Lead Organizer of Rabbis for Ceasefire,
former staff leader at Jewish Voice for Peace (2011-2021).
*Alissa is represented in brown text.**

You know, I always quote Grace Paley: “the only recognizable feature of hope is action.”

I was on the phone at 7:00 a.m. It was about a week after October 7th and I was crying and I just felt like there was nothing to do, nothing to be done, no way to stop this. I was in a despair spiral. And then I thought, “the only thing to do would be to get hundreds of people to show up.” It was all one thought. I went from “there’s nothing to do” to “here’s what we have to do.”

The past year has taught me that grief is an experience of profound disorganization. Grief is dismantling: it takes you apart piece by piece. The ability to organize people in mourning, one by one, while you yourself are also in mourning, is extraordinary.

For many Jews, the movement for a ceasefire in Gaza and for Palestinian freedom has harnessed grief into an organizing principle.

On October 18, Jewish Voice for Peace organized 350 Jews and allies for a civil disobedience in the Cannon Rotunda on Capitol Hill. Explicitly grounded in Judaism, the action began with the call of a shofar, and people converged on the Rotunda, singing and clapping as they coalesced into a unified sit-in. Rabbis at the center of the huddle opened a portal to our spiritual purpose: in keeping with our ancestral lineage, we are here to register our dissent to violence. Singing became sobbing, sobbing became chanting, chanting became committing. Helplessness became hollering. A staffer for Representative Summer Lee (PA-12) walked by and spontaneously threw off his badge, joined the sit-in, and was hauled off to jail. Having



spent the last ten days in a never-ending doom scroll, the collective velocity of Rotunda whipped me into another world. Without even knowing it, my cheeks were wet with tears.

While the Rotunda was not technically the first direct action demanding a ceasefire ([If Not Now](#) had blockaded the White House entrance a couple days before), it was the first [mediagenic mass expression](#) of moral outrage to Israel’s attack on Gaza to garner widespread attention in the US since October 7th. **The goal was clear: we wanted to do something that was massive, that showed the mass refusal of this violence by the Jewish community.** That mass refusal was depicted by an acoustical explosion, wild and frenetic; the volume of Jews protesting inside indexical to the volume of Jews across the country opposing the siege. **It was a “shouting into the wilderness” moment.** Possibly even prophetic.

The straightforwardness of the tactic — flooding an iconic location and refusing to leave — proved that simple tactics executed with meticulous visuals (black t-shirts reading “NOT IN OUR NAME” and uncluttered banners from the balcony contextualized the action happening on the floor) and technical precision (small affinity groups and staggered deployments through multiple entrances) get the job done. **Since mass dissent had not yet been visualized, we wanted**

a scale that would match the intensity of the moment. It wasn't just going to be a picket outside. At the time, it was the biggest instance of Jewish mass civil disobedience, and it set the tone for what came next. The rotunda action kicked off a sequence of iconic [mass demonstrations](#), inspiring a feeling that the [Jewish justice movement was being reborn](#).

72 hours of planning.

36 hours out.

Place-based affinity groups share recruitment numbers over Zoom.

Monday night call, 8:00 p.m.: Update from Boston: "We have a few commitments, but we've hit up a bunch of folks, hoping to pull together a crew to drive down to Washington."

12 hours out.

Tuesday night call, 8:00 p.m.: Update from Boston: "We've got 25 people heading to D.C. in the morning ready to be arrested."

Across the country, people said yes.
Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. **Yes.**

I've never been in such a constant flow of "yes" in my organizing career. We put out ideas and people were like "sure, yes, go." Every time Alissa and I talk, we talk about how [being in motion](#) is the only thing staving off people's despair.

The waterfall of yeses was both a reflection of the magnetism of the moment and the form of Jewish Voice for Peace's long-term base-building work. Complementing the work of developing chapters and ongoing campaigns, JVP has built upsurge moments into their organizing infrastructure.

JVP's growth can be mapped onto Israeli aggression.

At those moments, when something happens with Israel, there is always a new cohort that comes off the sidelines, ready to jump into action and lead.

When a trigger event happens, JVP is ready to welcome people in the door and turn them right out into action. Their ability to anticipate the contours of a response to October 7th, even if they could have never predicted the event itself, allowed JVP to move as quickly as it did.

Actions generally aspire for media coverage to build leverage against a target. Few actions successfully target the media's homebase at precisely the right time to launch a full narrative intervention into the status quo coverage. Cannon Rotunda was selected as a location for the action in large part because it is where the mainstream media camps out. **The result was not just coverage, but a catalyst for an entire counter-narrative.** The action announced the

arrival of moral consensus for a ceasefire that would now haunt the dominant narrative of U.S. support for Israel.

Demonstrating moral consensus for a ceasefire was also a strategy for putting pressure on elected officials. It was clear that most of the Democratic base supported a ceasefire, but that support wasn't doing anything to move the Democratic establishment. I realize now that the action was permission-giving, giving progressive elected officials permission to step out on a limb, because we showed that the people were with them.

While the action demonstrated a consensus in the Jewish community, it also revealed the fault line. **There isn't consensus in the Jewish community about Israel, because there is no single Jewish community.** Every time something happens between Israel and Palestine, we have to re-litigate that. We can't rely on whatever gains we've made in the past in terms of building support for Palestine, and say "the Jewish community supports Palestine." But we have built real support for Palestine. October 7th was such a game changer, so the question was, would that support still be true? With the rotunda action, we were like, "Yes, it's still true, there is still widespread support and there is also still a divide." Many Jewish activists that I've spoken to, who were part of the Rotunda or any of the JVP-led actions afterwards, have said that there isn't even moral consensus within their immediate family, and that aligning themselves with a different consensus often carries great consequences.

The State of Israel and its defenders have had to manufacture a feeling of consensus, because the reality is that from the very inception of Zionism, there has never been agreement amongst Jews on its value, purpose, or validity. While Israel and military contractors have captured elite consensus, JVP has channeled a counter moral consensus through sustained mass dissent. The guiding action logic for Jewish dissent has been a logic of scale: elite consensus may be stronger for now, but our consensus is bigger.

If we were to have a chance of building a movement around something so inconceivably horrific, we needed an infusion of collective possibility. The Rotunda action was a handful of smelling salts that caused the Left to come to, and to turn out. **In the Rotunda, with the acoustics of it all, the Jewish tradition and the ritual that was part of it. I felt powerful in that moment, we all did.** When I got out after being arrested, I learned that a close friend's family's home had been bombed in Gaza and I just fell down on the sidewalk. **That's what this whole experience has been: feeling into our power and then feeling our impotence.** This is the crux of this movement's upsurge moment: by being in action together we are building our power. Our power is not yet saving lives. But we keep going.

Action:	<i>The Piggy Bank Breakers take Nexus</i>
Led by:	The Piggy Bank Breakers
Location:	New York City, New York
Date:	June 22-23, 2023

RECOMMENDATION: TURN UP FOR EACH OTHER

LJ Amsterdam in conversation with [Farhad Ebrahimi](#), former President of the Chorus Foundation. Farhad is represented in blue text.

For over a decade, the Chorus Foundation has attempted to engage with philanthropic and impact investment spaces in an agitational way. At the same time, the Foundation has regularly supported their grantees to use direct action as one of their organizing tools. As part of our final, spend-down year, Chorus saw an opportunity to experiment with applying that same tool, direct action, to our own funder organizing — both within the philanthropic sector and within high-net-worth spaces more broadly. This possibility had been raised multiple times by our grantees over the years, but they (understandably) didn't feel that they were well-positioned to experiment themselves without endangering their own funding.

This is a case study of using direct action as an exploratory mission in a field that has almost no history of intervention. A new venue.

A long-time direct action organizer himself, Farhad really wanted to experiment with the possibility of a direct action campaign on philanthropy — a sector that is entirely complicit in economic inequality yet has remained untouchable, a sector beyond state and corporate entities. A new landscape for action.

Over seven months, a small team of strategists prototyped an action-based campaign that could intervene in philanthropic and high-wealth spaces to agitate, educate, and organize donors toward the following goals:

- Accelerate spending down in foundations;
- Increase funding for transformative but traditionally “unfundable” projects like reparations, land back, and new economy infrastructure; and
- Advocate for the continued use of direct action as a strategy that's relevant to funder organizing and changing the shape of the philanthropic sector.

A lot of direct action is about stopping — preventing harm, interrupting violence, shutting the system down. We didn't want to “shut down” philanthropy. Our goal was to open it up.

Because of his work co-founding [Solidaire](#), Farhad knew that funders need to be in community with other funders to do the personal and political education required to shed their wealth. So the actions needed to be married with a pathway into their own action. The organizing goal was to recruit funders from mainstream spaces and organize them (and their wealth) into radical funder spaces, specifically [Resource Generation](#) and Solidaire, to redirect and increase their giving to transformative grassroots organizing projects.

But to get them there, we needed an action that incited a major “a-ha” moment in funders' minds. We began to develop a theory of change to test:

direct action → psychic rupture in funders → funders join us → funders break their piggy banks = increased \$ for the grassroots → social and economic transformation

During our first design session, we did a power analysis of philanthropy's landscape and a spectrum of allies, and used narrative strategy tools to hone in on our audience: center or center-left funders, with medium-sized family foundations or access to familial wealth. We found ourselves exploring a pillar of power that lacked any real direct action history. All places and spaces felt up for grabs.

In the first design retreat, during the afternoon slump session, we were prototyping ideas with the Center for Story-Based Strategy's card deck, created by Felicia Perez, which invites you to come up with a creative action idea with constraints around format: a medium, a point of intervention, and a feeling to evoke. We pulled a card:

- Ceramic
- Point of Assumption
- Nostalgia



When I saw it, I was like, ceramics and nostalgia? Oh fuck, like, what, are we going to get a bunch of funders to do a pottery class? And make them talk about their childhoods?

But then one beat later, Farhad and I locked eyes – a piggy bank. Boom.

When you're a kid, a piggy bank is a tool for teaching you to save money for a specific goal. The premise is actually that you're saving *so that you could ultimately spend* the money. They're made to be broken. This became the central premise of the action: when you break your piggy bank and spend the money, *that's* when you get what you

really want — connection with community in service of justice. The image encapsulates both the problem (hoarding wealth) and the solution (spending down).

I really liked how we were focusing on the obstacle; the money is obviously critical to the story but it's not the interesting part of the story. We all know that rich people are rich. Like the important thing is like, why is their wealth constrained, and how can we break the thing that constrains it.

We talked a lot about tone in the design phase. We knew we needed a narrative strategy that was less confrontational than a traditional direct action, one that created a sense

of inclusion and understanding, with a certain degree of good faith toward funders. We wanted to be both earnest and irreverent: earnest in the sense that we wanted to communicate something like, “we take you at your word that you really want to use your money for good,” but irreverent — even agitational — in how we said, “well you’re not going to find that in the spaces you’re in right now.”

We wanted the action to say, “But that place does already exist, and you can belong there.”

Yeah, the only thing stopping you from joining us was you.

We decided it would be guerrilla theater: part storytelling, part game show, part musical. And most of all, a ritual. A rite of passage that names, celebrates, and pledges support to a wealth holder about to make a liberatory “big decision” in their radical philanthropic journey.

Because this action was not just about disruption, but actually was about re-diverting funder energy, we were picky about finding the right venue. We did a lot of research into philanthropic spaces, eventually deciding to test the action at Nexus Global, a \$2,500/ticket conference for social impact funders and investors. [Nexus is emblematic of the kind of mainstream philanthropic and/or impact investment space that is visible, well-attended, and self-congratulatory — all while fundamentally reinforcing the status quo around wealth and power. Despite these qualities, there have always been wealth holders at Nexus who are open to — or even actively looking for! — a truly transformative community to inform their approach to philanthropy and/or impact investment. This was our primary audience. The goal of this action was recruitment, not accountability for Nexus staff, speakers, or participants.](#)

The action had a beginning (“breadcrumbs:” miniature pigs or chocolate gold coins clandestinely placed throughout the conference), a middle (Chekhov’s gun: a full sized piggy bank that Farhad carried around under his arm and placed on the table during his panel), and an end (the ritual: the ten-minute guerrilla theater in a Nexus plenary session).

During the closing of the final plenary, the Piggy Bank Breakers quickly claimed the stage, accompanied by both music and singing, and invited people into the performance.

The MC (LJ) invited people to gather round — “something very special, very unusual is going to happen — today we’re joined by the Piggy Bank Breakers”...cue backup singers and the Piggy Bank Breakers theme song...

Farhad was asked seven questions, all about having a

piggy bank as a child and about his much bigger “piggy bank” as an adult. The arc had Farhad realize that, just like when he broke his childhood piggy bank to get a video game to play with his friends, breaking his “piggy bank” now would unlock the community good he truly wants. I handed Farhad a hammer. The cheering, chanting, and singing became wild and frenetic.

Farhad smashed the piggy bank.

And at that point we were physically escorted out of Nexus.

While we had consciously decided *not* to interrupt the session, and instead jump in when the host was giving their closing “thank yous,” the conference organizers were furious. Many of Nexus’ attendees were rapidly ushered out so they wouldn’t see, but many stayed — even when Nexus turned the lights off. In fact, audience members *turned their phone flashlights on* to illuminate us.

While our attendance for Day 2 had been revoked, we still intervened during Nexus’ culmination: a sunset cruise around lower Manhattan. When all of the conference attendees arrived at the dock, we were there — with a 30-foot inflatable piggy bank, playing music, dancing, and passing out invites to the After-Party of the Future, a little get-together we were having a block away.

[The after-party was an essential component of the action. We couldn’t just leave saying, “hey, sign up for Solidaire’s newsletter.” If we wanted to really pull people away from spaces like Nexus, we had to demonstrate that there was something better. Come to the better party. Plus, the party also gave us a concrete metric in terms of organizing success.](#)

[Another metric of success was Nexus’ reaction. I think the reason that it felt successful was because they reacted so over the top to it and that made people more interested, like these people must be doing something interesting if everyone’s so mad about it. The action pulled back the curtain or broke a container, it caused some doubt. Again, we were not trying to indict the container, but I think we had to cause discontent with the container for people to be like, wait a minute, how is this different? What is out there that I don’t know about?](#)

What did we learn about the sector as a terrain for action? We exposed a pervasive fault line within the philanthropic community, some of whom clearly are conscious of fissures between intent and impact. Encouraging people to think of building disruptive power in philanthropy invites people to consider their own complicity in that power. Changing the venue opened up new possibilities for organizing where the operating principle is not to name and shame, but to reflect and recruit.

Action:	<i>Rabbis For Ceasefire travel to Gaza</i>
Led by:	Rabbis for Ceasefire
Location:	Gaza
Date:	April 2024

RECOMMENDATION: CHANGE THE VENUE

LJ Amsterdam in conversation with Rabbi Alissa Wise, Founder and Lead Organizer of Rabbis for Ceasefire, former staff leader at Jewish Voice for Peace (2011-2021). Alissa is represented in olive text.

Time keeps pushing us on as organizers — where else, how else, who else, what else can we do?

It's April 2024. Actions for Palestinian solidarity are ebbing. I hear people talking about "atrocities fatigue."

Israel was, and is, using starvation as a weapon by restricting entry of aid. In December 2023, the U.S. abstained from a UN resolution for humanitarian aid to Gaza. How do you protest starvation? A question which is a fractal of the more haunting question: how do you protest a genocide?

This action came at the time when the famine and the forced starvation in Gaza was coming to light. All the actions we've done map onto what the political moment was about: the UN action [in January 2024] was because we had reached a stalemate in the U.S. and the movement was organizing for international isolation, then next it was about forced starvation, so our action had to respond to that. And I really kept coming back to what you said to us: where should our bodies not be? Well, they don't want us there in Gaza. Let's go there.

We got on a call with the rabbis from the UN action and we had a whole meeting about what we were going to do for Passover and at the end of the hour we had gotten nowhere, everything had been done. In the last five minutes of the call, I said, "well maybe we should go to Gaza." It seemed outrageous. And then it was, "yes yes yes yes yes yes yes." The Passover Haggadah opens with, "all those who are hungry, come and eat." **The question of what to do for a Passover action answered itself.**

To re/affirm the important role that Jews play in the movement for Palestinian freedom, there had to be a felt sense of solidarity and sacrifice.

30 members of Rabbis for Ceasefire attempted to cross the border into Gaza with a pickup truck carrying half a ton of rice and flour. Their goal was to intervene against starvation. They were [arrested](#) less than half a mile before they reached the border. Supplies were redirected to Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

When the state denies persecuted people all forms of self-determination, those people, political prisoners for example, sometimes organize or participate in hunger strikes, as one's own body is the last sovereign territory beyond the state's control. This was the anti-hunger strike. Feeding one another both addresses imminent material needs *and* illuminates the state's unwillingness or inability to do so. We turn up for each other.

This tactic is most common on the local level, but there is precedent for expressions of international solidarity that expand conventional understandings of kinship and relationality. In 1847, less than two decades after the Choctaw had themselves been forcibly relocated from 11 million acres of ancestral lands in Mississippi to Oklahoma, [they collected a donation](#) of \$170, equivalent to \$5,000 today, for the people of Midleton, County Cork, Ireland during the height of the Great Hunger. They also sent seeds. The bond between the Choctaw and Irish as both colonized and displaced peoples was compounded, and complexified, by the fact that so many Hunger-era Irish refugees sought refuge in North America, becoming conscripted into settler colonialism. At the outbreak of COVID-19, the Irish reciprocated the Choctaw's solidarity a hundredfold: the tribe's GoFundMe page went viral in Ireland and they received over \$500,000 in donations. Sharing food — whether it be through serving

breakfast, sharing seeds, or delivering truckloads of staple grains — is a life-giving act, which coalesces into political resistance when supposed antagonists act as kin.

The action touches on big thorny questions about how to show up when you are leveraging the privileges you are afforded by an oppressive power. As Jews, and as Rabbis, there was a strategic leveraging of privilege, including resources, arrestability, and connections. I was on the phone with the head of the UN in Gaza, asking can we actually bring you food? Can we go to your warehouse in Israel and bring you food? It was definitely a media stunt, but we genuinely tried to make it real. When we were speaking to my UN contacts in East Jerusalem and Gaza, they both were like, you can try, we can try, but it's actually hugely significant even if you don't actually bring food. We wanted to really bring food, and they were like even if it doesn't actually work, it will be symbolic. And that means something. How do you be in solidarity with people who are starving or wait 12 hours in a checkpoint? You need a physical sacrifice, one that won't be commensurate, but one that nonetheless says, "I am here."

The action timeline had to be pushed back because Iran was bombing Israel and the flights were canceled, but everyone in the action kept rebooking their tickets. People wanted to show up. As predicted, even though the food didn't cross into Gaza, the act reverberated in Palestine, in Israel, and in the media. I loved that we received a New York Times push notification — [“Police arrest rabbis near Gaza-Israel border at a rally to highlight starvation”](#) — which at the very least meant that people were forced to look at the forced starvation, even if they had curated their algorithms to block it out.

Regardless of how we would categorize this action — media stunt, political theater, symbolic intervention — it told a story about something elemental: hunger, food, offering. What I take away from this action is the political expression of effort. Trying, out of despair, as an act of commitment. Solidarity and showing up. Jews defying borders to bring food to Palestinians in Gaza calls a new world of justice into being by prefiguring that world in this unjust world. **It points to a coming future, even while trying to make that a reality now.**

Wanting life for Palestinians is a true commitment that has been built over decades in the Jewish community. And we demonstrated that. But I have a big regret that I didn't prioritize, to the level that I should have, relationship-building and unity with Jewish Israelis on the Left. They were already very small and they took a huge huge hit after October 7. What if we had prioritized international movement building? The Jewish Israeli Left are some of the most committed activists I have encountered, and under impossible conditions. Unlike in the U.S., there aren't neighborhoods or cities to move to

where you can live in a bubble with like-minded comrades. The Israelis we took action with at the Gaza border have been in and out of jail for years — one had just recently spent 8 days in jail for refusing to agree to stay away from the Palestinian village she was defending when she got arrested.



I think we do the movement a disservice by not thinking internationally. Even as many think nostalgically about internationalism of the past, we have failed to apply those same lessons to our movements of today. All societies, even the most repressive, have pockets of those who join arms for liberation and freedom for all. I feel I fell short of my responsibilities to link arms and to ensure there is a strong left in Israel to prevent rising fascism, to co-resist apartheid with Palestinians, and to have enough political power to save lives.

As [Judith Butler told Occupy Wall Street](#), “It matters that as bodies we arrive together in public. As bodies we suffer, we require food and shelter, and as bodies we require one another in dependency and desire. So this is a politics of the public body, the requirements of the body, its movement and its voice.”

Actions:	<i>Petition Delivery</i>	<i>“Domino Effect”</i>	<i>Dirty Diaper Delivery</i>
Led by:	Mother Forward	Mother Forward	Mother Forward
Location:	Washington D.C.	Multiple Cities	Washington D.C.
Date:	May 31, 2023	October 9-13, 2023	April 10, 2024

RECOMMENDATION: BUILD OUR BENCH

*LJ Amsterdam in conversation with **Katie Holler** and **Brigid Flaherty**, organizers at Mother Forward. **Katie is represented in orange text; Brigid is in pink.***

Actions become a proof of concept. We as moms have these big ideas, we know what the solutions are, and the actions become a way to demonstrate, “I can do something to show that.” It feels so simple. But it’s so moving. You can make phone calls, you can fill out email petitions. **But until someone gives you an opportunity to do, it’s all just a concept. Then you act, and it’s proof.**

Organizer and mother of three Brigid Flaherty, under her username TripleThreatMama, wrote a Reddit post about how she was fed up with paying so much for childcare. The post went viral. Mothers responded, and in January 2023, Brigid hosted a one-hour Zoom meeting. A couple Zooms later, they were calling themselves Campaign for Childcare, even though many had never been part of a campaign. “I’ve never done anything like this” was a frequent refrain. Through 1:1s and bi-weekly group meetings after bedtime, Brigid began to build a base of moms who were hungry to take action. The group, which officially became Mother Forward in July 2024, brought new members in and immediately activated them as leaders by giving them control to design and implement their actions.

My approach to building leaders within Mother Forward has always been to genuinely let the moms drive the design of the actions and the language we use. My theory is that all too often, paid staff come up with the action and messaging, and then we organize our base into doing it without a lot of discussion around their ideas. There’s a higher level of energy, buy-in, excitement and creativity that comes when you let members choose for themselves what they want to do. As an organizer, I may know the date of a hearing or a bill that’s coming up for a vote and my role is to share that piece of info, but then see if and how they want to engage in it. In a lot of private conversations, organizers usually say the members are ahead of staff in terms of what level of action or response they want to do, and I tend to agree. I trust the moms know

what actions and messaging resonate for them and it is my role as an organizer to unleash their power, test their ideas, and together we can evaluate for the next time. **Let leaders lead.**

During our first training session, 15 members learned new narrative strategy tools and principles of action design, then used those tools to develop a story, a strategy, and make tactical decisions about their first action — all in less than 30 minutes.

ACTION 1: STORYTIME AND PETITION DROP WASHINGTON, D.C. - MAY 31, 2023

The first action was friendly: a dozen moms — kiddos in tow — went to Washington, D.C. to drop a petition calling for the Senate to vote on legislation: the Child Care for Every Community Act and the Child Care Workforce and Facilities Act. **As we delivered part of the petition to Bernie Sanders, we had his chief of staff read a book to all the kids so we made this storytime action happen in the office. But some of us still had all this energy, like we just did this really cool thing, let’s see what else can happen. So we took our petition boxes around to visit some of our Senators and I walked in and told my Senator, JD Vance, that I wanted a sit-down. Just being there — standing in front of my Senator, sharing my lived experience — I felt power for the first time.**

After the guerrilla sit-down, when Katie handed over one box of petition signatories to Vance, she said, “I want you to know that there are more people from Ohio who have signed this petition than in any other state.” Vance’s response — “Oh, that’s great” — proved he was clueless, and Katie seemed unsure of what to do, so I stepped in. “You misunderstood. The fact that there are more signatories from Ohio on this petition means that there are more parents in Ohio than in any other state who are in urgent need of childcare. Ohio is failing them.” **I’ve talked with other moms before about what a difference it makes to have someone there who has done it before, who knew how to be more confrontational. It set a new tone for me, I didn’t know that I could go there before. I learned how to break the “be nice” rule.**

ACTION 2: THE “DOMINO EFFECT” MULTIPLE CITIES OCTOBER 9-13, 2023

Moms went to visit federal lawmakers’ offices shortly after the “fiscal cliff” to express their anger over the decision to abandon funding for childcare and to demand stabilizing money to keep providers open, kids in care, and parents in the workforce. After another rapid-fire training, the moms came up with an action called “the Domino Effect.” The narrative: ending funding for childcare creates a domino effect that’s bad for families, communities, and the economy at large. Lawmakers who refuse to take action to protect childcare funding are responsible for setting that chain reaction into motion. In short, without childcare, all the dominoes fall. Moms in a dozen cities dropped in on their reps to tell their own story of how the rising cost of childcare is creating a “domino effect” in their own lives. Moms all made customized domino sets: a couple moms got their reps to actually “play” dominoes by setting them up and watching them fall (get it?!) and other moms left the dominoes with their reps so that they would be reminded of the consequences of their decisions. Several moms went with their kids, without anybody else, because they felt supported by the group.

Lots of moms said, “I didn’t know that I could just show up at my rep’s office, I didn’t know that I could just go and do something.” It was game changing.

ACTION 3: POOPY DIAPERS WASHINGTON D.C. - APRIL 10, 2024

Ratcheting up the risk level and tone of actions, the moms went again to D.C. six months later. **This was our first really agitational moment. We were really gonna break the nice rule.** And it was a surprise visit to Speaker of the House Mike Johnson about his shitty record on child care. Like the domino action, we wanted to have something physical that we could leave with him. This time, it was dirty diapers. The narrative was clear: “We have a message for you: the way you’re failing American families is crappier than these diapers. We’re here to tell you what stinks about the childcare system and demand that you change it.” The moms had all written their own message on a diaper — “What’s shittier than this diaper? Pennsylvania’s record on childcare,” “What stinks about childcare is my bill,” “Doo doo better.” The diapers were filled with Hershey’s syrup, not actual feces, but as each mom handed their diaper over, they felt loaded. With shit, with meaning, with power.

What we all can learn from moms:

Real action logic comes from real life.

We have brought the kids with us to all our actions; they are always a part of it. Many of us don’t have a choice. The kids are attached to us. It’s easier to bring my son with me than leave him behind, but also it adds to the action: these children are why we are doing this. *They are why we are doing this.* **When you bring your kids to protest child care because you don’t have access to childcare — well, that pretty much sums it up, there’s your action logic. Plus, it’s harder to say “no” to an infant than to an adult, so we also used that to our advantage. And on a personal level, it’s so empowering to bring your child to something that matters to you.**

FLUIDITY KEEPS THE CREW TOGETHER.

Many organizations strive for a consistent upward trajectory of leadership development, a trajectory that is often incongruent with the reality of people’s lives. Because real people have real lives, their participation in organizing work ebbs and flows, but organizers don’t always know how to account for people coming in and out. With moms, everyone already knows people will be coming in and out; it’s part of the DNA of the group. Similarly, the group’s organizing activity accounts for times when childcare is less available, like during summer when kids are out of school. **Our organizational structures and practices can be fluid, allowing people to step in and out when they can,** rather than insist they demonstrate a consistency incompatible with their lives. Planning and participating in actions create bonds that last a lot longer than relationships built through icebreakers, so trust that folks will stay connected with the group.

ACTION BUILDS LEADERS.

Poet June Jordan said, “If you love me, you can trust that I can handle it.” Trust that people can handle it. For the domino drops, moms with zero prior experience and even very little participation in the group (attendance at one or two Zoom meetings) took on making their own actions happen. **They didn’t need to be micromanaged or “developed,” they needed someone to put their hands on their shoulders, point them in the right direction, and say “go.”** Developing members doesn’t mean deciding when they’re ready for action, it means supporting them to take the action that feels right for them. The stakes are high. The risks can be too.

From the jump, Mother Forward has scaffolded their members’ development directly onto actions. **I just talked with a mom in Wisconsin and now she’s running a town hall all by herself. We’re seeing the domino effect of our folks getting deeper into taking action.** Moms: changing the world before bedtime.

Hopeful Monsters is the result of research, field testing, and solidaristic partnerships. We hosted salons, one-on-one conversations, and spaces for anonymous real talk with organizers, trainers, artists, action jocks, and unaffiliated “free radicals.”

The core commitment of this project was to offer ourselves to groups. The Direct Action Incubation Lab provided leadership in action strategy and upsurge coordination, training in action design and narrative development, and support with the tactical nitty-gritties. We were in the room for everything from major movement strategy conversations to late-night banner-making sessions — that range of participation was essential for getting grounded assessments from the field.

Additionally, we teamed up with our Future Currents sibling project, the Strengthening Organizing Project, to facilitate two retreats in which organizers from across the country came together to prototype interventions to bolster base-building. We took the lead on a joint third retreat which was explicitly focused on digesting and understanding movement upsurges.

Based on what we heard from organizers and what we learned from embedding ourselves in organizations and mobilizations, we developed a set of hypotheses. We kicked the tires on these with our collaborators, then partnered with groups on actions to test them. These hypotheses evolved into our recommendations, and you can read about some of the actions in the case studies. In the next phase of this project, we hope to pilot some innovations in upsurge choreography and infrastructure.

METHODOLOGY

DISSENT: The collective expression of disagreement with dominant institutions, elites, or “official views.” The public questioning of truth, meaning, and authority. While dissent can be expressed on an individual level, dissent is most powerful when word and deed align collectively and in public.³⁴ We use this term to refer to the multiplicity of forms of opposition to the status quo.

DISRUPTION: In “Practical Radicals,” Deepak Bhargava and Stephanie Luce define disruptive power as “The ability to stop those in power from doing what they want to do and to break up the status quo — in short, the ‘power to wound.’”³⁵ Disruption entails interrupting the functioning of oppressive institutions, economic relationships, and dominant narratives.

DIRECT ACTION: A toolbox of tactics used for political and cultural intervention: to stop immediate harm, interrupt the flow of capital, implement a solution, or create leverage to accelerate decision making. Direct action is direct because one considers the problem in front of them, takes responsibility for the solution, and — motivated by conviction and consciousness — moves without seeking permission or mediation. Direct action includes civil disobedience, a tactic in which participants break the law to highlight injustice. While direct action is a set of tactics, it implies a strategy: that by registering our dissent, we put pressure on the system to respond to us.

STABLE DEFINITIONS FOR STATES OF CHANGE

THE DIRECT ACTION INCUBATION LAB



FUTURE CURRENTS

SPACE TO IMAGINE. STRATEGIES FOR ACTION.

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.

LJ AMSTERDAM



LJ is a social movement strategist and upsurge organizer from New York City. Since Occupy Wall Street, LJ has trained close to 15,000 people to take action. She is a Senior Fellow at Future Currents, where she leads the Direct Action Incubation Lab and is also a member of the Strengthening Organizing Project team.

A dancer and former DJ, LJ was a Co-Director of the seminal grassroots direct action training organization The Ruckus Society, which led hundreds of trainings in pivotal movement moments. Before that, she was a youth organizer. She holds a B.A. and an M.A. from the Institute of Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University.

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- 2 Protest for Breonna Taylor, Louisville 2020 - photo Jon Cherry
- 6 Celebration march for Breonna Taylor memorial painting, Louisville 2020 - photo Jon Cherry
- 7 Protest at the founding of Breonna Taylor Square, Louisville 2020 - photo Jon Cherry
- 8 Protest against Trump's Muslim ban, JFK Airport 2020 - photo Stephanie Keith
- 10 Protest for Breonna Taylor, Louisville - photo Jon Cherry
- 11 The Black People's Day of Action, London 1981 - photo Vron Ware
- 13 Occupy Wall Street D17 action, New York 2011
- 14 Jews take over the Cannon Rotunda, Washington D.C. 2023 - photo LJ Amsterdam
- 15 Black Lives Matter protest, Los Angeles 2020
- 16, 17 Las Tesis-inspired action outside Harvey Weinstein's rape trial, New York 2020
- 18, 19 Navajo-Hopi Relocation Act protest, Black Mesa 1986 - photo Kenji Kawano
- 20 Standing Rock Runners arrive at Oceti Sakowin Camp, 2016 - photo LJ Amsterdam
- 21 Thank God for Abortion activation, Vatican City 2019
- 22 Protest for Breonna Taylor, Louisville 2020 - photo Jon Cherry
- 23 Invest in Our Communities march, Brooklyn 2020 - photo LJ Amsterdam/ Freedom House mobile crisis team, Miami 2022
- 25 Standing Rock youth erect tipi in Hillary Clinton's HQ, New York 2016 - photo Rae Breaux
- 26 The Ruckus Society's Climate Resiliency Action Camp, 2018 - photo LJ Amsterdam
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- 30 NDN Collective's He Sapa Action Camp, 2023 - photo LJ Amsterdam
- 31 Jews take over the Cannon Rotunda, Washington D.C. 2023 - photo LJ Amsterdam
- 34 The Piggy Bank Breakers take over Nexus, New York 2023 - photos Rae Breaux
- 37 Rabbis for Ceasefire deliver food to Gaza, 2024

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

to my collaborator Angela Peoples for breathing life into this project;

to the Strengthening Organizing Team: Connie Razza, Lissy Romanow, Cristina Jiménez, Kandace Montgomery, Crystal Zermeno, and Nsé Ufot;

to the Future Currents staff;

to the participants of the Movement Upsurge Retreat: Ahmad Abuznaid, JaNaé Bates, Rae Breaux, Kari Claudio Betancourt, Alex Ding, Elianne Farhat, Abril Gallardo Cervera, Brianna Gibson, Rachel Gilmer, Makia Green, Taryn Hallweaver, Alan Hanson, Mary Hooks, Maria Ibarra-Frayre, Devonte Jackson, Jasson Perez, Tara Raghuveer, Felipe Sousa Lazaballet, Sondra Youdelman;

to the January Cohort and the February Cohort of the Strengthening Organizing Retreats;

to contributors and co-conspirators: Austin Almaguer, Marty Aranaydo, Deborah Axt, Christian Beauvoir, Jade Begay, Erica Chenoweth, Ben Chin, Crystal Clarity, Chris Crass, Heather Cronk, Neidi Dominguez, Farhad Ebrahimi, Brigid Flaherty, Stefanie Fox, Paige Gbasie, Gan Golan, Sean Gullette, Prentiss Haney, Ash-Lee Henderson, Emily Hobson, Katie Holler, Zoe Hudson, Monica Hunken, Karissa Lewis, Charles Long, Terry Marshall, Anissa Martin, Kandi Mossett, Scot Nakagawa, Dani Noble, Sandy Nurse, Andre Perez, Felicia Perez, Adiel Pollydore, Dejah Powell, Sunny Red Bear, Malachi Robinson, Jasmen Rogers, Rachel Schragis, John Sellers, Bernice Shaw, Aisha Shillingford, Kevin Simowitz, Suzanne Snider, Nelini Stamp, Mark Tilsen, Chio Valerio-Gonzalez, Cy Wagoner, Chris Westcott, Alissa Wise, Josh Yoder;

and a special shout out to the New York City Free Radicals, John Whitlow, Jack Downey, Rachel Meirs, Jon Cherry, and especially Caty McClure.

HOPEFUL MONSTERS

info@futurecurrents.org



Future Currents 2025