

# BUILDING POWER IN PLACE

A MUNICIPALIST ORGANIZING TOOLKIT



**MUNICIPALISM**  
LEARNING SERIES



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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to ***Building Power in Place: A Municipalist Organizing Toolkit***. This toolkit presents a snapshot of the praxis and theory of various place-based movements we describe as *radical municipalist*. This is also a space where movements share practical tips to apply municipalist strategy to your local organizing context. ***Building Power in Place*** includes key takeaways, lessons learned, and case studies to inspire and support municipalist projects. As an editorial team, we are not only thinkers, but also practitioners of municipalism in our own locales. Though we are inspired by organizing projects across an expansive geography, our ideas have ultimately been informed by local praxis. We put a lot of love into this toolkit and hope you will find it useful to build power in your place-based movement work.

## WHY MUNICIPALIST ORGANIZING?

Municipalist organizing is rooted in a vision for a **self-governed locality**. The *municipality* is the level at which neighbors can govern themselves and build alternatives to capitalism based on **cooperation and solidarity**.

In this toolkit, we are primarily inspired by **radical municipalism**: the vision that our movements can destroy the hegemonic structures that rule over us and create alternatives based on **direct democracy** and the **solidarity economy**. Radical municipalism is a place where **queer and nonbinary politics** are valued— where collaboration, dialogue, horizontality, and the co-construction of affirming, solidaristic relations replace heteropatriarchy and the matrix of domination (See: [Hill Collins, 2000](#)).

The pathway to municipalism can take many different forms. It draws from and is shaped by various traditions and social practices, as no two settings are alike. While these forms fall under the umbrella of radical municipalism, we identify three broad categories of place-based practice:

- **Indigenous** forms of radical democracy draw from ancestral practices of shared governance and are often based on community-specific worldviews that have deep socio-cultural roots.
- **Urban** forms reimagine the cityscape and typically draw upon worker and syndicalist traditions ([Kolokotronis, 2017](#)).
- Finally, **rural** forms tend to draw from community labor and land management practices.

The municipalist movement is still emergent in North America. In September 2023, the [Municipalism Learning Series](#) launched the [Municipalism Cohort Fellowship](#), a 12-week online program that sought to expand municipalist organizing. This fellowship invited grassroots organizers to reclaim governance in their cities. The fellowship provided an incubator for critical reflection, applied research, and the exchange of translocal tactics. Drawing on the fellowship's curriculum, we designed this toolkit to be an accessible guide to municipalist organizing for you, your comrades, and a wider audience of community members.

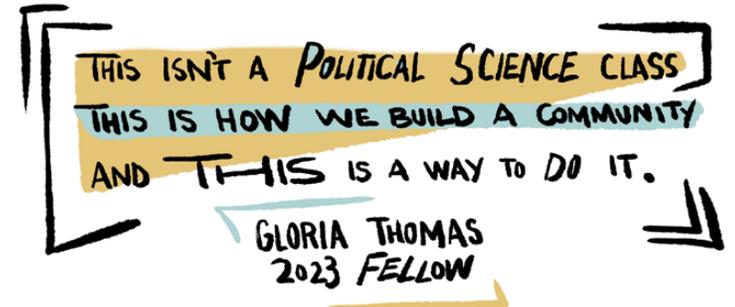
# HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

*Building Power in Place* synthesizes learnings, takeaways, exercises, and case studies for organizers beyond the Municipalism Learning Series Cohort Fellowship. This toolkit includes sections that explore topics such as: decoding municipalism, base building, facilitating peoples assemblies, building pathways to power, and taking action—transitioning these theoretical ideas into practice. In addition to highlighting examples of what has worked, we also discuss things that have not worked or only worked temporarily.

**We believe there is incredible value in learning from failures and even redefining “failure” and “success” in our movements.** We are unafraid to make points of rupture visible and demonstrate that these aren’t infallible organizing practices. It is important to remember that some efforts only make sense in a particular moment or place. **Whether we like it or not, longevity and universality are not necessarily defining indicators of success.** We invite you to think critically about your own local context— local conditions, opportunities, and culture— and let the concepts in this toolkit inspire you to develop strategies with unique potential to activate your community.

Each section of this toolkit includes content summaries, illustrations to visualize the learning series section, key takeaways, and reflection exercises to move through personal meditations. We hope they help spark your curiosity and activate your imagination!

This toolkit provides tools and practices to share with fellow organizers, community members, and comrades. **Our intended audience is people seeking a cultivated space to think through questions around place-based organizing strategy.**



## GETTING STARTED

If you are reading this toolkit, you likely are already engaging in organizing strategies in your own region. Maybe the term municipalism is new to you, maybe it is familiar. Regardless of your familiarity, **we invite you to think deeply about the ways that you are already using many of these theories and practices in your movement work.**

While you can work through this toolkit from start to finish, many sections can stand alone. Refer to the table of contents to jump to the topics and case studies that best suit your current needs and organizing moment. **Please take what feels useful to you from this toolkit and leave the rest.** You know your organizing context best and you’ll know if something is or is not applicable to your local environment.

# KEY CONCEPTS

Beginning with key concepts is an essential first step in building common understanding. Here we introduce some key conceptual frameworks you will encounter in this toolkit, and potentially also in your own movement space. **These definitions offer a starting point;** they represent a combination of the toolkit team's knowledge and experiences. They may be concepts you use or have never heard before. We invite you to see these concepts as dynamic—changing as circumstances, experiences, and language evolve. Note which concepts do and do not resonate for you.

## Direct Democracy

- Direct democracy is **a form of governance in which citizens directly participate in decision-making processes** without relying on elected officials. Direct democracy offers practical and effective institutions that can be implemented across the globe to counter an increasingly hierarchical republicanism ([Bookchin, 2015](#)).
- “A bottom-up self-governance system in which the people themselves have a direct say over all social, economic, and/or political matters impacting their daily lives, as opposed to ‘representative democracy.’” (See: [Black Socialists in America](#).)

## Dual Power

- Dual power typically refers to a situation where **two parallel and competing systems of power or authority exist within a society**. One power is typically the existing or traditional one, while the other arises from grassroots movements and alternative institutions. In Latin America, dual power refers to official government power and that of social movements. For example, in Venezuela, the communes present one such example ([Dalton, 2022](#)).
- “Two powers, one proletarian (democratic) and one capitalist, coexisting and competing for legitimacy during the transition away from Capitalism.” (See: [Black Socialists in America](#).)

## Intercommunalism

- Intercommunalism is a theory developed by political philosopher and Black Panther Huey P. Newton. He posited that **the role of revolutionaries was not to gain national sovereignty, but to liberate territories, building cooperative networks** with other liberated zones. Intercommunalism emphasizes the need for solidarity and cooperation among different communities worldwide in the struggle against oppression.
- “The people of the world must seize power from the small ruling circle and expropriate the expropriators, and distribute the fruits of our labor that have been denied us in some equitable way.” (See: [Newton, 1974](#).)

## Militant Research

- More of a practice than a method, militant research refers to the work carried out with and for the grassroots. It effaces prior knowledge and ideologies as it seeks to instead work “from below” to generate new knowledges and understandings. Rather than develop research for the sake of research, **it works with underrepresented groups to produce research that unequivocally supports social transformation**.
- “Militant research attempts to work under alternative conditions, created by the collective itself and by the ties to counter power in which it is inscribed, pursuing its own efficacy in the production of knowledges useful to the struggles.” (See: [Colectivo Situaciones, 2003](#)).

## Solidarity Economy

- Solidarity economy is a post-capitalism framework that rejects state-dominated authoritarian forms of socialism, instead **affirming a core commitment to participatory democracy expressed through a moral economy** ([Kawano and Matthaei, 2020](#)).
- “An alternative framework for economic development grounded in practice and the following principles: solidarity and cooperation, equity in all dimensions (race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc.), social and economic democracy, sustainability, pluralism (not a one-size-fits-all approach), puts people and planet first.” (See: [US Solidarity Economy Network, n.d.](#))

# KEY CONCEPTS

## What is municipalism?

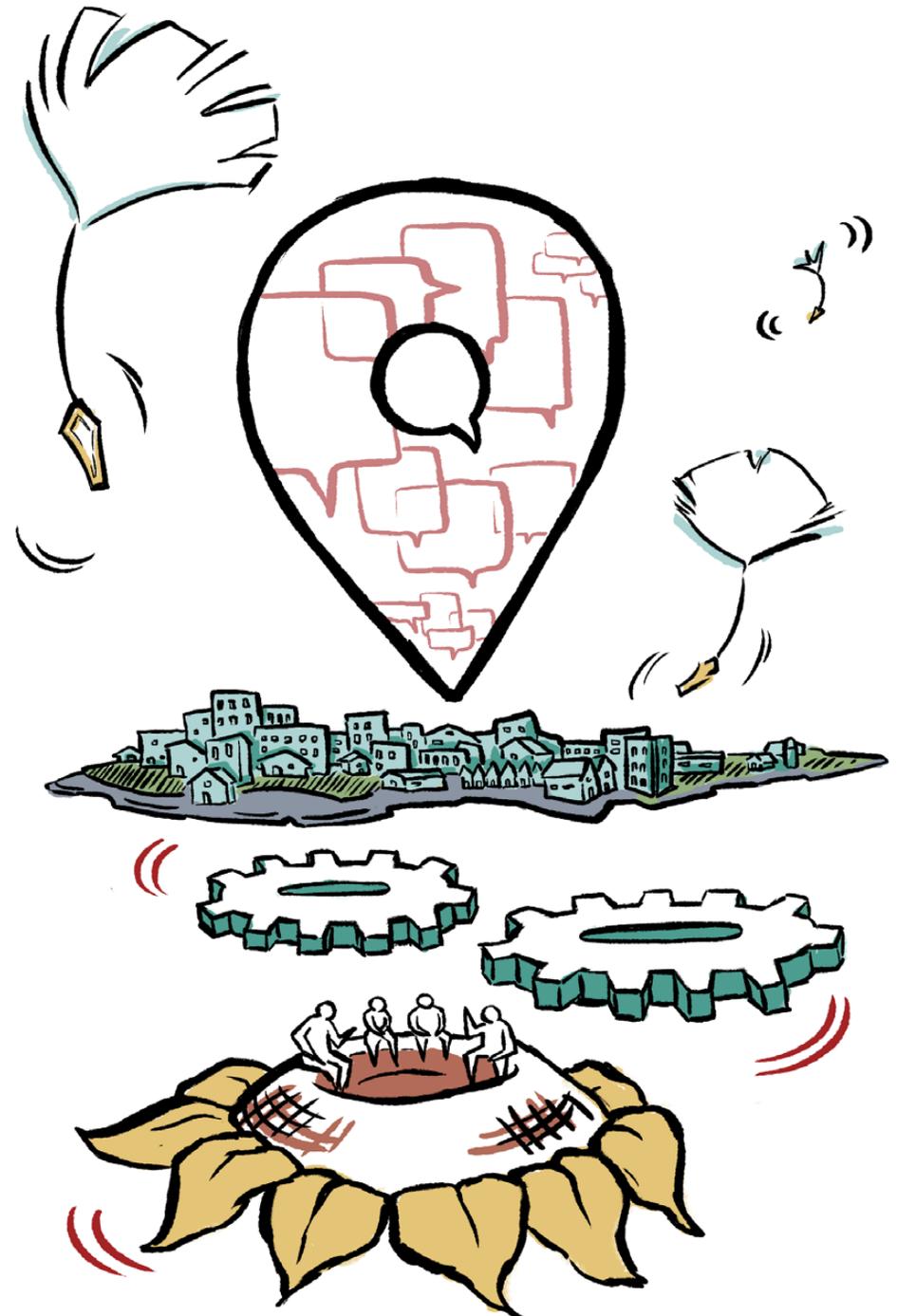
Municipalism refers to a **political philosophy and strategy that emphasizes local self-governance and community-based decision-making**. Municipalism is not a singular, monolithic movement, but a realm of experimentation in which **the municipality is a key site of social, political, and economic transformation**. (See: [Ahern, 2022](#) and this [Toolkit's Resources section](#) on page 123 for further reading.)

## What is radical municipalism?

Radical municipalism is a political and social philosophy that **advocates for transformative change at the local level**, with a focus on participatory and grassroots democracy.

Radical municipalism emphasizes community self-governance, civic engagement, and the establishment of local, directly democratic institutions to transform existing power structures. It is the vision that our movements can and will **move away from coercive and hegemonic structures and move towards alternatives based on direct democracy and the solidarity economy**. Radical municipalism aims to build alternative politics based on the commune to replace the nation-state, patriarchal power structures, and colonial capital accumulation ([Remembering the Commune, 2021](#)). (For further reading, see: [Roth, Russell, & Thompson, 2023](#).)

For other relevant concepts, see the *Black Socialists in America's* website: [Glossary of Socialist Terms](#).



# 01.

# DECODING MUNICIPALISM

*Adapted from a presentation by Eleanor Finley and Abel Liu*

This section will orient you to what municipalism means in this toolkit's context.

- What exactly is “municipalism” and where did it come from?
- How can municipalism inform your organizing practice?
- What is the difference between municipalism and other place-based organizing?
- Why are there so many terms that appear to mean virtually the same thing?

***Decoding Municipalism*** aims to demystify municipalist organizing and to contextualize municipalist movements- their main concerns, key objectives, and tensions.



# DECODING MUNICIPALISM

About REINVENTING GOVERNANCE

WHAT KIND OF POLITICAL SYSTEM does A POST-CAPITALIST future call for?

- EXPERIMENT IN TRANSFORMATION
- LOCAL RADICAL DEMOCRACY
- Rooted IN INTERDEPENDENCE
- SELF-GOVERNANCE



CONFRONTING INSTITUTIONS

AND DEMOCRATIZING THEM

WHO ARE THE MUNICIPALISTS



Barcelona En Comú

los angeles For all



CIVIC PLATFORMS

MOVEMENT WORK

DUAL POWER

WHAT MUNICIPALISTS DO

DIRECT DEMOCRACY

BLACK + INDIGENOUS Self-Governance

North American ROOTS

Global Networks

"DEMOCRACY" Is this idea INCLUSIVE or alienating?

How do we ensure SOCIAL JUSTICE within DIRECT DEMOCRACY?

How should our political system relate to the economy?

Are we REVOLUTIONARY or Reformist?

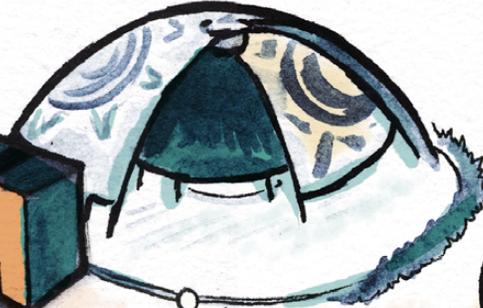
COMMUNALIST ??

What do we CALL ourselves?

LIBERTARIAN MUNICIPALISTS ??

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALIST ?

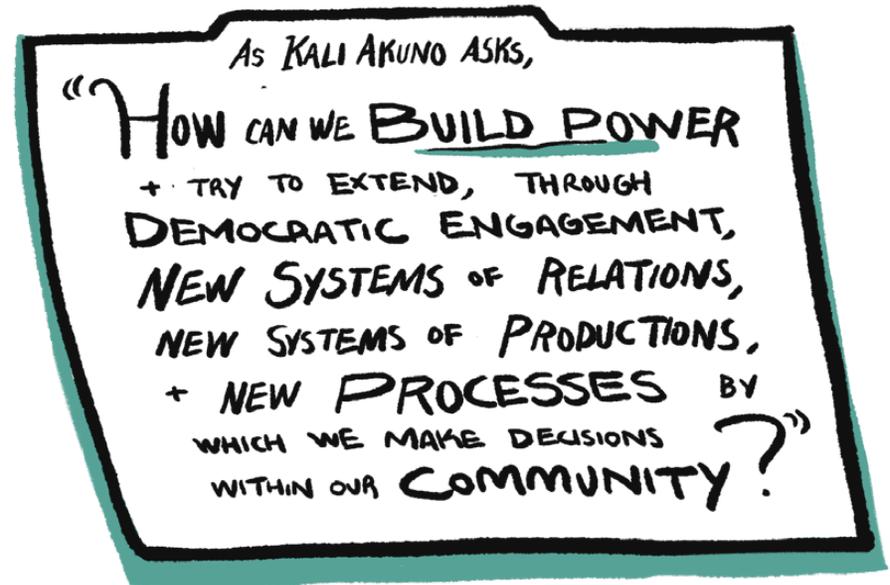
THE DILEMMAS



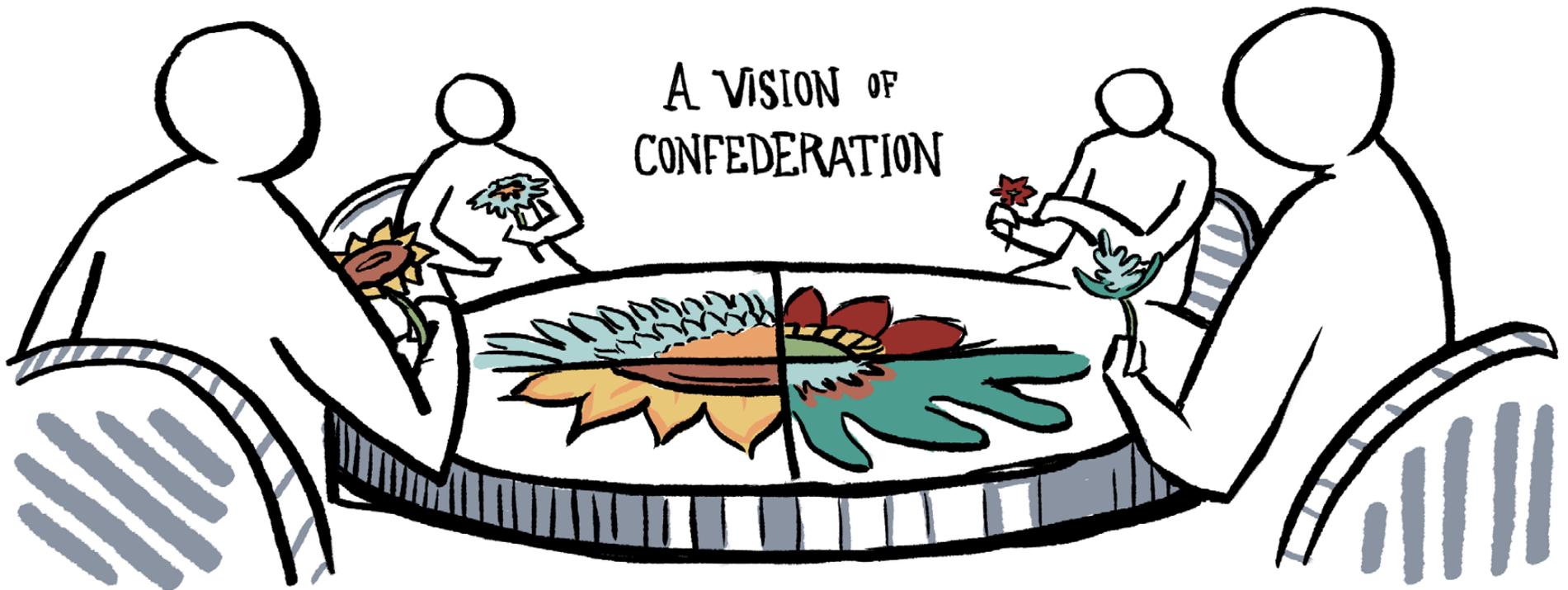
# WHAT IS MUNICIPALISM?

## Municipalism is...

- A redefinition and approach to political power
- An attempt to destroy capitalism, colonialism, racism, heteropatriarchy
- A realm of experimentation
- A family of movements
- A reclamation of humanity's many legacies of freedom
- A means and an end



- Kali Akuno, 2022



# MUNICIPALISM IS...

“A situation within which we could work to combine our activity and energy to produce public goods”

“Imaginings of how we might live together”

“Combining territory, land, water, resources, money and people to make entire ways of life”



*Ruth Wilson Gilmore,  
CUNY Graduate Center*



*AbdouMaliq Simone,  
University of Sheffield*

“Municipalism is an abiding sentiment that runs through a vast range of collective actions”

“An ethos of mutual concern and interdependence”

“Governing attuned to the heterogeneity of livelihoods and orientations”



*Kali Akuno,  
Cooperation Jackson*

“Land back to Indigenous sovereignty and control through democratic practice of opening up to people who want to be good stewards to the land”

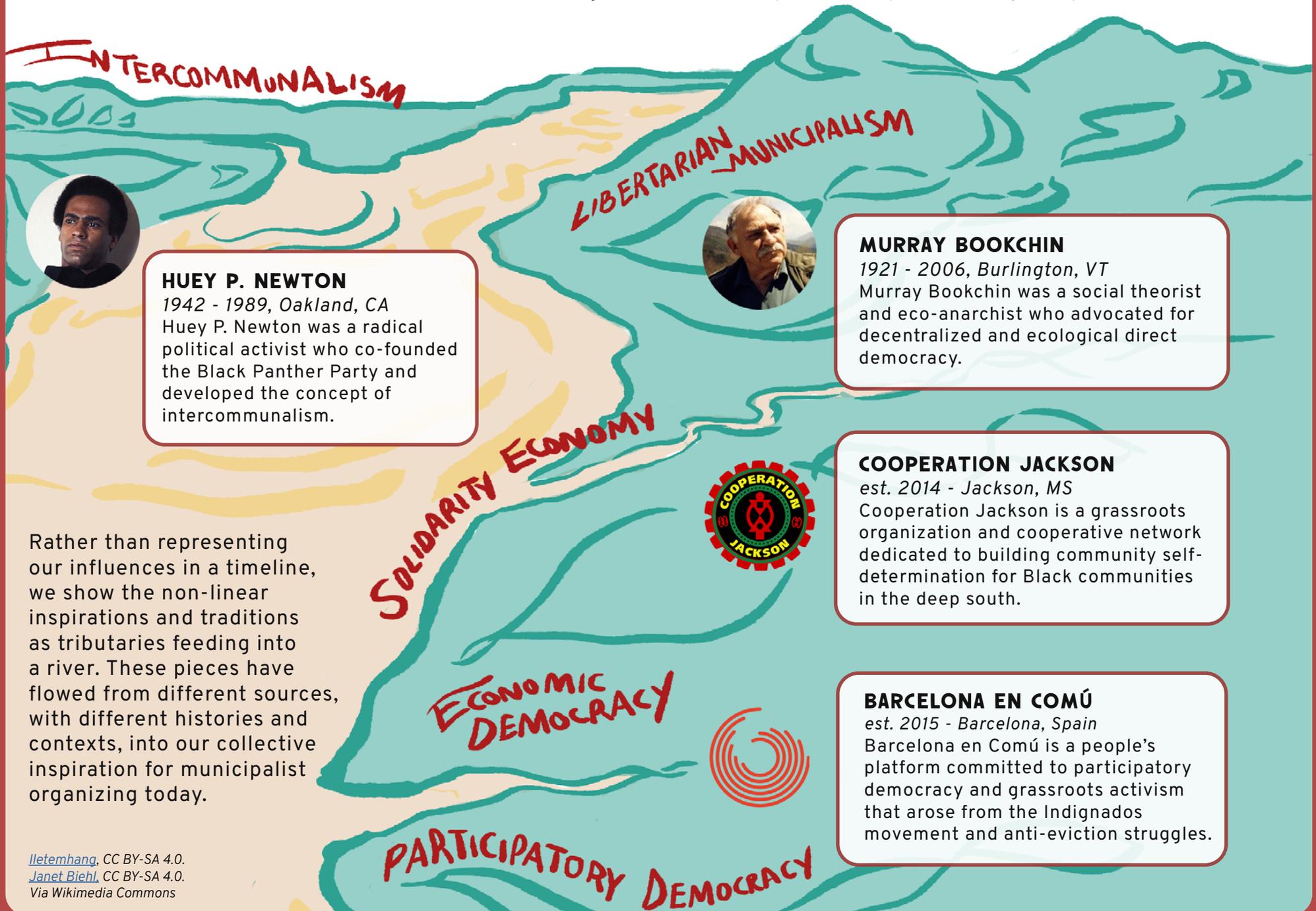
“Municipalism starts with our own construction and definitions of community”

“Dismantling of the existing nation-state”

*Excerpts from  
“[The Municipalist Moment](#),”  
May 1, 2022.*

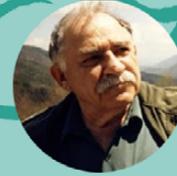
# OUR KEY INFLUENCES

Here are a few of the key thinkers that influenced and inspired the creators of this toolkit. This is a small sample of the **many** lineages and ideologies that have shaped municipalist theory and practice.



## HUEY P. NEWTON

1942 - 1989, Oakland, CA  
Huey P. Newton was a radical political activist who co-founded the Black Panther Party and developed the concept of intercommunalism.



## MURRAY BOOKCHIN

1921 - 2006, Burlington, VT  
Murray Bookchin was a social theorist and eco-anarchist who advocated for decentralized and ecological direct democracy.

Rather than representing our influences in a timeline, we show the non-linear inspirations and traditions as tributaries feeding into a river. These pieces have flowed from different sources, with different histories and contexts, into our collective inspiration for municipalist organizing today.

## COOPERATION JACKSON

est. 2014 - Jackson, MS  
Cooperation Jackson is a grassroots organization and cooperative network dedicated to building community self-determination for Black communities in the deep south.

## BARCELONA EN COMÚ

est. 2015 - Barcelona, Spain  
Barcelona en Comú is a people's platform committed to participatory democracy and grassroots activism that arose from the Indignados movement and anti-eviction struggles.

[Iletemhang](#), CC BY-SA 4.0.  
[Janet Biehl](#), CC BY-SA 4.0.  
Via Wikimedia Commons

# GLOBAL MUNICIPALIST INSPIRATIONS

People across the globe are organizing for democratic control of their communities, and each movement develops its own unique practices according to its context and conditions. This map highlights movements and traditions around the world that inspire us as municipalists and the unique concepts that have emerged from them.



 **SPAIN**  
 **SOUTH AFRICA**  
 **ROJAVA**




 **TURTLE ISLAND**  
 **CHIAPAS**  
 **CHILE**

Learn more about these organizing traditions in the [Municipalist Inspirations](#) resource section.

# WHAT DO MUNICIPALISTS DO?

Municipalists use a variety of strategies that suit their individual organizing projects. Examples of strategies include:



## MOVEMENT WORK

- Solidarity economies, mutual aid and care networks, degrowth, tenants unions, protest work, permaculture

## DIRECT DEMOCRACY

- Holding, hosting, and organizing peoples assemblies
- Rejecting the current system of “representation”

## DUAL POWER

- Two-pronged movement with both governmental and non-governmental power
- Complimentary pressure from within and outside formal government
- Generative tension

## CIVIC PLATFORMS

- Advocating for “non-reformist” reforms
- Electing movement leaders
- Using local context to determine capacities

The Municipalist Moment watch party in Los Angeles on May Day 2022, Image Credit: Los Angeles for All.

# WHY DO WE NEED MUNICIPALISM?

How and why does municipalism not just reproduce hierarchy and the state?

Municipalism is a way of reshaping how people make decisions.

In order to make sure everyone can comfortably and confidently make decisions together, we have to understand how our present circumstances make that difficult. Racism, capitalism, patriarchal structures, and other systems of oppression pit us against each other and prevent us from working toward common goals. **Municipalism aims to break down the divisions created by these systems and to foster space for dialogue and commonality**, so we can deeply understand each other's needs and work together to build the world that we, as a collective, want to live in.

Movements can reproduce hierarchy and reinforce the power of the state when they are not intentional about their priorities and structure. For example, if we run a local candidate for the purpose of addressing our community's needs, are we also prepared to take on the state's use of local funds to wage imperialist wars abroad?



# DISAGREEMENTS & DILEMMAS

Municipalism has its share of disagreements, dilemmas, and points of friction. Considering these disagreements and dilemmas is essential to finding one's own niche within the movement. Municipalism does not need to be defined rigidly. We outline some disagreements and dilemmas faced within municipalism below. **Have these questions come up in your community? Are there other dilemmas you are trying to work through?**

## What do we call ourselves? By what terms and affiliations do we align ourselves and our strategies?

- Some use: municipalism, libertarian municipalism, radical municipalism, direct democracy, participatory democracy, democratic confederalism, communalism.
- Each of these terms carries a different connotation and slight variation in strategy and ideology.

## What is our relationship to the state?

- Do we prioritize reform or revolution?
- How important are elections and how do we orient toward them?
- If we attempt to take state power, how do we resist cooptation?
- To what extent do we dissolve power and hierarchy in existing dominant structures?

## What is our relationship to labor?

- Do we organize community councils, labor councils, or both?
- How do we turn union power into community power? How do we organize workers who are excluded from traditional unions?

## What does “democracy” mean to us?

- Our existing societies are often described as democracies, but many peoples' needs are not centered. What makes us different?
- If our goal is deeper inclusion, does that mean everyone has to decide on everything? Municipalists try to answer these questions by creating their own interpretations of participatory or radical democracy.

## How do we respond when direct democracy and social justice collide?

- Direct democracy must be infused with social justice to be liberatory. How do we help people find solidarity across difference without being prescriptive or paternalistic?

## How do we organize ourselves?

- How do we balance our energies between building exemplary models, even if small, versus scaling up and organizing a mass base of participants and supporters?
- How many people are willing, able, and actually want to participate in the ongoing labor of running collective institutions? How do we build a nurturing political home where participants feel connected and supported to navigate conflict and disappointments?

## How do we focus on local needs without becoming exclusionary?

- When organizing is hyper-localized, boundaries can become borders that keep people out.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Municipalist movements attempt to **democratize and transform power relations through our shared vision for self-governance.**

Radical municipalism emphasizes community self-governance, civic engagement, and the establishment of local, directly democratic institutions. It is the vision that our movements can and will **move away from coercive and hegemonic structures and move towards alternatives.** Radical municipalism aims to build alternative politics based on the commune to replace the nation-state, patriarchal power structures, and colonial capital accumulation.

2

Municipalist projects **lead from locality.**

Movements differ depending on local, social, and historical contexts and issues. The *municipality* is the level at which neighbors can govern themselves and build alternatives to capitalism based on cooperation and solidarity.

3

Municipalist projects tend to emerge in a given locality from **a base and alliance of social movements.**

Some allied movement spaces are the solidarity economy, housing justice, abolition, and social ecology.

# CONSIDERATIONS IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

by Gloria Thomas and Guadalupe Pardo, 2023 Fellows

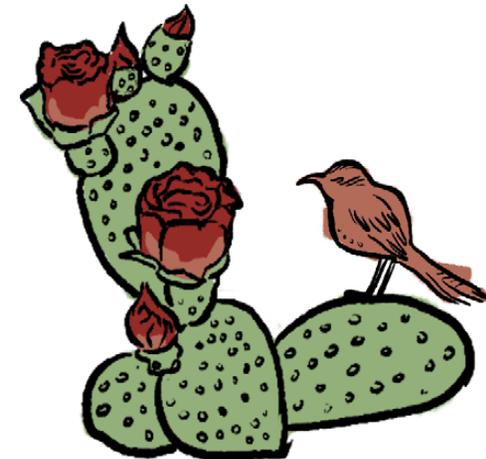


Gloria Thomas,  
2023 Fellow

The Rio Grande River is the life giver to all living beings in her corridor. She is the birthplace of the [Estok G'na](#). While connotated with birth and motherhood, the Rio Grande River's water was soiled both by the by-products of industrialization (agricultural runoff and toxic waste dumping) and by postcolonialist xenophobic rhetoric inflamed by proximity to Mexico.

This river and border has outlined a region wrought with racialized violence and ideological power struggles, most notably in its history of segregation and colonialism. In the early 1900s, white business men came to the Rio Grande Valley looking to settle and develop it. They found small Spanish settlements interspersed within a nettlesome environment made of mostly thornbush and inhabited by roaming populations of indigenous [Karankawa](#) and the [Estok G'na](#). This didn't stop white business owners from spinning tales of the mythological "[Magic Valley](#)," a successful ad campaign that sold other mostly mid-western white businessmen the dream of a temperate, 'tropical' paradise

perfect for planting citrus—an undeveloped area free for the taking. Historic [Spanish land grants](#), which established long lineages of families living in the Rio Grande Valley, were subsequently ignored as settlers employed extrajudicial violence during land seizures. The local population, dispossessed of their land and stirred by the Mexican Revolution across the border, rose up in [La Matanza](#), a five year long dispute between the local population and white American settlers. Established US forces including the military, local law enforcement, and Texas Rangers



Guadalupe Pardo,  
2023 Fellow



*On the Arroyo Colorado River - Harlingen, Texas (2023)  
Image Credit: Guadalupe Pardo*

aided the settlers and they handily won the conflict. As a result, the majority of elected officials were now white Americans who ruled over the Spanish and Indigenous population. Thus began a long history of segregation & redlining.

The Valley has historically been [excluded from participating in electoral politics](#), which has led to a poverty-stricken immigrant majority with many families of mixed documentation status. The Valley's history of agriculture is still prevalent as many people are compelled to do migratory farm work to make a living.

Organizing within the Rio Grande Valley has largely been on behalf of these marginalized populations, with legacy organizations such as LUPE

(La Union del Pueblo Entero) working with farm worker leaders for labor rights and economic and housing justice. Local organizations are dedicated to immigration reform and know-your-rights advocacy, though these transborder issues often happen without transborder solidarity and representation; a challenge to contemporary organizing in the Rio Grande Valley.

Municipalism is done first and foremost through the practical application of language. We stray from legitimizing the contemporary political boundaries of 'borders', 'counties', and 'nations' because these boundaries conflict with the way we live. The "Rio Grande Valley" is a large semi-rural region with pockets of urban cities, making long distance travel necessary. However, this kind of travel remains inaccessible to a large majority. The majority of RGV folks have family on both sides of the border. Many cross the border daily to go to school or visit their family. In a world without white supremacy and colonialism, there would be no "border" to cross and the Rio Grande would be a place of union.

The imposed contradiction of living as a culture that transcends these political boundaries and organizing with the principles of municipalism, which emphasizes locality, may seem difficult. Municipalism emphasizes many strategies that try to use the existing local political structure to reflect a direct democracy. In this case, using the local political structures themselves can feel like an affront to the cultural identities of the Rio Grande Valley, because doing so would turn away undocumented relatives and exclude family members across the border.

These local political structures are currently dominated by corporate interests and wealthy families descended from colonizers that use their power to bring in polluting industries and maintain oppressive systems of capitalism and white supremacy. With this in mind, we cannot do any political action without resisting oppressive borders, empowering our community, and transforming local political structures. What this looks like still needs to be explored. Observing activist

spaces demonstrates that many groups focus on immigrant rights and empowering local artists and cultural narratives (Voces Unidas, Trucha RGV, Nuestra Delta Magica), while others galvanize local communities to make a presence in political spaces (Border Workers United, LUPE). Each of these organizations have their unique struggles and there is not yet a clear pathway to combine efforts and achieve the goals of resisting oppression, restructuring narratives, and empowering the community. Municipalism offers a wide umbrella to capture different forms of organizing that we will have to adapt to these contexts.



We as organizers have to reflect on our experiences as individuals, the various narratives imposed on us historically and presently, and limitations we face in the border region. It's imperative to self-reflect in organizing spaces and weed out the white saviorism we experience with local organizing. Victimization is also very prevalent in local narratives and is counterproductive to establishing local leadership as legitimate and powerful. In order to successfully organize and empower local communities to maintain self-directed municipalities, we work first to challenge preconceived narratives and create alternative structures that address imposed violence through social, political and economic structures and respond with grassroots networks of care that encompass our international community.



*Gloria Thomas (she/her) is from Brownsville, TX. Her parents are from South India, and she moved to Texas when at 6 years old. She studied Chemistry and Anthropology at UTRGV, and she received a graduate degree in Water Resources Sciences at the University of Minnesota.*

*Guadalupe Pardo (she/they) is an active community member based in the Rio Grande Valley. They use sustainable art practices, historical analysis and grassroots organizing, always centering creativity, to imagine radical change.*

# REFLECT ON YOUR INTENTIONS IN USING THIS TOOLKIT



- What are you hoping to gain from using this toolkit? How can you nurture these goals?
- What issues impact your town, neighborhood, and city the most?
- What energizes you about your movement space? How can you hold on to this energy?

# UNIVERSAL QUESTIONS IN LOCAL ORGANIZING



*A conversation with Denzel Caldwell, Marisa Holmes, and Michael Hardt, facilitated by Belinda Rodríguez and George Ygarza*

*This discussion was organized as a follow-up to a previous panel about Popular Assemblies hosted in November 2023. In this conversation, Belinda Rodríguez and George Ygarza guide three panelists—*



*Top to bottom:  
Denzel Caldwell  
Marisa Holmes  
Michael Hardt*



*Top to bottom:  
Belinda Rodríguez  
George Ygarza*

*Denzel Caldwell, an organizer with the Black Nashville Assembly, Marisa Holmes, organizer and author of the book *Organizing Occupy Wall Street*, and Michael Hardt, author of several books, including *Assembly with Antonio Negri*— through a discussion on their experiences with local organizing and common dilemmas faced by municipalist movements.*

*Inspired by [Aimé Césaire's 1956 letter of resignation from the French Communist Party](#), we invited the panelists to consider the tension between the universal and the particular in municipalist organizing.*

*Historically, the notion of the universal and related worldviews of totality have imposed a kind of homogeneity in the way that they define resistance and support movement building.*

*Universalism in some ways effaces and flattens difference, collapsing histories into a singularity. Universalism can overlook the way in which power touches down and impacts territories differently.*

*The tension between the universal and the particular is one that affects all aspects of organizing, and is something we wrestled with in the creation of this toolkit. It is important to hold both the universal and the particular at the same time. Our desire is not to supplant the universal with the particular. To do so would prevent the formation of a unified struggle or front against forces of violence and systems of oppression which in themselves operate universally.*

“

*My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars.”*

*- Aimé Césaire, 1956*

WE CANNOT PUT FORTH  
A POLICY PLATFORM  
OR ANY PROJECT THAT'S  
SUPPOSED TO BE COLLECTIVE  
WITHOUT COLLECTIVE INPUT

**Belinda:** This first question is inspired by Denzel. During the last panel, you emphasized the importance of developing a sense of leadership and protagonism in the assembly space. What are some specific practices that you think are successful in cultivating a sense of leadership and protagonism? What has been helpful, and what traps can people fall into when trying to cultivate this?

**Denzel:** A large part of what creates a sense of protagonism is when communities organize in such a way that they are literally in control of how things are directed organizationally. Oftentimes, we fall into these traps of avoiding our sense of self awareness such that we'll say, "Yeah, we're organizing with community" but then in practice, there's this small subset of folks who say, "This is what we're actually going to do and then we're just going to herd everyone else along." And so part of the ways we have worked to develop a protagonism with our community members has been with a focus on the local electoral arena, particularly in policy.

Our policy platforms that we have released to the city have come about as a result of a voting process with community members who attend the assembly. Here people actually get to develop and co-create policy platforms. They get to put numbers behind those platforms when we're talking about the budget cycle. As such, people get to vote directly, which is something we hold sacred because some people are able to come in and participate more consistently while being conscious of those dealing with the daily struggles of capitalism which leads to varying levels of commitment. Part of this looks like them being able to come in and offer input adjustments to the policy platform in addition to voting, as well as giving feedback to some of what is produced when we get the actual policy platform.

As far as the traps, the traps are in finding those moments when people –especially those who might be in leadership – find themselves doing the work that is supposed to be collective. If we're talking about strategy or the direction of organizational work based on our conditions, that should be a collective conversation rather than a closed door conversation with certain people who may have been able to sharpen themselves in such a way to where they can have that conversation. When we commit ourselves to that through just being self aware of our position, as well as being mindful of the fact that we cannot put forth a policy platform or any project that's supposed to be collective without collective input, then we find ourselves in a successful place.

**Marisa:** During Occupy Wall Street, there was definitely an emphasis on being a leaderless movement. In practice, it's probably closer to something like leader full. But people were given a lot of opportunities to participate, whether in the assemblies or working groups or spoke councils. That was the whole ethos of what we were

doing, it was very intentional. This is the way in which we trained people and carried out popular education and applied things in real time. So we had facilitation trainings and direct action trainings. There were think tanks and later the Free University. We had these kinds of trainings and meetings happening everyday. So that's really important for any kind of horizontal or democratic movement. It's important that people have those shared skills and there's an intentional kind of building process over time. It's an evolving process. I think horizontal leadership- a leadership that is in service to others, to the community- has to have education as a core component.

**Michael:** The way I'm conceiving the objective of this kind of organizing is for an inversion of strategy and tactics. It's not an abandoning of leadership, but rather an inversion of the way leadership was traditionally thought. Traditionally one would think that the leadership is responsible for strategy-long vision general thinking, whereas tactics could be handled temporarily by different groups. I think instead everyone should be involved in the strategic decisions, and leadership should have these temporary roles when decisions are necessary -not in deciding the overall strategy, but rather in offering tactical interventions.

At the most banal level, for example, for every demonstration you need a security group. You need to be able to make decisions- that's not going to be up for a vote with everybody. You need to make decisions quickly. What's advantageous about this is that it gets around the standard and almost cliché critiques of horizontalism and leaderlessness because that's not really what's going on. It is rethinking the role of certain kinds of leadership, and also quite different from the traditional roles of leadership.

**George:** Thinking about base-building, how do we expand political consciousness and find commonality or solidarity across differences without being prescriptive? How can we build bases and collective movements?

**Marisa:** Early on in the planning assemblies for Occupy, we always imagined that there would be many, many assemblies. And yet, the assembly at Zuccotti became more emblematic and people looked toward what we were doing and the example that was set. So there's this constant tension around not actually wanting to be the center of anything, but people assuming that we were. The intention was to have a plurality, but in practice it didn't always play out.



*Consensus on the Declaration of the Occupation in the New York City General Assembly.  
Zuccotti Park, New York City (2011).*

*Image Credit: OWS Media Working Group.*

**Denzel:** Generally speaking, for me, what I've found to be successful has been being clear about the common forces or institutions that shape the varying particularities of people's experiences. So it's less about trying to universalize people's particular entry points into the assembly space in this case or helping them to shape their understanding of their particular condition. It's more so about taking these particular conditions and recognizing that there are common institutions that shape our particularities. They impact us differently. And then also recognizing material things that we all need.

As it relates to the Black National Assembly, our base is working class Black folks in Nashville. There's already a certain line there: being a part of the working class, being of African descent in Nashville, Tennessee. But then even with the different experiences within that subgroup part of the ways we navigate those experiences comes down to how these things impact us materially in some way. When we shape our policy platform building from that perspective, then we give space for people to come in with their particular experience and outlook in order to paint or

add detail to that reality. This gives us the space for folks who are coming from different parts of the city, for example, or people who may be a part of different sectors within the working class. Practice is also important in terms of shaping how we go about policy platform building and power mapping in the assemblies. It comes with its challenges, because people come in with their particular tendency or worldview.

There are those who want to impose a uniformity to people's experience, despite how people make it into the space or may articulate the things that they are dealing with. There is something very grounding about going out and acknowledging the common material needs that we all are deprived of and reminding ourselves of the ways in which the decisions being made for us by the current political structure impact all of us, although they may look different. This is regardless of how people enter the space or what particular orientation they enter into the assemblies with.

**Michael:** When I think about the construction of a new universalism and struggles, it functions to me as a concept of a cycle of struggles. Struggles in one location, even around certain topics, are then taken up and provide inspiration for struggles elsewhere that then get translated into their local phenomenon. Already in Occupy Wall Street, we had our backs to Tunisia and Egypt and Spain and

Greece, and so by the time Zuccotti Park comes, it's already part of a cycle of struggles. No one imagines that they're the same. It's not like what was happening in Tahrir Square is the same as Plaza del Sol in Madrid or something.

However, I do think it's a construction of a kind of universalism that doesn't rely on sameness, but takes inspiration and works through a kind of translation. That process of translation is where the real differences are kind of negotiated. The capitalist structures of power and white supremacy and patriarchy are relatively independent, but they're interwoven. Recognizing the ways they're interwoven allows us to see how our struggles need to be articulated in a similar way. Both of them are trying to approach this question about universality or approaching universality from the perspective of struggles that clearly remain different, but nonetheless function or are able to struggle together. Maybe that's the universality I am aiming for: how can we struggle together, recognizing that the conditions of our struggles and that the power structures we're facing are different, but still allowing for the articulation that allows for struggling together?



Members of the Black Nashville Assembly walking down Jefferson Street during the Tennessee State University's Homecoming Parade (2023).  
Image Credit: Kelby Anderson (@\_koncept)

**Belinda:** An underlying issue regarding the path towards municipalism is the relationship of the movement to existing institutions of power. Michael, can you describe different ways you've seen municipalist movements choose to relate to dominant institutions?

**Michael:** One of the greatest tensions and difficulties has been the choice about whether to enter into the electoral process and also taking over the existing institutions. Barcelona seemed like one pole of that which seemed very successful, at least for a while—taking over the city, running for mayor, using the party structures. In the US, the movements have been less inclined towards that, but also in the US it's much harder to do that. In some countries, there's a debate about whether we should take control of state power. When

I think about the US, fuck, like, we have no chance of taking over state power. I think the cliché is that movements in the US—and I think Occupy is often cited for this—don't want to do that.

**Belinda:** Denzel and Marisa, we'd love to hear if there's a long term vision that your movement has. Do you view your organizations as being this permanent alternative institution where people can gather and organize or do you see yourself eventually replacing existing institutions? Or maybe there's a different way you have of looking at it?

**Denzel:** First I have to echo Michael's sentiments about how complicated it is to even consider taking state power in the US. I mean, as inspired as I am about struggles for power outside of the US, and even in the Global South, having a grounding in basic civics and also just power dynamics within the United States, it's a very complex machine.

With that being said, I think that as far as the Black Nashville Assembly goes, the aspiration is to seize power, and then eventually replace the power structures, and do that in concert with other parallel movements as well. We desire to be—we are, as we currently exist—an independent entity that is at least outside of the duopoly of the two major parties and the secondary structures that are shaped by the major parties. Our orientation isn't reducible to the older liberal strategy of "let's just put people in office." We're thinking more expansively. We're thinking about the structure of power. We're thinking about not only who is in the position to align and support our policy platforms, but also how decisions are made over people's

lives and resource allocation. The tricky part comes into play based on our conditions. We're a subset of the working class in Nashville. And we're in a southern state that has a supermajority, and they're being incredibly hostile to any local organizing or any whiff of what we would call municipalist movements. There's one bill that's on the floor where they're essentially trying to eliminate or nullify any local bodies' attempts at just reforming the police forces, not even any larger, more radical approach. But this is preemption happening at the state level.

I think our long term vision is being able to use the assemblies as a decision making space for our communities to be able to make decisions together around more than just policy, because we understand that people currently are captured by the electoral process. The hope is that through that collective decision making, and execution of strategy, that there becomes this weaning off of this larger need or desire to engage in the limited political activities that exist now.

**Marisa:** The 2011 movements rejected representation and engagement with any kind of electoral process and party structures, and Occupy was part of that. We were very clear in all of our collective statements and the assemblies and councils that this is just not a direction that we're going to go in. And we didn't even want to make demands of existing institutions, because that would further legitimize them. This was the logic at the time. And I mean, that did open up space for imagining other ways of operating and for legitimizing our own activities- seeing them as important and powerful in their own right. And we developed these alternative structures to feed and house people - largely temporarily in the end-but that's what we were doing. We were building alternative institutions and political processes and ways of dealing with resources and meeting people's needs, outside of electoral politics.

And all this was outside of the state and challenging the state.

**George:** Thank you all for such an enriching and dynamic conversation. What are some final thoughts, concluding remarks, or just questions that you're leaving this conversation with?

**Denzel:** One of the things that this is having me think about, especially as this question of universality comes up, is whether it's not so much that we should seek to find a universality in thought, or strategy, or tendency, but rather seek to find universality in the conditions that shape our worldview and conditions. Because I think there's a practicality and a spaciousness that leaves for us to occupy or respond to it with our particular strategies that are informed by our varying ideological tendencies. Capitalism has found a way to be universal, though it may manifest itself in different ways and have different intensities. The thing that we oppose is so much that there is a usefulness and beauty in the plurality of responses to that universal threat. I think that part of the desires and drive that I've had and some of the work that I've been doing is finding a way to think more deeply about what unity in response to this universal threat looks like.

Those of us who've been doing this for a long time understand that uniformity is neither practical nor desired. But what does it mean to think through power - this universal threat- and respond in ways that allow us to work in concert based on certain points of unity.

Also just thinking about the ways in which our local struggles are just local manifestations of a global struggle. And so, my takeaways are: getting comfortable with struggle; figuring out ways to seek points of unity rather than a general uniformity; and then recognizing that there is a universal threat that doesn't require a universal response.

**Michael:** Denzel, I thought that was really interesting. It reminds me of a point that Rosa Luxemburg made. It's right after 1905, and the party she was part of in Germany had a sort of policy of solidarity with our Russian cousins who failed in the revolution. And Luxemburg is critical of this notion of solidarity. She says, if you're thinking of them as something external to you and that's what you're having solidarity with, you're completely mistaken. You have to understand that their struggle is really your struggle. I think the expansiveness of the forms of power that we're facing is one basis for understanding the ways we can struggle, or we must struggle together even though our struggles are different.

**Marisa:** The really great thing about the economic crisis, as terrible as it was, was that it made it very obvious there's a common enemy across the globe. And although people were affected in different ways, it made it possible for people to see resonances in each other's struggles. It was very obvious for me in 2011 that we were living through this crisis moment. Everyone talked about the crisis. And that's not quite the context we're in right now. I'm not sure what it would take for people to see a common enemy or multiple enemies now, but I do think that that's helpful. And in order to sustain these kinds of coalitions over time, it is necessary to have structures in place to deal with conflict. Conflict is inevitable, and it's definitely something that our enemies will push on, so we have to anticipate that and have structures in place.

OUR LOCAL STRUGGLES  
ARE JUST MANIFESTATIONS  
OF A GLOBAL STRUGGLE



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*George Ygarza (he/they) is a first-generation popular educator, organic scholar and militant researcher. Before becoming a certified Middle School History teacher, George spent five years as a substitute teacher in the post-industrial city in which he was born.*

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*Michael Hardt (he/him) teaches political theory in the Literature Program at Duke University. He is co-author of several books with Antonio Negri. His most recent publications are The Subversive Seventies and, with Sandro Mezzadra, Bolivia: Beyond the Impasse.*

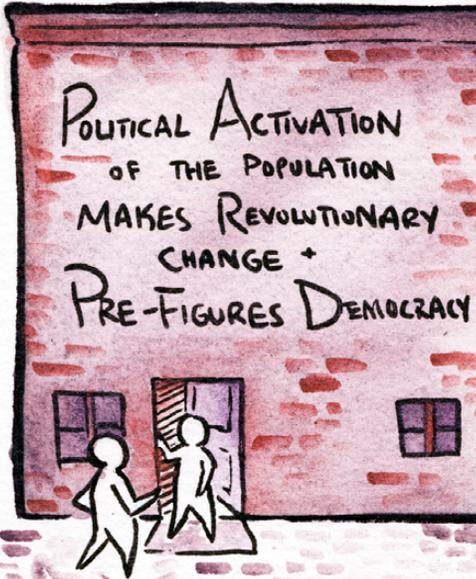
# O2. BASE BUILDING



*Adapted from a presentation by Mason Herson-Hord*

Democracy radicalizes at the point of encounter with mass movements. Its potentiality to turn into revolutionary politics depends on how this encounter is sustained. Radical democracy developing into a *revolutionary* politics, capable of fundamentally reshaping society, does even moreso. By definition, small activist groups do not make revolutions, nor do localized mutual aid projects or insular political parties. It is the political activation of substantial fractions of the population at large that makes revolutions. Such upwells of popular energy may appear to come out of nowhere, at least to outside observers, but in almost all cases these draw upon and emerge out of preexisting forms of social organization that draw ordinary people together.

It may seem easier to focus our energies on talking with others who already share our ideas, but the long-term project of making those ideas a new common sense in our wider community will lend them far more power. **One of our most important purposes as municipalist organizers is to break out of our ideological clubhouses and activist subcultures and carry forward the steady work of building mass organizations among our neighbors, co-workers, and fellow tenants.** Rather than begin from grand theories or top-down organizing structures, as municipalist organizers, we find place and locality as our starting point, our base. In this section, we discuss the nuts and bolts of base building work and the key strategic considerations for its implementation.



"ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY + THE TRANSITION TO ECOSOCIALISM HAVE TO COME FROM BELOW..."

# BASE-BUILDING

COMMUNITIES HAVE TO DRIVE THE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION PROCESS THROUGH SELF-ORGANIZATION.  
FROM COOPERATION JACKSON

3.5% RULE



MICHELLE SAYLES .COM

## KEY ELEMENTS\*

- ✓ CONFIDENCE  
SENSE OF AGENCY + BELIEF THAT CHANGE IS POSSIBLE
- ↓
- ✓ CAPACITY  
AKA PEOPLE POWER
- ↑
- ✓ COMMITMENT  
COLLECTIVE DEDICATION TO THE WORK

\* OF STRATEGIC ESCALATION

## IDEOLOGY

HOW NOT TO BASE-BUILD:

- ✗ IDEOLOGICAL SECTS  
w/ SHARED POLITICS ONLY
- ✗ "TAILISM" → FOLLOWING THE MASSES

MODELS FOR GROWING YOUR BASE:

- ✓ POLITICIZED CLASS ORGANIZATIONS  
EX: TENANT UNIONS
- ✓ INSURGENT PUBLIC SPHERE  
EX: PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING ASSEMBLIES

## SCALE + FEDERATION

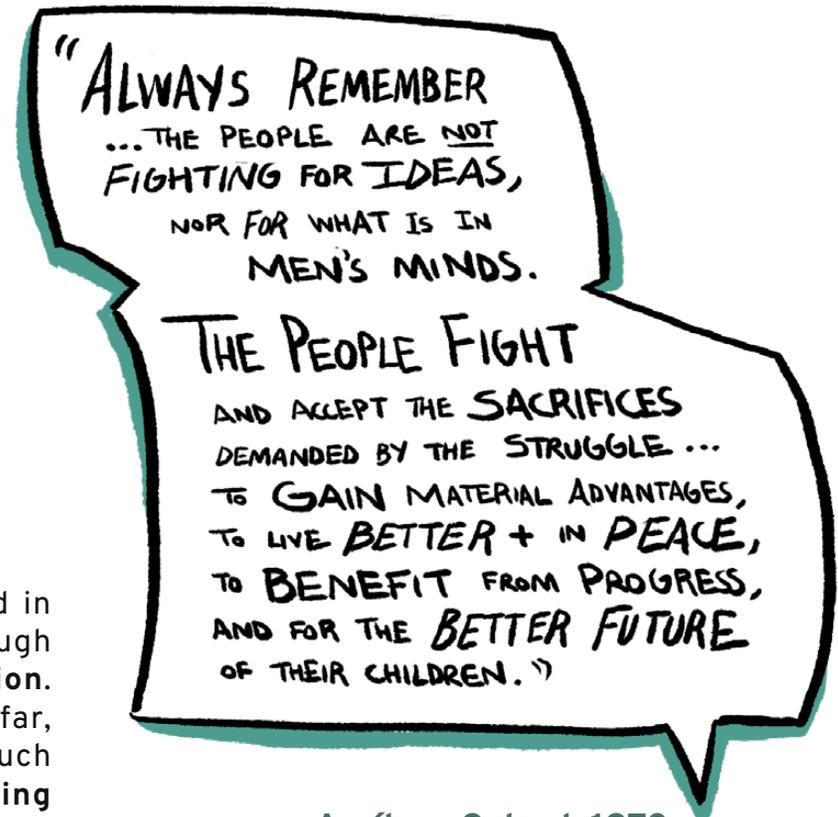
- MODEL 1 BOTTOM-UP ORGANIZING PROCESS
  - MODEL 2 PLATFORM ORGANIZATION  
@ CITY LEVEL THAT ROOTS LOCALLY
- FOR PLACE-BASED ORGANIZING\*

# BASE BUILDING

Base building, in the context of labor organizing and tenant organizing, is deeply important for cultivating municipalist movements. Because excellent practical guides for these types of organizing already exist, we focus here on organizing by place-based, rather than necessarily class-based, affinities: organizing our neighbors into institutions of participatory self-governance. For practical guides of organizing, see: [Tenants Association Handbook, 2020](#) and [McAlevey, 2017](#). Much of what is discussed here will also cross-apply to organizing in multiple other sites of struggle.

The initial stages of neighborhood base building will be rooted in concrete responses to problems facing your community, through which you and your neighbors can build vehicles for **collective action**. The political possibility and purpose of these vehicles extend far, far beyond individual issue demands or community projects. Such base building initiatives are instead ultimately about **assembling the building blocks of a genuinely democratic society**, with self-governing communities organized along participatory lines. This is a distant vision, however, and distant visions in themselves are not sufficient for building the movements and organizations needed to reach them.

The great Cape Verdean anti-colonial revolutionary, Amílcar Cabral, stated that we must **“always remember that the people are not fighting for ideas, nor for what is in men’s minds. The people fight and accept the sacrifices demanded by the struggle in order to gain material advantages, to live better and in peace, to benefit from progress, and for the better future of their children.”** We suggest that when setting out to build mass organizations, we must initially hold such visions for the long term waiting in the wings, informing and guiding our practical work, but keeping at the center what we may concretely engage others around *right now*.



- [Amílcar Cabral, 1973](#)

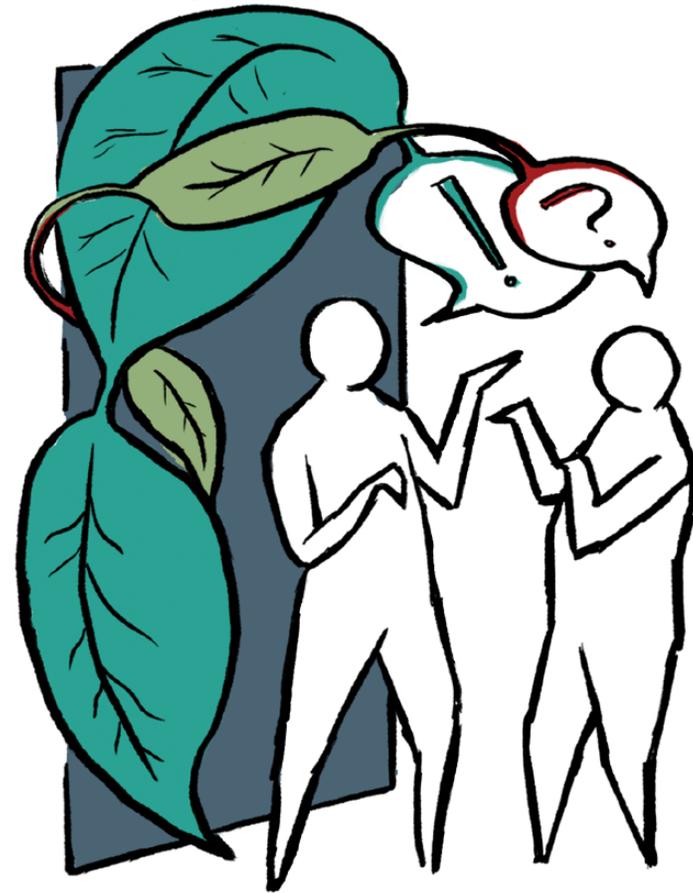


Amílcar Cabral  
Image Credit: [Unknown author](#), Public domain,  
via Wikimedia Commons (1964).

We are, first and foremost, competing against our neighbors' other pastimes and obligations for their time and energy—not for their ideological allegiances. We are also pushing against many working people's sense of social and political helplessness. In most American and Canadian contexts, people have little if any experience in collective action or recognition of the ability to change things. Building mass organizations requires *onramps* that bring people together and strengthen their confidence in their own power. This organizing methodology is called “**strategic escalation.**” You take on issues or campaign actions that are both scaled to your present means, but are themselves building skills and organizational capacity, to create a trajectory of more ambitious collective projects and actions. Above all else, the purpose of these early community projects is to *build a container.*

## Relationship building

All things organizing begin with **relationship building.** Relationships are both the foundation and the mortar of collective action, the means by which we can come to understand what we share with others and the glue that can move us together. Knowing one's neighbors on a personal level is a precondition for organizing them. Embrace opportunities for shared meals, lending one another things, hanging out, and anything else that might help build relationships. We might call this the “first step,” but that may be misleading, for it is not completed upon embarking on the “second step.” It must be deepened and broadened through all subsequent stages of our base building work. In essence, it *is* base building itself.



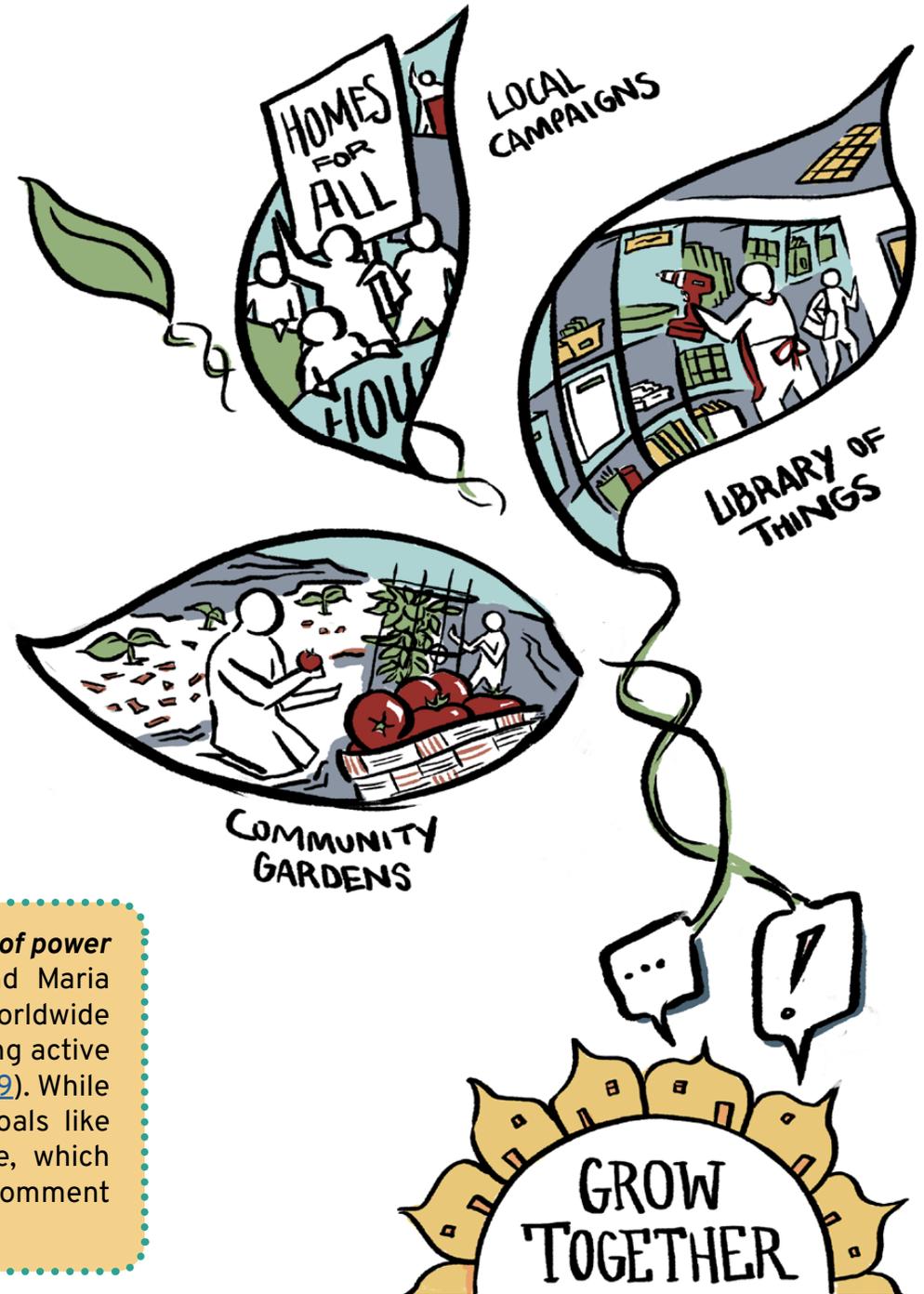
## Problem Identification and Assembling a Team

Based on these social connections with others in our community, we can move on to **problem identification** and **assembling your core team:** your initial neighborhood organizing nucleus. Through conversations with others, you will be able to figure out what issues people in your community are facing (for example, a common unmet need, or perhaps a local environmental hazard) and who wants to work with you to develop community organization towards some sort of solution.

## Inviting Neighbors

Then, with a team, one will need to begin the outward facing work of **inviting neighbors** into a community discussion space to decide and act together on common issues. Many such outreach operations utilize flyering. However, we *strongly* recommend using flyers only as a complement to an outreach program of door knocking. In addition to being most often ignored, flyers are one-way forms of communication. Flyers lack a relational dimension, with no two-way connection or exchange of ideas. As a general rule, most of your time during an organizing conversation should be spent listening! A friendly dialogue on a neighbor's porch will not necessarily result in them coming out to a meeting, but it still always helps develop the relational foundations of your organizing project. Flyers left on a doorstep can do nothing except bring someone out to a meeting, which they do a very poor job of. Instead, use flyers only as something to leave behind when no one answers or as a reminder of specific meeting details to leave someone with after your conversation. When it comes to base building, there is simply no substitute for a face-to-face conversation.

**What scale of participation do we need to shift the balance of power in our communities?** Researchers Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan analyzed outcomes from over 300 campaigns worldwide from 1900-2006 and found that none failed after achieving active sustained support of **3.5%** of the population ([Robson, 2019](#)). While this research focused on maximalist campaigns with goals like ousting dictators and claiming territorial independence, which might not map neatly to every struggle, it is a powerful comment on the role of participation in social movements.



## Small-scale organization-building projects

When gathered with your neighbors, discuss ways you can work together to create collective responses to collective problems. While your emerging organization can enable such solutions, *it is the work of finding solutions that builds your organization.* Through these initial neighborhood projects, you assemble an enduring space of collective decision-making and collective action that can then be deployed in a variety of directions. With an expanding group of participating neighbors, excitement about what else you might collectively be capable of (community gardens, a tool library, regular neighborhood assemblies) builds. Pursuing any of these more ambitious efforts will push you to build out organizationally with consistent door-to-door outreach and engagement with other neighbors to share what you are doing and to invite them into the democratic political space you have assembled to bring their own ideas and offer their own efforts.

New problems may drop into your community's lap: service cuts to your bus line, a new polluting industrial facility, a gentrifying development refusing to negotiate a community benefits agreement. These are gifts to your neighborhood organizing efforts. **When you have a preexisting and functional vehicle for collective action in place in your neighborhood, it will be the natural absorber of upswells of community anger and the natural organizer of a community response,** which any interested person can readily plug into. Anything that your community group can respond to helps push you further along the trajectory of building a mass organization.



Cooperation Los Angeles event (2023)  
Image Credit: Los Angeles for All



## The Three Cs of Base Building

Throughout all of these steps, effective neighborhood organizers aim to create a positive feedback loop between what is called the “Three Cs” of base building: **Confidence**, **Capacity**, and **Commitment**.

**Confidence** is the sense of participants’ belief in themselves and one another to be able to change *anything*. While this may vary across contexts, one of the most common barriers people will put up to their own participation is an insistence that nothing they could do will matter, that they are powerless in the face of a given set of problems. That’s not a sense that you can rationally argue someone out of. The power of collective action needs to be *proven*; it needs to be *experienced* to be internalized. This political confidence to be built is both individual or subjective, *and* collective or organizational.

**Capacity** is the amount of people power you can actually bring to bear on these problems. Building an organization means growing the skills, resources, and human energy it can call upon to affect changes in your community.

**Commitment** is a question of how much individual participants are willing to actually dedicate themselves to such work. For an unproven project, probably relatively little. Commitment, like confidence, is built through doing, through demonstrating new reaches of the possible.

Capacity rests on our people’s confidence and commitment; while our confidence and commitment ultimately stems from the capacity we can collectively demonstrate, and prove to one another. No one on the fence with childcare and long shifts to deal with is going to pour their time into projects that they are alone in or that seem hopeless. Each of these “Three Cs” need to be continuously rebuilt, but they interact developmentally, reinforcing each other.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Break out of the activist subculture!  
Revolutions are made by people in the millions.

2

The concrete comes first!

3

The Three Cs of base building:

- confidence
- capacity
- commitment

4

There are different approaches to scaling and deepening movements, but these base building practices are necessary for any of them to be effective.

“When we’re not careful, this thing called activism can become a repelling mechanism to the very people whom we need to be organizing into a grassroots political force. **Activism can become an exclusive enclave**—a kind of enlightened clubhouse—where self-selecting activists cluster together, expressing our idealistic values but never developing into a big enough force to make a real dent in the problems we protest.”

- [Jonathan Matthew Smucker, 2017](#)

# ORGANIZING THROUGH ACTION

## EXERCISE 1:

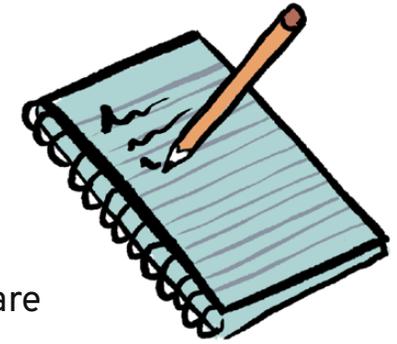


Consider the problems that affect your immediate community.

- What problems can be effectively responded to (if not resolved) by a small group of impacted people, without systemic or political change? → **Initial neighborhood organizing nucleus**
- What problems seem too big to tackle now but could be effectively responded to by all of your neighbors coming together? → **Community mobilization**
- What problems necessitate some kind of political collision with capitalism, entrenched local interests, or state power to be fixed in any real way? → **Community politicization**

# ORGANIZING THROUGH ACTION

## EXERCISE 2:



Consider your starting point. This reflection can be helpful to discuss with a few others you are organizing with.

- Who do you know that is well-connected in your neighborhood, with many social connections and relationships in your community? → **Building leadership core**
- If you went knocking on doors or talking to people in the street, what initial community problem-solving initiatives could you invite folks into? → **Entry points to action, draws to participation**
- What points of struggle can you build towards once assembled into an organized base? → **Expanding horizons for collective action**

# ASSEMBLIES IN POSTINDUSTRIAL CITIES: CASE STUDY



by George Ygarza, 2023 Fellow



George Ygarza,  
2023 Fellow

In our contemporary world, where politics is defined as state power and a disassociated leadership class, peoples' assemblies are transformative projects in that they seek to bring about new ways of thinking, doing, and ultimately governing. Organizing an assembly in a post-industrial city presents a unique set of challenges as well as opportunities on which to build such a project.

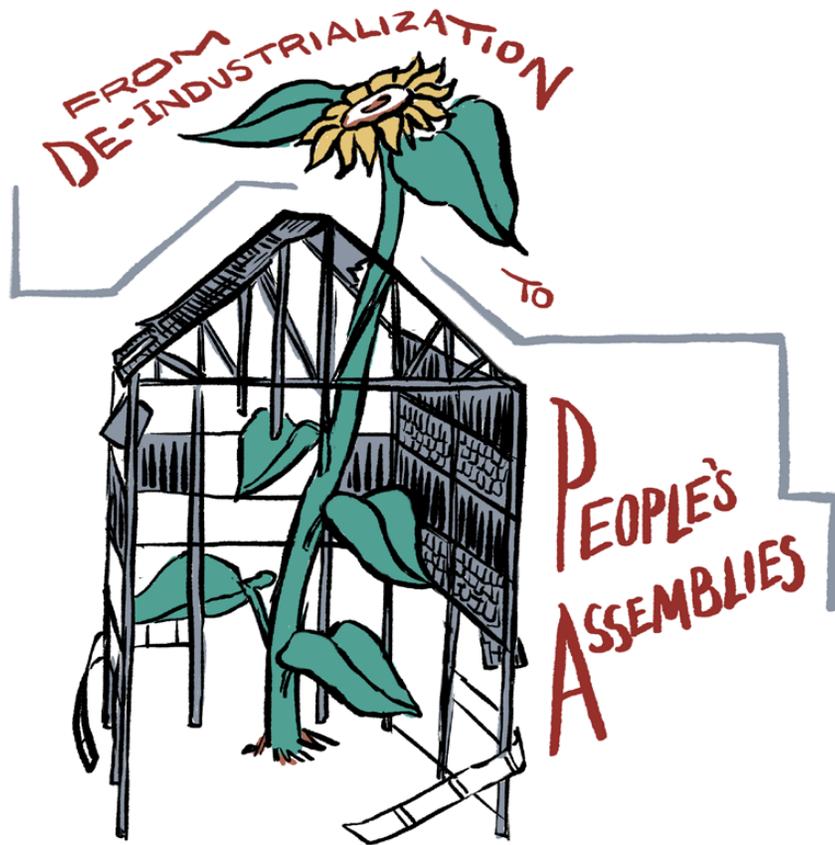
## What constitutes a post-industrial city?

A post-industrial city is one that has been substantially marked by deindustrialization. A part of the global geography of capitalist development, deindustrialization occurs when an industry-driven economy is no longer profitable for the capitalist class in a given city, thus initiating a phasing-out of its industries. This occurs through a series of smaller processes including *disinvestment*, *capital flight*, and ultimately the shutting down of industries, all underlined by the exodus of the city's dominant class. What follows is urban blight, a stage brought on by decreases in tax-revenue that subsequently leads to declining social and economic standards.

While deindustrialization creates a domino effect of depreciating economic and social infrastructure, it may inadvertently create certain conditions that can be used as a base for the establishment of people's assemblies.

## Case Study: Paterson, New Jersey

In Paterson, New Jersey, deindustrialization began in the 1960s as a way of offsetting the *falling rates of profit*. As with many other once rising, albeit unequal urban centers, deindustrialization devastated Paterson's economy, hitting the historically (and currently) marginalized first. Despite this, Paterson retained some positive factors for migration due in large part to its proximity to New York City (15 miles away). Depreciated housing and the growing service sector jobs at the end of the 20th century attracted immigrants from Latin America, West Asia, and the Caribbean, all of which would join the earlier generation of Black southerners who had emigrated to city and who collectively created new small-scale economies throughout Paterson. This unique *urbanscape* would produce a dynamic, dense, and heterogeneous population by the turn of the 21st century.



As with other postindustrial cities, Paterson suffered from housing insecurity, slumlords, high rates of crime and police brutality, corrupt misleadership, and other modes of social and economic precarity. Years of broken promises, failed projects, and neglect by city officials would produce a general sentiment that these conditions were indeed systemic. It was in this context and in response to the longstanding injustices in the city that concerned members of the community formed an unaffiliated Black Lives Matter chapter in 2016.

Coming together in a period of national reckoning, BLM Paterson committed itself to building alternative social programs to address racial capitalism in the city. In 2019, BLM established its political education collective (Polied). A subcommittee within BLM, Polied was tasked with internal study as well as public-facing popular education projects for transformative change. The collective soon decided that rather than serve as a vanguard for a particular political project, it would invite the community to be co-facilitators in the process, eventually working towards establishing a people's assembly to collectively address the issues facing the city.

The realization that our city needed a people's assembly came about over time, through a slow and intentional process of internal reflection and listening. By 2019, we had established a reputation as grounded organic organizers, having set-up food and clothing drives, harm reduction workshops, a community fridge, and numerous other mutual aid projects. This is deepened by the fact that many of the members of the collective were either Patersonians or shared deep cultural affinity with the city, making us well-prepared to navigate the cultural and socio-economic particularities of the city. This element is crucial for organizing amongst the grassroots as it allows us to build lasting connections, trust, and the affinity necessary to foster a strong community foundation. As such, we were able to engage with many more residents, meeting people where they were given that many of us had experienced or were still experiencing some of the precarious realities our neighbors were going through.

Our first in-person assembly was held in March of 2023 following a very successful virtual gathering the year before. Outreach began a couple of months in advance when we reached out to local residents on the BLM listserv and contacts we had collected over the years from our mutual aid projects. Building on the success of the first virtual gathering, the in-person assembly was held at a local Islamic center in the heart

of the city. We chose this location for several reasons. Its central location in one of the most underserved wards of the city allowed us to start with the most vulnerabilized members of our community. We made sure to take into account the socio-economic conditions of Paterson when planning the logistics of the assembly meeting. We provided food for the community as well as a space to host children through the BLM Paterson's grants. This work was entirely done through mutual aid and communal support, meaning facilitators were not paid.

We dedicated a large part of the first hour of the three hour meeting for introductions. Many community members took the opportunity to share their experiences with housing, policing, and other issues around health and their everyday realities. As facilitators we made sure to take a loose and fluid approach, making sure we did not reproduce the disassociated culture of the town hall. Instead we brought participants in as active members, encouraging community members to assume roles as co-producers of knowledge and solutions. We anchored the assembly meeting around two main themes, policing and housing, of which we presented an overview of in a short powerpoint. The rest of the time was spent dialoguing with the community and validating their experience through our own engaged research. **By simply holding space, we were able to extend the democratic space beyond the ballot box, inviting more participatory engagement and fostering a sense of co-ownership and investment.** This was reflected in the sentiment of one participant, a school teacher, who stated she would postpone her move to the south so that she may participate in the transformation of the city.

Our connection with the community allowed us to recognize how many of the social and cultural practices in postindustrial cities like Paterson resonate with the essence of people's assemblies. The shared struggles experienced by people living in urban space



Paterson Peoples Assembly (2023)  
Image Credit: George Ygarza

can conjure up a sense of belonging and community, where the communal is practiced in different forms. This *protocommunalism* also comes from the social and cultural practices brought over from many of the immigrant populations who come from societies with rich traditions of different assembly models. For example, many immigrant communities emigrated from urban peripheries or rural communities where collective decision making was a cultural norm.

As a postindustrial city, Paterson's urbanscape/setting presents unique elements that worked in favor of assembly formations. Its high density meant that we could more easily organize neighborhoods and disseminate information. Postindustrial cities also offer



Paterson, New Jersey (2008)  
Image Credit: [Dougtone](#), CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons

a unique temporal opportunity: given that they are in a kind of transitory state of development, neither prospering from industry nor yet fully gentrified, postindustrial cities present an opportunity for a well-organized base to get ahead and set the narrative. It was here where we found a space for critical interventions, where we could start conversations with community members about creating alternative pathways in the city. However, these elements can also be taken advantage of by developers and politicians who mislead the community with false promises, short-term solutions, and moral panics. This was already at play as only a few months after our assembly the state attorney would take control of the city's police department citing mishandlings by the Paterson police department, establishing a vision for community policing through their [“Next Gen” policing program](#). As had been previously done in Camden, this new program opened the door for more surveillance and criminalization of our community rather than present viable

solutions to the social economic problems created by neoliberalism in the city.

In Paterson, and other postindustrial cities like it, history has taught us that community sensibilities are often exploited by politicians working together with developers that deceive constituencies with short-term solutions that work against their interests. For example, quality of life issues can be instrumentalized by self-interested and corrupt politicians seeking to transform the city through the interconnected processes of the militarization of the police, predatory housing, and a culture of individual exceptionalism. In our assemblies, many community members were well aware of these processes already at play, voicing their concerns about new development projects and hyper-criminalization despite the relentless campaigns and propaganda in support of them. Many in the space realized that their neighbors held similar distrust of the police, developers and politicians, having experienced structural neglect for generations.

We ultimately found our role as facilitators and insurgent or [militant researchers](#) working to complement the social and experiential knowledges of the community. We find our role in helping to develop viable and radical democratic processes informed by the unique urbanscape of the postindustrial city. The assemblies were a starting point, a visible point of encounter where critical ideas and possible futures surfaced. We see these assemblies as seeds, germinating within the community as we carry on consciousness raising in other more visible and less visible ways.



*George Ygarza (he/they) is a first-generation popular educator, organic scholar and militant researcher. Before becoming a certified Middle School History teacher, George spent five years as a substitute teacher in the post-industrial city in which he was born.*

# 03. PEOPLES' ASSEMBLIES



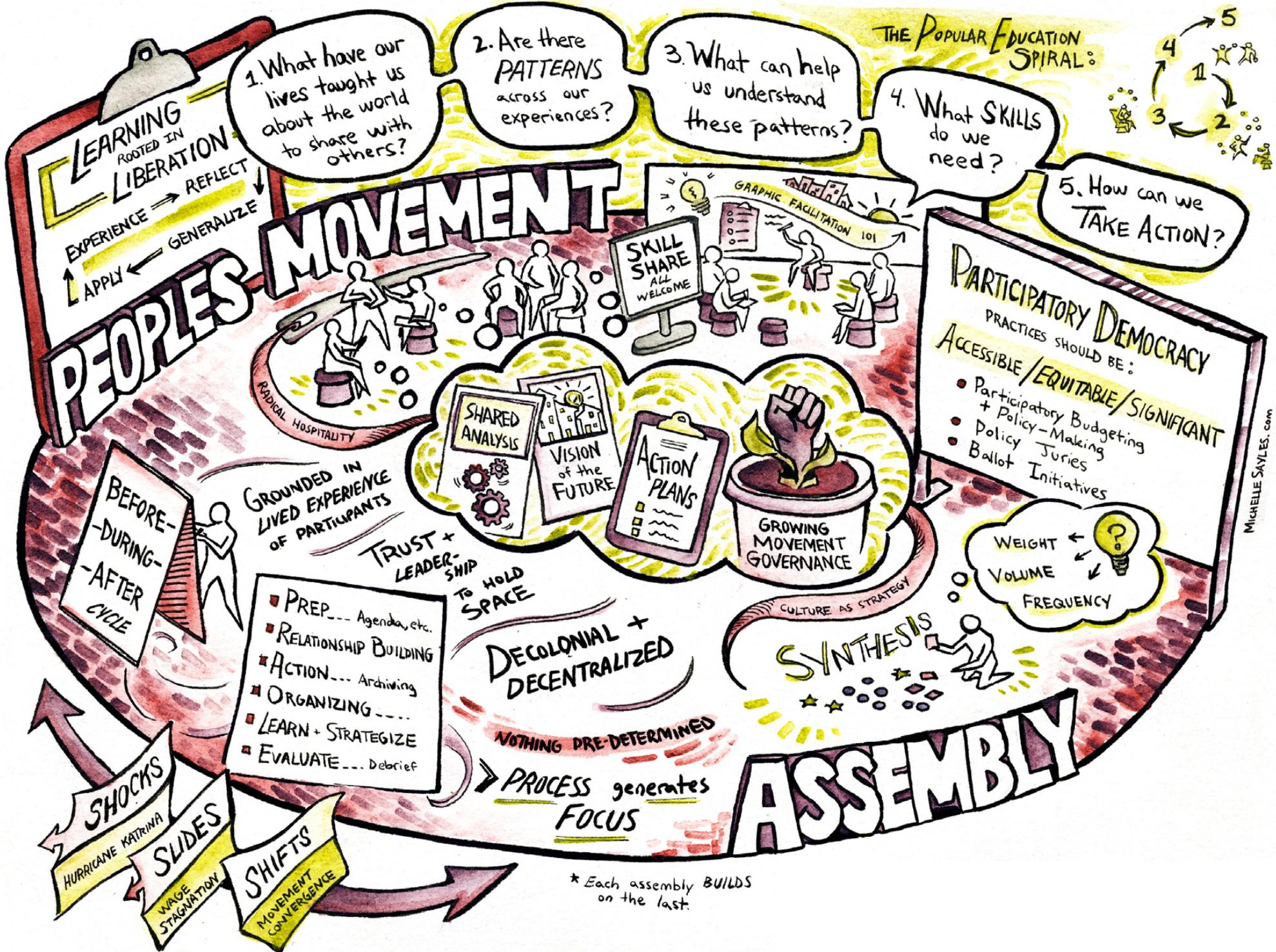
*Adapted from a presentation by Mike Tekh Strobe*

From these new or renewed relationships developed through base building efforts, we can affirm our commitment to collective strategies for changing the problems impacting our communities.

How do we best facilitate people being together with one another in shared spaces? What skills can support us to synthesize all of the different ideas people bring to an assembly?

## ***Why is it spelled *peoples'* here?***

All concepts are political. The prevailing subject in this guide is written in plural possessive form, ***peoples'***. This was an intentional choice, a conscious and political decision we made which recognizes that people are not a monolith but represent a plurality of communities with their own context, histories, struggles, and realities. In using ***peoples'***, our intent is to bring together these pluralities of communities, acknowledging that while different in many ways, they share desires to create collective ownership in their own way. Some of our inspirations for this choice include: [the Black Panther Party's Peoples' Free Medical Clinics](#), [Project South](#), and the [Peoples Movement Assembly Handbook](#).



**LEARNING**  
ROOTED IN  
**LIBERATION**

EXPERIENCE → REFLECT  
↑ APPLY ← GENERALIZE

1. What have our lives taught us about the world to share with others?

2. Are there **PATTERNS** across our experiences?

3. What can help us understand these patterns?

4. What **SKILLS** do we need?

5. How can we **TAKE ACTION**?



# PEOPLES MOVEMENT



## PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

PRACTICES SHOULD BE:

**ACCESSIBLE/EQUITABLE/SIGNIFICANT**

- Participatory Budgeting + Policy-Making
- Policy Juries
- Ballot Initiatives

**SHARED ANALYSIS** (with gear icons)

**VISION of the FUTURE** (with sun and house icons)

**ACTION PLANS** (on a clipboard)

**GROWING MOVEMENT GOVERNANCE** (in a pot with a raised fist)

**CULTURE AS STRATEGY** (written on a ribbon)

GROUNDING IN LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PARTICIPANTS

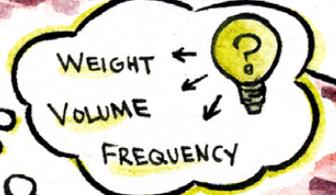
TRUST + LEADERSHIP TO HOLD SPACE

DECOLONIAL + DECENTRALIZED

NOTHING PRE-DETERMINED

PROCESS generates FOCUS

# ASSEMBLY



BEFORE-DURING-AFTER CYCLE

**SHOCKS**  
HURRICANE MATHINA

**SLIDES**  
WAGE STAGNATION

**SHIFTS**  
MOVEMENT CONVERGENCE

- **PREP**... Agenda, etc.
- **RELATIONSHIP BUILDING**
- **ACTION**... Archiving
- **ORGANIZING**...
- **LEARN + STRATEGIZE**
- **EVALUATE**... Debrief

\* Each assembly **BUILDS** on the last.

MICHELLE SKAYLES.COM

# BEGIN WITH A REFLECTION



When it comes to group facilitation, those with experience sometimes unintentionally trivialize group facilitation work and forget how these methods become more natural with time. At its core, facilitation is a social skill born from personal experience. Beginning with this reflection will point out what feels comfortable, normal, or difficult in your own organizing space. These questions may illuminate your space's internal structure or biases—elements which can be helpful to be aware of in the long run.

- How do you feel in your organizing space? Are you comfortable and at ease?
- How do you feel when you conduct general meetings and strategize with your fellow comrades?
- Do you express yourself freely and feel heard?
- Do you think your other group members express themselves freely and feel heard?

# WHAT IS THE PEOPLES' MOVEMENT ASSEMBLY?

Peoples' Movement Assemblies (PMAs) are a form of collective decision-making and movement governance. The Assembly is both a gathering and a process (See: [The Peoples Movement Assembly Handbook, 2016](#)). This process harnesses the organizing body's combined community and cultural organizing skills in order to gather people in a place where they can build relationships and do their best thinking with each other.

Assemblies are essential forums for gathering collective opinion, but it is important to remember assemblies require significant participant time (labor) and participants may face barriers to participation, such as accessibility, child care, and other material conditions. An effective assembly will address these facets of everyday life in addition to being a convening space.

The Assembly offers answers to questions like:

- How do we best facilitate people being with one another in shared spaces?
- What skills can support us in learning to synthesize all of the different ideas people bring to an organizing project?

## The Purpose of the Assembly

There are four key purposes of the Assembly:

1. To generate shared **analysis** about the social, economic, political, and cultural landscape to find opportunities for coordinated action
2. To create shared **visions** of our communities, region, world, and future
3. To develop **action plans** to return to our home organizations where we can build these strategies into our work
4. To practice **movement governance** that dismantles oppression and builds liberated infrastructure



# ASSEMBLIES AS...

## 1) Group-centered leadership

Some assemblies are constellations of social movement organizations and people that seek to govern themselves. Sometimes assemblies may just be a group of individuals. Whatever the case, it is important to ensure participants are **grounded in lived experience** and represent communities impacted by injustice. You want to make sure that people feel a shared sense of **trust and leadership**, and are capable of holding this process and are able to make decisions together. Finally, you are building a space that is **decentralized**. It is important to come to the Assembly without a single predetermined goal. **The process itself will surface the most important issues and focus of the Assembly.**



*The Municipalist Moment in Los Angeles on May Day (2022)  
Image Credit: Los Angeles for All*

## 2) An Experiential Learning Cycle

The Assembly is a type of experiential learning cycle. It is designed to be a process that allows you to name and reflect on your experiences, to generalize what is common about those experiences, and to decide what action to take in solidarity with one another.

The Assembly is a filter for application and coordinated action. **Do not make the mistake of moving people immediately towards a decision.**



# INSIDE THE ASSEMBLY

## What does an assembly look like?

The Assembly is an ongoing process to practice and exercise power at the community level across frontlines, and it may itself become a social movement. Preparation, facilitation, participation, reflection, and follow-up are all critical stages of an Assembly. As each Assembly is dependent on organization, it should build on the previous lessons and accumulate knowledge towards future gains.

## Stages of an Assembly

### 1. Preparation

- Convene a planning team
- Structure an invitation to frontline participants
- Prepare an agenda and facilitation plan

### 2. Relationship Building

- Welcome participants
- Cultivate informal bumping spaces where people can meet one another
- Support healing
- Feed people

### 3. Action

- Collect documentation
- Synthesize notes, declarations, and reportbacks
- Communicate with participants and the broader community

### 4. Organizing

- Set expectations for participants and orient them to the Assembly process
- Create an environment of radical hospitality in the space where the Assembly is hosted

### 5. Learning & Strategizing

- Set the context for the Assembly through grounding exercises and facilitators who can clearly articulate the process and support synthesis
- Provide historical background and analysis
- Discuss visions for the future

### 6. Evaluation

- Debrief with everyone involved, including participants, facilitators, planning team, and organizers to harvest lessons from the gathering. *What did we learn from this process? What can we take into the next stage of our organizing?*



# THE POPULAR EDUCATION SPIRAL

1. What has our own lived experience + lifetime learning taught us about the world that we can share with others?

1. START WITH EXPERIENCE

2. What patterns can we discern about the current landscape or conditions from what we know about participant experiences in the room?

2. IDENTIFY PATTERNS

3. What new analysis or framework will build upon our lived experience + shared patterns to help us find a new approach to an old problem?

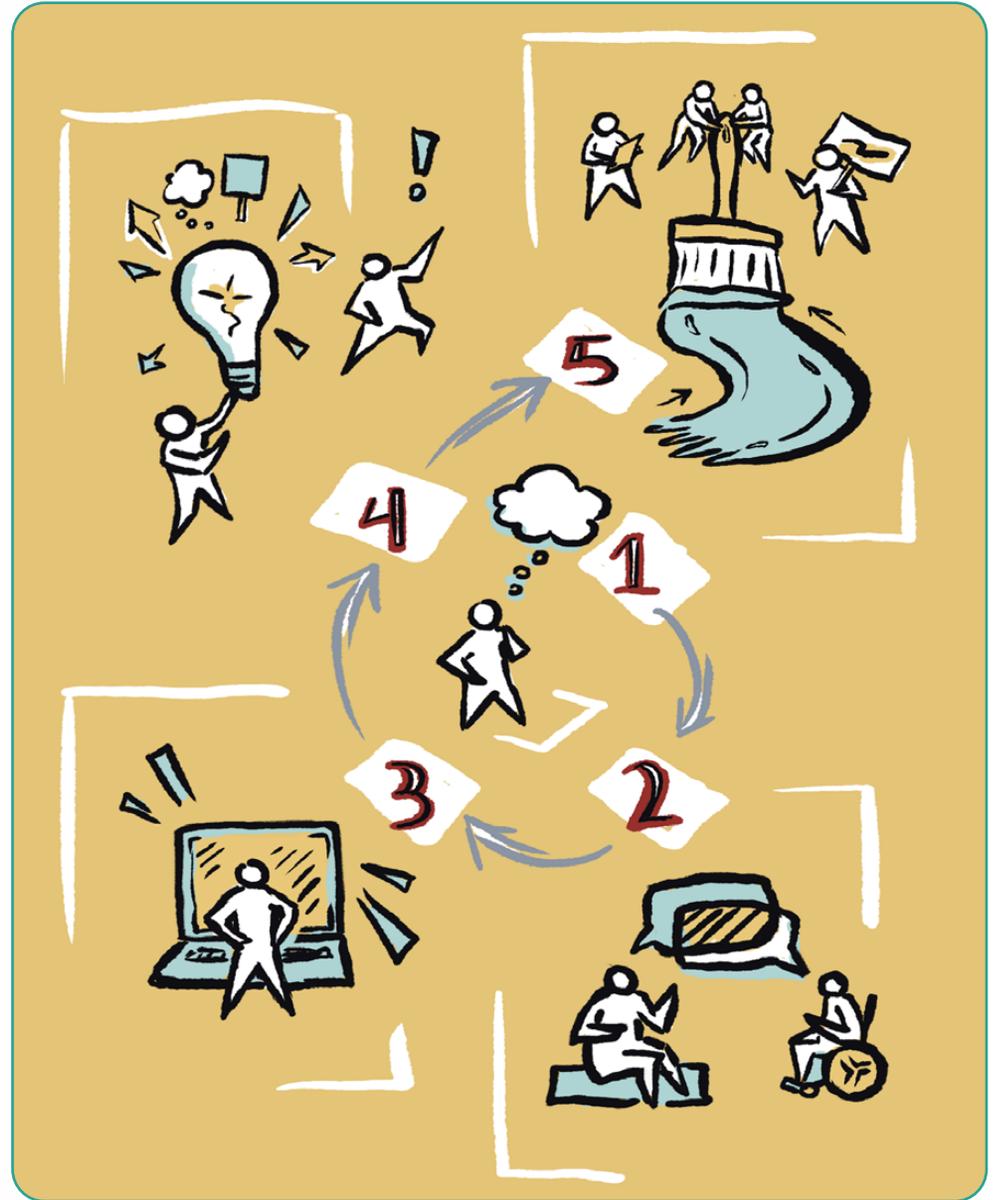
3. ADD NEW INFORMATION

4. What skills do we need to grow as we strategize + plan the next actions we will take?  
**TAKE ACTION.**

4. PRACTICE & STRATEGIZE

5. What can we practice + apply?

5. APPLY WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNED



# ORGANIZING THE ASSEMBLY

Here are some elements to consider when organizing an Assembly:

- Strong **facilitation** is present throughout the Assembly and participants feel heard in the space.
- **Culture** is woven throughout the gathering and not tacked on as an afterthought.
- **Skill building** is part of the work we do to build relationships and make our time together even more valuable. We can acknowledge knowledge gaps and identify collective learning opportunities.
- **Synthesis** assembles the wisdom of all voices present at the Assembly into a powerful community mandate for action. Importantly, it is attuned to dissonance and tensions.
- The Assembly is a space for us to **recommit to one another** and to our collective vision to plan for how we will build a different world.
- Everyone leaves the Assembly with one or more **next steps** or concrete actions that they can carry home.

## Facilitation is Political

- Build and prepare your facilitation team from the outset. Know each stage of the process and who will hold what parts.
- Create space to learn while ensuring that people who have been harmed are not subjected to new harms or tasked with creating their own harm-free space.
- Be aware of the arrangement of physical and virtual spaces, such as arranging chairs in a circle or sharing responses in rounds to lift up all voices. Develop radical hospitality in all parts of the gathering.
- Everyone has a role to play. Play to the strengths of the people assembled.
- Listen to the group. All input is valuable. Conflict can be generative. Boundaries are information. The Assembly is always generating new knowledge.
- Seek out opportunities to develop new forms of leadership that is horizontal, distributed, bottom-up. Recognize your accomplishment and celebrate success!



*Los Angeles Rising Summer Picnic (2023)  
Image Credit: Los Angeles for All*

## Crafting an Agenda

- Create spaces for rich interactions and pathways for all voices to be heard.
- Create group agreements and guidelines together in the space.
- Articulate a clear set of goals for how you would like to spend this time.
- Determine who is leading which parts and agree on timing for different sections.
- Use an intentional method to conclude the Assembly, such as a Closing Circle, to help you feel and see the size of the group while establishing accountability to one another.

## Culture

Culture should be centered in the conversation. Culture is not a performer at the beginning or end of the Assembly. Culture represents the place, the people, and the desires of the group. By including culture, we acknowledge and recognize history: **we are on stolen land enriched by stolen people.**

We can ground ourselves by using:

- Chants or synchronized breathing to create cohesion and synergy in large groups
- Music in the languages and from the lineages of the people gathering at the Assembly
- Movement and dance when it feels right
- Encourage spontaneous expressions of joy throughout and celebrate children who bring them into the space.

*Acknowledgment:*

*Nikki Brown with [SpiritHouse](#) and Wendy Shenefelt with [Alternate Roots](#)*

## Skill-building

Based on your group and timing, you may want to organize more concrete ways for participants to learn and share skills. For example, many aspects of the Assembly process are skill building arenas:

### Documentation

- Note-taking, documentation, and archiving are key parts of movement work. They are skills that need to be developed and are often undervalued. Make sure your note-takers and movement historians feel seen, appreciated, and supported!

### The Art of Hosting

- Site logistics, event planning, agenda design, and facilitation are important skills in hosting. We want people to deploy these skills in their own assemblies when they return home.
- How can we provide the skills for a great experience today?

### Participatory Action Research

- Skills such as legal aid, know your rights training, tenant organizing, and participatory action research may surface during the Assembly.
- How can we address knowledge gaps while we are together?

## Synthesis

It is important to pay rigorous attention to the information that emerges from an Assembly. What is the new knowledge that is produced at the Assembly? How does this knowledge serve as the community mandate for shared action plans towards the vision of the assembled?

Synthesis is a time-consuming and demanding task. A small group of folks will be responsible for listening throughout the Assembly. These folks will listen for weight, volume, and frequency of comments. The synthesis team will be prepared to discuss overlapping themes, connections, questions, or disagreements.

At the end of the Assembly, the synthesis team surfaces what we have learned from our time together.

### The synthesis team is listening for:

#### General themes

Themes that consistently emerge and critical questions that surface.

#### Clear mandates

Broad agreement on particular actions or strategies we can move forward on immediately.

#### Core Agreements

Agreements that echo in the Assembly about particular ideas, positions, or actions that consistently resonate.

#### Recurring Disagreements

Issues which the community tends to have varying differences on that are not easily overcome.

#### Action steps

Short-term action towards a specific end and/or long-term commitments to participate in working groups, educational endeavors, or joint campaigns.

## NEXT STEPS:

### Commitments to Action

The end of the Assembly should pave the way for everyone to show up in the future. Synthesize your commitments to action. These can include:

- Organizing a future Assembly
- Connecting your work to local actions
- Preparing visions and ideas for the next Assembly
- Anchoring organizations to action through explicit asks



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

## All facilitation is **political**.

You should inform the design and facilitation of your Assembly with **a set of intentional political objectives in mind**. Remember, objectives should be process-oriented, not outcome-oriented.

2

## The Assembly is a space for people to **practice collective governance**.

You can use facilitation tools and clear agreements to guide participants towards moments of solidarity that leave no one behind.

3

## The Assembly grows and builds momentum as a **continuous process**.

Think about your cadence, capacity, and timeline before you initiate your first Assembly because it will let you know what commitments the planning team should make at the end of the gathering.

4

## The Assembly is a space for both **collective strategy and collective learning**.

Think about this gathering as a **bumping place** creating the opportunity for practical or political education.

5

## **Cultural organizing is not an afterthought**.

Culture is strategy. Culture is political. Design opportunities to explore the culture of the Assembly into your initial planning and ensure that the cultural organizers you invite are a prominent voice at the planning table.

# REFLECT ON YOUR SKILLSET



- What types of facilitation and planning skills does your organizing project need to develop in order to hold the container of the Assembly?
- How can you build these skills? What are some explicit steps you can take together to grow your collective skills?

# REFLECT ON LINEAGES AND LEGACIES

- Are there assembly traditions in your local or regional history? Are there local indigenous groups, maroon communities, or religious groups that have organized governance models in your region whether historical or contemporary? How can these traditions inform your practice?
- Considering examples from the more recent past, what can you learn from assembly experiences of movements like Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, or other 21st century movements within your community?

04.

# BUILDING PATHWAYS TO POWER



# PART 1:

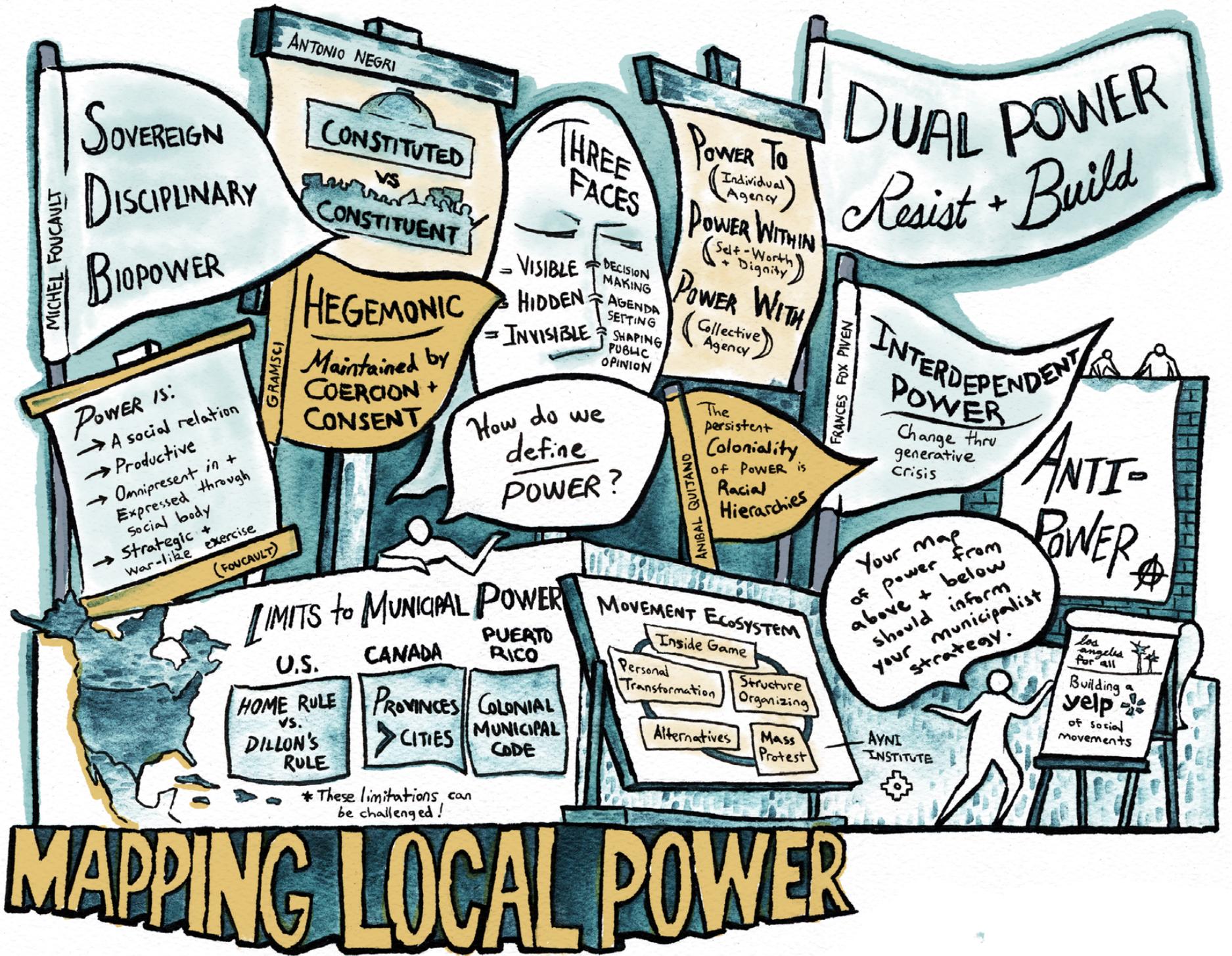
# MAPPING LOCAL POWER

*Adapted from a presentation by Yvonne Yen Liu*

A vital process in identifying pathways to power is to understand and map the political and social landscape of your own local context. **Understanding complex networks of power can enable directed efforts to take that power back, a strategy for the deep democratization of the municipality.** In this section, we discuss steps for building a detailed assessment of the place where you organize and mapping local power from above and below:

- Where is there a concentration of power?
- Where do openings exist for devolving it or assembling counterpower of our own?
- Is there a particular actor or institutional space that is strategically placed and well-connected to others?
- What power is your organizing project challenging or building?

The answers to these questions vary enormously across contexts, and following the precise movement strategy that worked in one region is unlikely to succeed in another; understanding the particularities of your place is key! **Mapping the contours of power in your terrain will guide your local municipalist organizing strategy and chart a course through it.**



# MAPPING LOCAL POWER

# MAPPING LOCAL POWER

When beginning local organizing, it is important to think about the elements that shape your locality. Cities, towns, and villages are all products of social construction. These spatial boundaries around communities have not existed since the beginning of time. Many cities, neighborhoods, and towns are fabricated according to the interests of those with financial and bureaucratic power. In turn, many of us live in municipalities where power and resources are begrudgingly allocated by the nation-state. Our daily lives are regulated by the law, the state, and capital, which are interpreted and enforced by local governments and police. Despite this current formation of power, in many municipalities the distribution of power does not have to be fixed, and has in fact, been fluid over time.

We know, for instance, from archeological evidence popularized by David Graeber and David Wengrow in *The Dawn of Everything* that the ancient Mesoamerican city of Teotihuacan was structured in a kind of municipalist model, embracing dynamic governance ([Graeber and Wengrow, 2021](#)). Making up the largest city in the Americas in the first half of the first millennium (1 CE to 500 CE), the people of Teotihuacan built pyramids and made human sacrifices to their gods. Then, they realized that they made a mistake, and plausibly underwent an urban social revolution.



*A reconstruction of an inside courtyard and central temple in an apartment compound in Teotihuacan - Anthropology Museum in Mexico City.  
Image Credit: Yvonne Yen Liu*

The people reorganized their society and instead of building palaces for kings, they built housing for all. Everyone regardless of their wealth, social status, or class had a home, all of similar size and quality. Instead of the ruling class, ordinary people were immortalized in their art.

**How can we be like Teotihuacan?** In order to understand and alter the sources of power in our communities, we need to first understand the current composition of power and capital in our places. One way to do this is through the practice of power mapping. In this section, we will discuss some examples of how power is organized in municipalities, to help you think about how you might approach power mapping your own region.

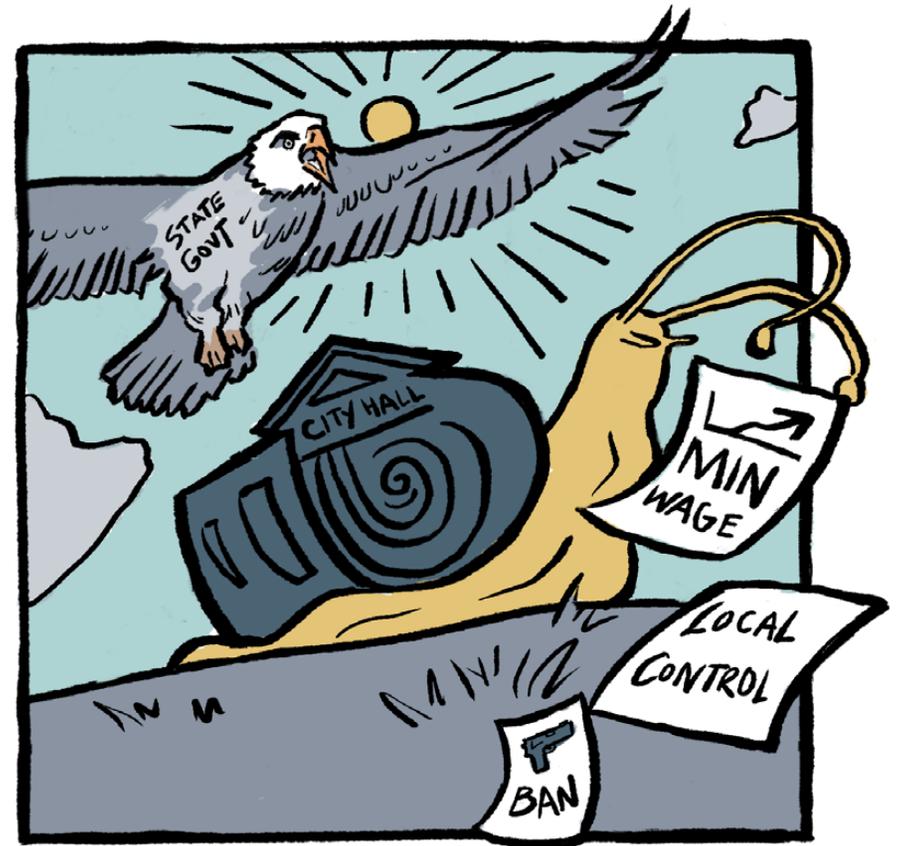
## City Governments in Different Contexts

The structures and scope of municipal governments vary radically: most obviously between different countries, but also between and even *within* states and provinces of the same country. Our Municipalism Learning Series fellows are based in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. We will take a look at how the limited constituted power of municipalities is laid out in each of these legally distinct settings. Here we will point to some of the primary research questions municipalist organizers must answer in their own particular context.

**United States** – The U.S. has a rich history of prioritizing states’ rights, and in this vein, the U.S. Constitution is silent about local governance, leaving many laws up to individual states. According to the National League of Cities, about ten states formally recognize local governments and their autonomy in their state constitutions or statutes ([National League of Cities, 2020](#)). This is known as *home rule*. Home rule implies that the state should not infringe on local authority in certain areas. In the absence of home rule, *Dillon’s rule* is the default in the remaining approximately 40 states. Dillon’s rule is named after an Iowa Supreme Court Justice, John F. Dillon, who ruled in 1868 that local governments only exercise power expressly granted by the state. Some states use a hybrid model of both home and Dillon’s rule.

The specific structures of municipalities in the U.S. may take a variety of forms (including having a strong or weak mayor or city manager systems). Broadly speaking, state governments define the scope of municipal power, and have the authority to *redefine* it, by way of state legislation. Conservative governors and statehouses, seemingly regardless of whether their state abides by home rule or Dillon’s rule, have preempted local initiatives before and after adoption.

For example, 25 states preempt local minimum wage laws and 22 prohibit local paid sick leave ordinances. During the pandemic, at least 16 states enacted prohibitions against mask mandates, quarantines, or isolation. Since 2021, 18 states have imposed bans and restrictions on teaching critical race theory.



**Canada** – Canadian provinces form cities by either charter or act, per the British North America Act. Courts have stuck to a strict interpretation of this. For example, a 1993 ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada found that “municipalities are entirely the creatures of provincial states” and therefore “can only exercise those powers which are explicitly conferred upon them by a provincial statute” ([Sewell, 2021](#)). Certain cities, such as Calgary and Edmonton in Alberta, have been granted special powers by provincial legislation but they are subject to limitations and often require provincial approval. (These are known as “chartered cities.”)

Provinces have attempted to curb local autonomy since the late 20th century as Canadian cities emerged as global focal points. For instance, in 2018, the province updated their electoral maps midway through the election, and cut half of the Toronto city council seats in the middle of local elections. By eliminating half of the city’s wards, Ontario took away the city’s ability to achieve a more democratic governance structure under the revised electoral process. This occurred despite legal challenges and popular outrage. Provincial governments may “dictate municipal policy, overrule and revoke local decisions—even revoke a city’s existing powers—at any time, without notice, justification, or appeal” ([Charter City Toronto, n.d.](#)).

“

By radically redrawing electoral boundaries during an active election that was almost two-thirds complete, the legislation interfered with the rights of all participants in the electoral process to engage in meaningful reciprocal political discourse.”

- [Justice Rosalie Silberman Abella of the Supreme Court of Canada, 2021](#)

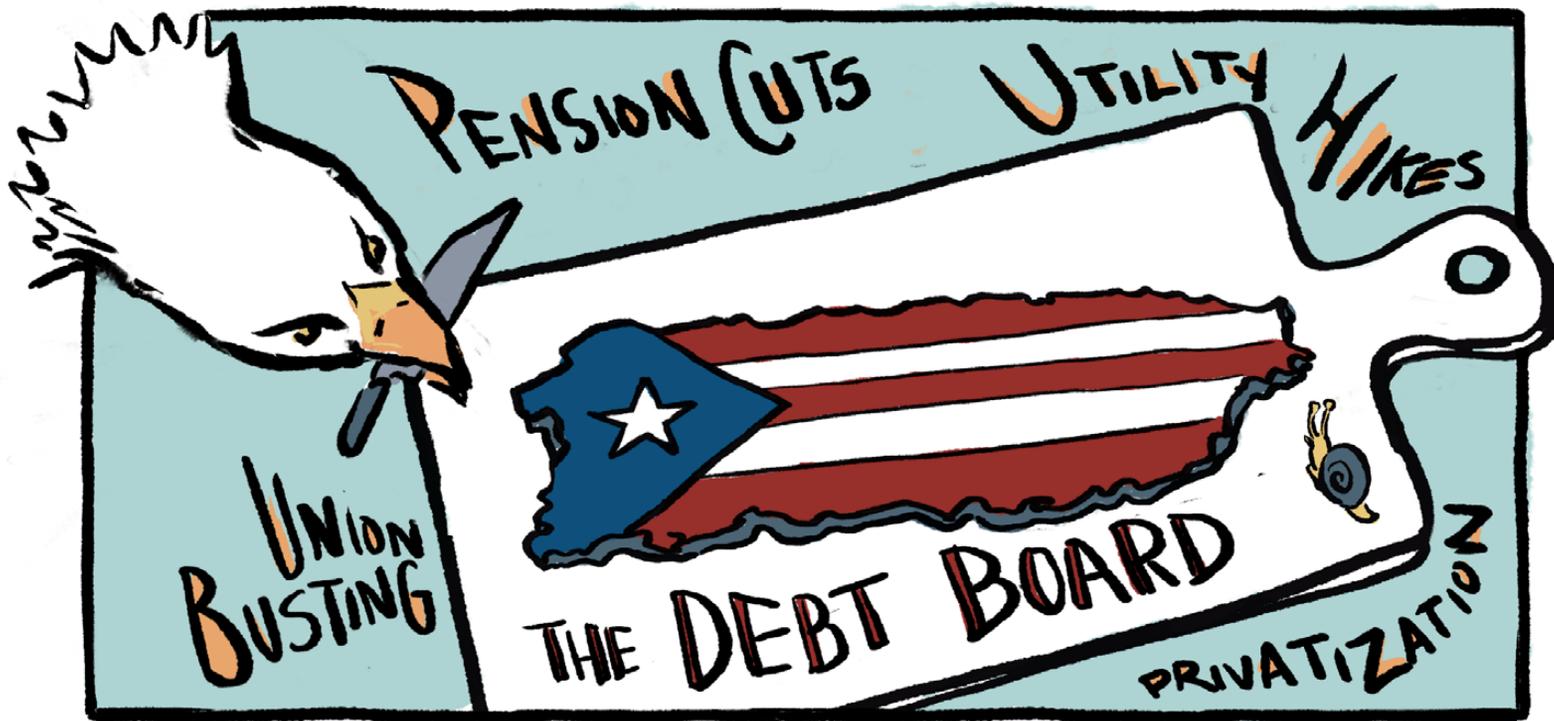


**Puerto Rico** - Cities in Puerto Rico are artifacts from Spanish colonialism. When the United States invaded the islands and seized control in the Spanish American War, the *ayuntamiento* system largely stayed intact ([Pivateau, 1952](#)). The 1952 constitution gave the legislative assembly broad and far-reaching powers, including the authority “to create, abolish, consolidate, and reorganize municipalities; to change their territorial limits; to determine their organization and functions; and to authorize them to develop programs.” The 2020 Puerto Rico Municipal Code grants limited powers to the 78 municipalities.

Puerto Rico, as a colony, is under the ultimate authority of the United States. The 2016 Supreme Court case *Puerto Rico v. Sanchez Valle* determined that Puerto Rico lacks true political sovereignty, and its governmental authority is derived from the U.S. Congress ([Puerto Rico v. Sanchez](#)

[Valle, 2015](#)). The following year, Congress responded to the debt crisis by passing the PROMESA law, signed by President Obama. PROMESA, ironically meaning “promise” in Spanish, gave the U.S. the power to appoint a board of bureaucrats with almost limitless authority to set, approve, or deny Puerto Rico’s budgets and even overturn laws. This board has adhered to a strict austerity strategy, making decisions that increase suffering of the local population in direct proportion to the profits extracted through its extractive and exploitative measures.

Puerto Rican municipalities’ power—and consequently their ability to respond to the will of the people—is doubly limited by the structure of the Commonwealth government and its subjugation to the U.S.-appointed fiscal control board, largely composed of people who have no direct accountability to those who live, work, and play in Puerto Rico.



## Mapping the Municipality

How do we go about mapping power in a city? For the reasons explained above, there is no cookie cutter approach. Every municipality is different and contains a different storied past. Our hope is that this guide will provide key steps to facilitate your power mapping research process.

### 1. Begin by identifying the external constraints on local government.

- Has your state or provincial government passed preemptive laws blocking certain kinds of municipal ordinances, like rent stabilization, environmental protections, or local minimum wage increases?
- How do state or provincial law define and limit the kinds of municipal governmental structures allowed?
- What is the scope of political authority granted to municipalities?

### 2. Chart out the political structure of your municipality.

- **American cities incorporated within a home rule system** typically have a city charter, a document that is something akin to a municipal constitution, defining and delimiting the authority of the different parts of the city government. If your city has a charter, a detailed study of it should be a centerpiece of your power mapping research.
- **For unincorporated communities in the United States**, the political structure that instead should be the object of study is the county government. If your city lacks a charter, its structure is instead defined by state law.
- **In Canada**, a city's structure is determined by provincial statute, either in the form of specific legislation granting charter city status to a specific municipality or a Municipal Act applying to all cities in the province. It is not something under the control of the city itself.

- **Puerto Rican cities** are mandated by law to have a “strong mayor” system with an elected executive and a municipal legislature. One mapping approach that many find useful is creating a visual representation of the municipal government's structure to indicate which positions/bodies are elected or appointed, who they answer to, and what powers they possess.

### 3. Identify the process through which the structure of a city government may legally be changed.

- One of the most obvious potential pathways to democratizing the city (at least in the US) is to replace its charter with a radically different one which enshrines forms of direct democracy and institutes direct recall of all elected officials to ensure authority rests firmly with the city's people. The process of amending the charter varies substantially from city to city. In some places, it requires supermajorities on the city council; in others, charter revision can bypass the existing city government altogether through election of a citizen charter commission and a public referendum.
- It is also important to study the charter revision process alongside the first question above, to identify what limits state government places upon the possible governing forms a city government might take—a serious strategic concern even in home rule cities. If the people of a city approve a radical charter that violates state laws, the state government will move to block its implementation. Courts may even threaten to block such a new charter adoption measure from appearing on the ballot at all, as happened in Detroit in 2021. (See [section on Detroit on page 64.](#)) In the Canadian context, changing the structure of a city's government is only possible (at least by legal means) through provincial legislation.

## Mapping Constituent Power

Power exists in many forms. Power is not just the *power over* the state, but it's also the *power with* each other to collectively redefine our lives. The Italian autonomous Marxist Antonio Negri differentiated this **constituent power** of the democratic force and revolutionary innovation of the mobilized people from **constituted power**, or the fixed power of formal constitutions and central authority (Negri, 1999). Constituent power is also known as *popular power* in the lexicon of Latin American social movements, as *democratic authority* in the context of democratic confederalism and the Rojava Revolution, and as *power from below and to the left* according to the Zapatistas. Part of our task in power mapping is to identify the social forces that might be mobilized towards the project for a democratic

city and a better world, as well as the existing institutions of popular participation that have potential to be retooled as building blocks of such a municipal radical democracy. This entails *social movement mapping* and *community mapping*.

Social movement mapping entails compiling a database of information on the various organizations and projects that make up the local movement landscape, from issue-based organizations to labor unions to political education circles. Drawing upon the concept of [movement ecology from the Ayni Institute](#) can help identify movement actors in our place and make sense of how they might relate to one another symbiotically.



[Oakland Community Power Map](#), by the [Anti-Eviction Mapping Project](#) in [This is Not an Atlas](#) (2018).  
Image Credit: Erin McElroy

Some cities also have well-established civic institutions for democratic decision-making at the neighborhood level: our inheritances from community movements of past decades. Those may be open and participatory, or top-down and to an extent bureaucratically absorbed into the city government, or something in between. How are we to relate to these? Should we focus on trying to engage with these existing neighborhood associations, block clubs, and community boards, or should we dismiss them in favor of forming our own peoples assemblies from scratch?

This is the question of an *inside strategy* versus an *outside strategy*.

An overarching municipal movement strategy will almost always entail an inside strategy with respect to some institutions and an outside strategy with respect to others. There are two key factors to consider in answering this question with respect to a particular institution:

- (i) how **democratically permeable** it is, the extent to which people can organize to enter into it and shape its decisions, and
- (ii) how **structurally malleable** it is, whether its decision-making structure and social function can be transformed by the people who make it up.

If an institution is politically and structurally independent, such that those who participate can decide what it does, it will have far more expansive possibilities as a space for participatory democracy. Neighborhood institutions that are more strictly proscribed by the city government are generally more limited.

Consider, by way of example, a homeowner's association (HOA). While these are a sort of community institution through which neighbors can make collective decisions, they are also inherently exclusionary with respect to tenants and unhoused people, and are structurally wedded to the class interests of homeowners. Prospects for retooling an HOA as an organ of participatory democracy are as viable as utilizing Chambers of Commerce as socialist institutions for coordinating

economic democracy. HOAs may be a clear cut instance of an institution requiring an outside strategy, but others may be more promising for an inside strategy track or occupy a gray area. Using these criteria and depending on the particulars of our context, we might reject participation in toothless community "advisory councils" but experiment with independent block or neighborhood associations as institutional containers for people's assemblies. We are looking to find fertile ground for demonstrating "proof of concept" for direct democracy.

Identification of local solidarity economy initiatives—even embryonic or informal ones—is also an important part of community mapping. These are glimmers of a more just world reflected into the present that can expand people's social imaginations and neighborhood assets to draw upon in our organizing work. An effective municipalist movement ought to experiment with different ways that democratic community institutions can help bring such solidarity economies and mutual aid projects to scale.

“

**Inside-outside work is needed but it is also a contradiction.** It is only okay when we recognize it as such and constantly work to check ourselves on which is the priority tactic or strategy to advance the needs of the people. **Which aspect of the inside-outside dynamic, at any given moment, will best shift the balance of power?** Most of the time, the outside protest and self-organization is, of course, most able to mobilize for lasting change.”

- [Saki Hall, 2023, p. 88](#)

# MAPPING POWER IN DETROIT, MICHIGAN



Ali Gali,  
2023 Fellow



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2023 Fellow

*A case study by Ali Gali, Mason Herson-Hord, and Rosie DeSantis*

The City of Detroit is emblematic of the conditions faced by cities around the country. While Detroit is in many ways an ideal representative of postindustrial Black cities, it is also like nowhere else in the world. We have engaged in a deep study of our highly *particular* movement context here to develop our roadmap for revolutionary struggle. Our analysis aims to provide an example of the ways you can map power in your own local context.

## Detroit's Context

Since the 1970s, Detroit has been a majority Black working class city as a result of white (and later Black middle class) flight. From its peak population of nearly 2 million people in the 1950s, Detroit has undergone a punctuated drawdown of its residents, hovering now at a stable low of around 650,000 people. The spatial relationship of the disinvested Black city to the largely white and overwhelmingly suburban metropolitan region is the central shaping force of our social context.

Interlinked with Detroit's racial geography are a few key factors that condition social struggle here.

The city is the poorest major city in the United States, with almost a third of its people below the poverty line. During the most desperate years of the downturn and bankruptcy, when the state effectively evaporated from large swaths of the city, **mutual aid was a basic survival practice for thousands of people.** In such a context, revolutionary organizers alone do not hold the burden of arguing to others in their community that the system is broken and does not work for us. Daily life in Detroit makes that case every day. Our challenge instead lies in persuading others that *things could be different.*

Detroit is also internally riven by a spatial division that is something of an inverse of the social boundary between city and suburb: what many residents refer to as “the two Detroits.” One Detroit is the **gentrification project concentrated in the greater downtown area**, now an investors' playground, with a handful of satellite outposts in other neighborhoods slated by city planners for redevelopment. The other Detroit is often (perhaps inadequately) referred to simply as “**the neighborhoods,**” **the remaining 90-95% of the city's land area**

**not receiving this new investment.** These developer interests have a tight hold on the city government and are seen by Detroit's neoliberal leadership as the only solution to the city's fiscal challenges.

Detroit's budget problems have lent serious political force to the prevailing racist skepticism about its residents' abilities and indeed rights to govern themselves. In 2012, the right-wing [Michigan state legislature passed a measure](#) (over the heads of voters who had just rejected it in a referendum) that dramatically expanded the governor's powers to place struggling cities under "emergency management." This entailed, in essence, the end of any democratic authority over the municipal budget, which is instead under the dictatorship of a single bureaucrat who answers only to the Michigan governor. On one hand, this has produced a risk-averse local political class intent on only coloring within the lines; on the other, there is a widespread appetite for political narratives of the city against the state, whose grip limiting democracy in Detroit was broadly seen as illegitimate. This is a source of deep potential for a municipalist movement.

While no longer under emergency management, Detroit is governed through a strong mayor system, in which our mayor (who differs little in the fundamentals from the previous Republican-appointed emergency manager) appoints the vast majority of key positions in the city government, such as the heads of all departments, and writes the city budget, which city council may only reject or approve. The city government continues to be non-responsive to the needs and demands of its majority Black population. Detroiters have instead turned to each other, drawing upon their radical history of



*Detroit Temple (2023)  
Image Credit: Ali Gali*

Black Power and labor movements to experiment with visionary new organizing. In more recent years, this has taken shape through movements for water rights, housing justice, and police abolition.

As a consequence of Detroit's disinvestment, land is far more available for communal repurposing than in just about any other urban context in the United States. While real estate vultures circling overhead since the Great Recession are now descending in the hopes of taking hold of a new gentrifying expansionary cycle, huge tracts of the city still remain vacant. In the past decade, Detroiters have been claiming land for, among other things, [the largest urban farming and community garden initiative in the world](#). The looming threat of gentrification, however, creates an urgency towards gaining legal ownership of land, while increasingly challenging Detroiters' access. The Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA) is

a public agency with limited oversight, tasked with the redistribution of more than 62,000 parcels of vacant land. For years, the agency has been criticized by residents for its lack of transparency and speculative practices. Within neighborhoods of prospective development, for instance, DLBA is reported to hold off listing properties or deny residents' offers for purchase until land value increases significantly. This is the shifting playing field of the struggle over land, which shapes the prospects for many community initiatives of self-determination.

Within this dynamic context of restrictions, divisions, and opportunities, Detroiters have attempted municipalist projects in relation to the city government, as well as within their neighborhoods. Reviewing the achievements and setbacks of these attempts can help us build a strategic analysis towards movements to come.



*A community barbeque at the Joy Project located in Detroit's North End (2023)  
Image Credit: Ali Gali*

## The People's Charter

As a home rule municipality, Detroit determines its own structure of government, which is laid out in the [city's charter](#). While policy changes can be achieved through the action of elected officials, implementing changes to *how* the city is governed requires amending the charter. Detroit's process for this has multiple steps, in which a grassroots movement would need to succeed in several rounds of elections. This has been attempted by a quite radical community campaign, from which we (and other cities) can learn some very important lessons.

In the 2018 August primary election, [voters decided by just 184 votes](#) to begin the charter revision process. Then in November, a slate of community activists from various organizations won a decisive majority of the commission seats. They embarked on a project they called "the People's Charter." The commission held meetings with leading activists engaged in key issue areas: education, public transit, water access, housing, environmental justice, and more. Their dialogues produced a document that was, if not revolutionary in scope, remarkably visionary. It covered a lot of ground, but most of the proposed changes fell into one of two categories:

- (i) dispersing some of the mayor's administrative power to the city council and new directly elected positions in the government and
- (ii) enshrining a collection of *economic* rights for residents of Detroit, such as a reduced fare for low-income bus riders, an income-based water affordability program, and committing the city to pursuing public Internet broadband.

It also called for the creation of new city departments and task forces for matters like environmental justice and reparations.

This People's Charter then faced unrelenting legal and political challenges, which were mainly framed in two different ways: the charter's legality and its (allegedly) unsustainable financial commitments. The Michigan Attorney General's office identified a number of internal legal inconsistencies and conflicts with the Michigan Home Rule Cities Act. It was then tied up in court battles to determine whether it could even be placed on the ballot, though it was eventually allowed to proceed. During the lead up to this election, the problem of its fiscal viability became centerstage. Local elites closed ranks against it and waged a high-intensity advertising blitz. Over July 2021, the city became blanketed in billboards asserting that this new charter would force the city back into bankruptcy. The pro campaign had no such resources. It was voted down with one-third in favor, two-thirds opposed.

We have a few general observations about this effort to help guide strategic thinking for the future:

- **Detroit's charter revision process can take place while entirely bypassing the city government.** There is no need for us to actually win city council or mayoral elections to be able to change the structure of municipal governance.
- The legal possibility space for how a restructured city government might look is **tightly constrained by the state government.** Our movement needs to have shared strategic clarity about whether we can defend our new model of city government as compliant with existing state statutes or if we instead need to plan a route of actual legal defiance.
- We were easily overwhelmed by the opposition campaign. A future effort will need to rethink the process by which a new charter is drafted. The People's Charter attempted something radical by involving social movements and community organizations in the process. However, this was still limited to a tiny milieu of progressive nonprofits and the already politically activated. **For this sort of effort to succeed at the ballot box, the commission must steward a process of mass participation in the revised charter's drafting.** This will necessarily require a pre-existing base of people's assemblies that can bring ordinary people's voices into the charter: not in the dozens, but at minimum in the tens of thousands. The people will not be so easily swayed to vote against themselves.



*Ritual (2023) from "[No Single Path Through the Mountains.](#)"  
Image Credit: Ali Gali*



## Block by Block on Detroit's West Side

The Warren Junction Community Council (WJCC) was formed initially among neighbors on Campbell Street on Detroit's West Side in 2016. One of the authors of this piece was part of this group which began by facilitating conversations about the problems faced by the neighborhood to identify the ones we could readily address together, eventually deciding to focus on the issue of illegal dumping. Contractors from outside the city had made a practice of coming into the neighborhood and dumping construction waste in alleys and onto vacant lots. Initial activities focused on direct neighborhood action, such as hosting neighborhood clean-up initiatives and creating makeshift barriers to prevent future illegal dumping on vacant lots.

The main tool in WJCC's arsenal was a relentless door-knocking effort by its outreach team. They would split up the neighborhood into different parts and go door to door with a clipboard and flyers with some basic information. These doorstep conversations had several goals:

- Establish an initial neighbor-to-neighbor relationship
- Inform the neighbor of WJCC's existence and purpose
- Invite them to an upcoming event (a meeting, social event, or clean-up party)
- Collect their contact information for a growing database
- Ask them about their own ideas about what sorts of things we should be doing together in our neighborhood to improve it

The illegal dumping issue brought neighbors together in community meetings, which led to taking on more challenging projects. WJCC ended up taking on the city planning department over an industrial redevelopment project.

This campaign did the most to galvanize the organization and develop it into something with genuinely mass participation. The historic Kronk Recreation Center, which had produced thirty boxing world champions in previous decades, had been decommissioned and was then destroyed in a suspicious fire in 2017. The city quietly demolished it and began courting industrial developers for the site. In 2019, the planning department circulated information about a community information meeting about a prospective project and a planned rezoning, which WJCC turned out to in force. We signed up all the neighbors who came and then held down the venue after the planners were finished with their presentation to hold our own community meeting about how to respond.



*Palmer Park (2023)  
Image Credit: Ali Gali*

Most residents voiced pollution concerns, given that the Kronk site was in a residential area. We were not confident that we could halt the project, but decided to extract whatever environmental protection and community benefits concessions we could from a future developer. The planning department claimed there was no developer yet, only an effort to rezone the property so that it would be more attractive to future ones, and that we would have ample opportunities to demand such environmental protections at future stages of the process. Further research and a FOIA request revealed these claims to be false. Not only was there a secret developer already lined up, but they had also already submitted site plans, which included none of the pollution abatements that planners told us would be assured.

After rezoning, there would be no other stage in the process in which residents had any leverage, so long as the proposed project conformed to the new zoning. We changed our strategic course to block the rezoning until we could engage in community benefits negotiations with the developer and secure concessions. We mobilized neighbors to submit dozens of public comments, meet with members of city council, and attend the city council meeting where the issue was to be decided, and we *narrowly* succeeded.

It was an electrifying experience for the members of WJCC, who came away with a new political confidence in their own collective power.



*Participants in an abolitionist workshop series, exploring connections among neighborhood-based infrastructures of Detroit (2023).  
Image Credit: Radical Play*

The block club had grown from an organization of five to ten people to several dozen people and a contact list of hundreds.

That winter, we launched new neighborhood committees for the community garden, outreach, mutual aid work, and for identifying vacant properties that we could seek to buy and repurpose for communal use. Unfortunately, lockdown from covid was just around the corner and took all the wind out of WJCC's sails. Participation plummeted, and these activities needed to be narrowed down to the community garden and pandemic mutual aid work. All of this was the work of just one block club in the neighborhood over the course of a few years.

## Eastside Community Network & LEAP

The Eastside Community Network (ECN) and a community decision-making series, Lower Eastside Action Plan (LEAP), exemplify a four-decade process of movement-building in Detroit's Eastside. These reflections are based upon an interview with Maggie DeSantis, ECN's founder.

*“Nobody is going to do this for us.” – ECN's Formation*

In the 1970s and '80s, the Eastside of Detroit experienced accelerated white flight, the consequence of city services' withdrawal from the area and the arrival of crack cocaine. ECN emerged at the crux of these structural dispossessions, drawing from the remnants of community associations that carried forward the Detroit tradition of hyperlocal collective action. While some of these associations were initially formed by white homeowners to keep Black folks away, the shell of these structures became fertile ground for municipalist organizing. As DeSantis shared, ECN's formation process began with just “a few leaders who are pissed, want to do something about it, and have time.”

DeSantis explained that at the time, organizing meant going door to door, flyering, talking to people directly, making phone calls, and spending time in each other's homes. These connections took years to grow, yet the deepening, face-to-face intimacy meant that the bonds that were forming would last. When the organizers were knocking on doors, they had visions to share with their neighbors, but primarily they came with the open-ended question: *what would you like to see happen on your block?* ECN became a hub for neighbors who were energized to make changes. For those who gathered under its umbrella, ECN provided leadership workshops that encouraged spreading power and capacity for decision making. At the same time, on each block, it was a small number of people who would take the reins to mobilize change.

Often this came down to who had the time to organize, alongside a belief in the possibility of change.

While Eastsiders were growing their relationships and agency to act on their neighborhoods, the overall economic and structural conditions of the city continued to decline. In the landscape of loss and lack of state support, ECN started pondering whether they could bring together their networks that had grown for 20 years towards creating a community vision for the Eastside. Thus was born LEAP, out of another wave of neighborhood organizing.

In a brief sketch, LEAP meetings looked like a room full of tables that represented each of the participating neighborhoods of the Eastside. Participants were asked to sit with their neighbors, even if they did not know them. DeSantis emphasized, “whether they lived 5 blocks apart or not, they needed to work together.” During its first two years (2010-2012), 200 participants were brought together in these meetings each month. They were organized as education sessions to amplify the residents' agency, as relationship-building experiences, and as spaces for collective decision-making. **A central question for the meeting was to determine what to do with the large swaths of vacant land.** While the city framed vacancy as a nuisance and those living in abandoned areas as *failed* caretakers, the organizers attempted to claim agency for residents to repurpose open areas. Residents were introduced to zoning laws and regulations to develop a plan that would be legible within the formal structures.

After this two-year process, LEAP produced a long-term, livable vision of the Eastside. These conversations included what parts of the region the neighbors wanted to keep green, where they wanted to see more buildings,



Artwork from "[No Single Path Through the Mountains.](#)"  
Image Credit: Ali Gali

and how they wanted access to be managed. The neighbors had an opportunity to think about their own blocks, within a larger region that worked collaboratively. Within a thick atmosphere of dispossession and pessimism, LEAP was able to nurture among neighbors the tools and capacity to shape their own blocks through building trusting relationships. Moreover, the residents had collaboratively found an answer to the difficult yet vital question of *what do we want to see in the future of our neighborhoods*. It was thus an exercise in collective education, sustained hope, and visionary imagination.

## Reflections from Block Club Experiences

From these case studies, we can draw out a few key lessons that inform our long-term strategic thinking in Detroit.

**First** is the **power of place**. Neighbors know one another's daily lives and share the most common ground for an immediate and present connection. This **hyperlocal face-to-face organizing work has far deeper relational potential than among people scattered across the city or those connecting online**. While it may seem tempting to try to "go big" and extend an organization's reach into more neighborhoods, having a clear and constrained geographic scope will help ensure that we instead focus on deepening our organizing, and from there building collaborative relationships with block clubs doing the same nearby. As DeSantis puts it, "To create the powerbase, *many* block clubs need to form adjacent to each other, and work together on one to two goals."

**Second** is that **block clubs and neighborhood associations are only containers, and building them is only half the battle**. A structure is a shell shaped by its intentions. *The political content*, the visions and principles that they can

be infused with and carry forward, is what is most important.

While it is important to treat block clubs as politically open, such that any neighbor can participate in a democratic space, we as municipalist organizers also need to build our more expansively democratic and inclusive principles into our block clubs' organizational culture and advocate openly for a more radical vision of what they might achieve.

**Third** is the importance of a certain *kind* of leadership, one which helps one's peers break through the resignation to the way things are and assume collective responsibility for their neighborhood's future. Organizing projects do not assemble spontaneously, and even the simple matter of gathering neighbors requires initiative and focused dedication by a small group of people who believe in the vision for neighborhood democracy. **It is a heavy weight to shoulder, and not everyone has the time, the energy, or the interpersonal skills to do it.** In that early stage when most work is done by leaders, the organization is weak. Many block clubs, unfortunately, stay weak, as the personal projects of a given community member for many years (and may disappear should they leave the organization). Any strength and power that a block club has extends from a common sense of ownership over it as a *collective* project, one which requires each of our ongoing commitment and democratic participation to thrive. That is why **understanding leadership as "crafting a we" rather than "people following me"** is itself such an essential leadership quality for this work, along with patience—for the long and steady work of organizing a mass base and with the people themselves, who may very well often be personally difficult to engage with. This leadership



*Revival (2023)*  
Image credit: Ali Gali

also entails seeing the seeds of inspiring yet distant goals in the more mundane work of the present.

**Fourth**, even as these organizing campaigns by block clubs have required forms of engagement with the city government, this was always secondary to and in the service of **building the community's organized power.** While victories in the form of government concessions are possible, as with the Kronk Recreation Center site, even nominal defeats can facilitate the development of networks of relationship and trust, of autonomous community decision-making and community action, upon which a new base of power is built. **We cannot and should not anticipate that the city government will be responsive to our demands, and a strategy that centers that will face disillusionment.** A movement for the long term must instead prioritize building a neighborhood democracy of our own.

## Honing Our Strategy

Based on this detailed study of the social and political context of Detroit, **we have reached the conclusion that our most viable “pathway to power” is a revolutionary movement strategy of assembling a dual power capable of challenging the city government for democratic legitimacy.**

Within this framework, it remains possible that a future radical charter revision initiative will be strategic and worth pursuing. However, **we believe that a dedicated decade or more that is focused on building a powerful block club movement is a *precondition* for a People’s Charter to succeed.** This is for a few key reasons:

- If we attempt to challenge ruling interests head on in the arena of public messaging, especially with something as complex as the whole structure of the city government, we will be defeated. They possess resources for narrative creation that we could scarcely dream of. We **must build popular consensus around a new model of governance**, for which a democratic federation of block clubs would be the collective architect *and* proof of concept, in advance.
- Even if we succeed at the ballot box, the state government will move to block a new charter’s implementation. We must be prepared for the contingency in which the vote for a new charter is rendered merely politically symbolic, but where the real power to set aside the old system of city

government rests instead with our institutions of neighborhood self-determination, through a moment of popular rebellion.

- The preparation for autonomous community action and implementation, including the building up of self-determination, will be a central thread of municipalist strategy, beyond the contingencies of a Charter process. **These preparations must be political** (having the institutional capacity to take power into our own hands), **material** (possessing the physical means to supplant the city government and provide for our people through a period of crisis), **and ideological** (having prepared Detroiters for the conceptual leap of breaking with the established legal order to claim for ourselves a genuinely democratic society).



*A community barbeque at the Joy Project located in Detroit's North End (2023)  
Image Credit: Ali Gali*

- There will be many strategic debates about the best course of action for our movement in the coming tumultuous years. **A dual power strategy is flexible and adaptable** for this precisely because it entails developing a structure of democratic decision-making through which those debates can be had and important decisions made—and popular forces can be organized to implement them along the way.

This is what we envision for the long road ahead— each step paved by neighborly conversations on doorsteps and porches!



*Participants in Abolition within Our Relationships workshop closing the space through making a collective web, viscerally expressing our dependency on one another. This activity was led by Sicily McRaven (April 2023).*

*Image Credit: Radical Play*



*Ali Gali (they/them) is a queer seed, grown near the southeastern mountains of Turkey, alight with questions towards freedom as a collaborative possibility. They are a thinker, writer, and photographer, with a long-standing practice of cultural organizing. Last year, they created abolitionist containers in Detroit that brought together a range of organizers to imagine a communally sufficient city.*

*Mason Herson-Hord (he/him) is the program director of the Institute for Social Ecology and an organizer and writer in Detroit, MI. He is a co-founder of the Symbiosis federation and was previously lead organizer of the Motor City Freedom Riders. His work, focusing primarily on movement-building and ecological philosophy, has been published in places like The Next System Project, In These Times, The Ecologist, and ROAR Magazine.*

*Rosie DeSantis (they/them) is a multi-published Detroit poet, abolitionist event curator, and audience-integrated theater-maker. As founding coordinator of the Cooperative Economic Network of Detroit, they are deeply involved in local efforts to organize, invigorate, & platform solidarity economics in the city through the framework of the Black anarchist tradition. They are currently in the process of renovating & developing a neighbor-programmed community space & political education/resource hub, towards the cultivation of a people's assembly site.*

# MUNICIPALISM & THE RIGHT

*A conversation with Ale R., Gracie R., and Michelle S.*



*In this conversation, Michelle facilitates a discussion with Ale and Gracie. They share views from the ground in Nashville and Chicago on how the right uses municipalist strategy in their organizing. They map out some lessons to inform our movements towards liberatory municipalities.*

**Michelle:** What does right-wing municipalism look like? What do right-wing forms of prefigurative politics look like and how is that showing up? What kind of right-wing movements are taking a municipalist strategy where you are?

**Ale:** I am based in Chicago, which can sometimes be a bit of a bubble when it comes to preventing the formation of larger scale or more complex right-wing activity that is explicitly white supremacist or neo-Nazi. With that being said, in the past few months we have seen an uptick in these things called [Active Clubs](#) out in the suburbs. They are basically these MMA gyms started by this neo-fascist named Rundo. These sites are decentralized and networked. They also bring together a lot of individuals who are either already explicitly followers of white supremacy and neo-Naziism, or that have hyper masculine tendencies that are being brought into that culture. These groups have started coming into the city and leaving stickers on telephone poles and things like that. I know comrades who go around and rip them off or sticker over them.

They are a problem for a number of reasons. One is that they can be a site of generating revenue, which means there are more resources they can use to do awful things. Also they tend to be explicit about developing a kind of fighting or martial culture for the purposes of inflicting violence upon marginalized communities. They believe in something called “X Day” - it is their idea of some sort of large-scale race war that would happen in

the US after a major change. You can imagine that being anything from a much more explicit fascist government - like a Trump 2.0 situation that overlooks their violence - or just these small localities capitulating to the needs and desires of white supremacist actors. It is a point of concern because it is not a few rogue entities that are just weird misogynists that do Jiu-Jitsu moves on each other. They are trying to organize and create a much more active militant force.

Another right-wing development is a neo-Völkisch group called [Asatru Folk Assembly](#). It is a group of neo-paganist individuals that follow a mythos of Norse beliefs that center white supremacy. They started forming in the late sixties, and popping up across the so-called US in chapters called kindreds. Around the early, mid 2000s they started being a lot more nuanced in their approaches and making use of 501(c)3 structures. [They began purchasing property, in particular churches,](#) and were allowed to purchase property by city councils who would normally just say it is an issue with zoning and not an issue with race and social justice. And they usually avoid critique by saying that they are a church, and not this dangerous community.

They have pictures of their kids and families posted to social media. But they are frequently sites that centralize a neo-fascist ideology. My understanding is that a lot of white supremacists and neo-Nazis who have left jail as of late go to Asatru Folk Assembly to find housing. It's almost like a retirement community for neo-Nazis. They are involved with trying to create these initiatives around home schooling for the purposes of indoctrination. They also purchase property. Groups like Asatru or structures like Active Clubs or even alt-right structures like Proud Boys and Moms for Liberty: they are not all mutual. A lot of the time their memberships are shared across these different groups that develop out into much larger networks.

**Gracie:** There are a lot of things that pop up in Tennessee since it is a more rural state. There is just this hotbed of history of the American South and a lot of structures around Tennessee that enable right-wing groups to come out here and have more access to space and land. I am in Nashville and so a lot of the things that happen in the state cook in these rural environments and then present themselves in the Capitol in Nashville every so often. Here we see the concentration of a lot of the ultra conservative media outlets in Franklin, Tennessee - which is a suburb of Nashville - have pushed the entire state more to the right. We see a huge influx of people from California who have more conservative views flocking to rural parts of the state as a place that they know they can practice those views. It has been a really interesting spot to have us constantly dealing with the threat of Nazis coming to regular protests. Seeing neo-Nazis on the street is not that uncommon here anymore, like Blood Tribe, which was just marching in downtown Nashville on a recent Sunday afternoon. A lot of patterns are emerging in Tennessee in a way that is somewhat unique in how the right wing movement is consolidating power and translating it to local municipal power structures.



*Members of the Asatru Folk Assembly stand in front of Odinhof, their unofficial headquarters and community center in California, during the Midsummer Celebration (2020).*

*Image Credit: [Mr. Editor 12322](#), [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons*

All of these people live south of town and have a Moms for Liberty contingent that is active in their school board. A lot of the critical race theory discussions that we are seeing popularized nationally are happening here in Tennessee. A lot of banning books. A lot of repression of LGBTQ youth. And narratives about protecting children from trans people that are perpetuated by these groups. They come out in tandem with more militarized right wing groups who definitely know each other, but act like they do not. You will see people coming armed to school board meetings more than usual, with non-COVID face coverings.

It has caused this general acceptability around that kind of politic in Tennessee. We had a mayoral election last fall. The candidate who won was one of the more progressive council members which was a tribute to grassroots mobilization. He has turned out to not be as radical as we thought, but

his main opponent was a Republican woman who had ties to the Proud Boys and who used similar consulting firms. **We are seeing more of the Republican options are increasingly only the hyper-fascist folk instead of the more traditional fiscal conservatives.**

Here in Nashville we are seeing right-wing power being consolidated into a political sphere and in institutionalized government. They are actively working to shift who is in power, pulling the conversation towards the right and this general trend of fascism that we are seeing across the United States.

**Michelle:** This has me thinking about my time living in Vermont. I was paying attention to the flooding and rebuilding this past summer when the Winooski River flooded. I remember hearing that in Barre, Vermont, a lot of the local Proud Boys had actually been doing mutual aid and solidarity work as part of the flooding recovery and they were using mutual aid strategies to build their base and solidarity with this community that I think got neglected while Montpelier got a lot of attention. And so thinking about that and everything you have just described, do you think that there are things that we can learn from what the right is doing right now?

**Ale:** At least based on some of these groups we have been talking about, one is the use of public records to try to figure out how things like property is purchased and who is holding it and how money is moved. My understanding from the reporting on Asatru is that it was local property records that helped clarify the extent of that sort of situation. The other is how the right uses non-profits and 501(c)3s to conduct a lot of their organizing.

I know Moms for Liberty is really close to the John Birch Society. John Birch in general is really close to a lot of

ultra conservative far-right groups, and has ties to political actors in high places in the US government. Groups like the [Heritage Foundation](#) may be less explicitly fascist but do also have a lot of connections to anti-critical race theory and anti-LGBTQ+ education. It is important to understand how they are using these vehicles as a way to store capital and also plant political actors and navigate these larger conversations.

As much as on the left we try to really nurture more movement lawyers to help with cases of activists, the far-right also has lawyers who hold membership in white nationalist organizations and work within the legal system to defend white supremacist goals.



*Iowa State Representative Brooke Boden speaking at a rally hosted by Moms for Liberty at the Iowa State Capitol in Des Moines, Iowa (2024).*

Image Credit: [Gage Skidmore from Surprise, AZ](#), United States of America, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

I think of mutual aid as a very anarchist practice, but the idea of providing resources and then using that as a space for political education does not have to be left-wing. There are ways that these techniques can be appropriated for right-wing causes.

**Gracie:** Yeah, there is ideological development that is happening in a way that is central to how people are formed politically, but especially tied into religion and morals. They are churning out people from a really young age to believe these things and enact these values in their actions even if they are not saying them. I feel like the left has a really hard time in finding a robust way to oppose this indoctrination that is happening.



Whether we can support people to think more critically and have better media literacy - there are some political development skills that the right has that we could really learn from. Not to indoctrinate people, but to combat how they are doing with political education.

In bigger cities that are not in the south and in these more rural contexts, we are seeing a lot more people on the left. When the fascists are so isolated from the rest of society it is a lot easier to have that be an incubator. I do not know how much we can learn from that, but at least **knowing how much isolation leads to that incubation of ideology can help us figure out how to combat it.** There is this assumption in rural Tennessee that everyone who lives there is ultra conservative, especially with the way the right is using geography and buying up land. I really feel more and more like if something were to go down and there needed to be another political fascist capital of the country that it would be here at Nashville at this point of politicization.

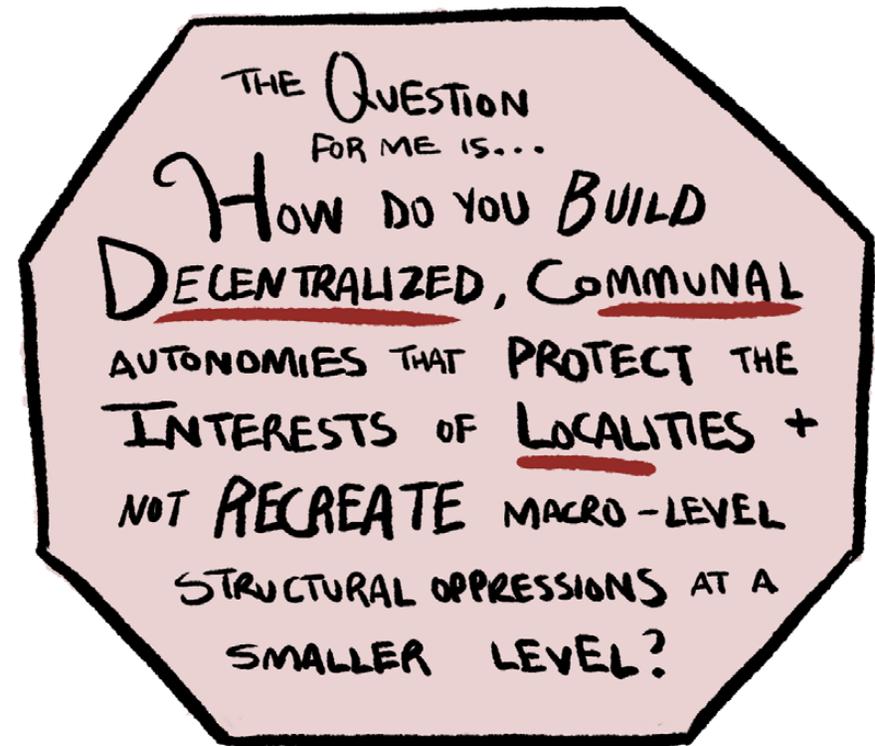
And so just thinking about how solidarity can happen. I think we need some sort of solidarity nationally on the left to not lose hope, or to share tactics or to just know that there is a group of people who could be mobilized if something were to happen. The right has these really extensive networks nationally through churches and various parties and decentralized fascists groups that they have established. They are loosely connected. That kind of connection could serve the left well in terms of at least knowing who is who and where the players are and if there are other people that are politically aligned in other places and what they are doing. The strategy we are seeing on the right now is "divide and conquer localities", chop up every individual government and put fascists at all levels from local city councils to the presidency. That is going to really initiate a takeover of the country whether or not somebody like Trump or somebody who is even more fascistic comes into power.

Figuring out how we can similarly run people electorally or build robust left-wing alternative institutions outside of the government to combat that rise is something that we could really learn from the right's divide and conquer strategy across the country.

**Ale:** There is something to be said about having more practical skill sets within our communities. Developing out collective defense in ways we have not before, in a way that is legitimately rooted in wanting to be a part of a larger community and take care of it when there are people who want to fracture it using narratives based around domination and racism, misogyny and all other various forms of oppression.

Prepper culture used to just be a fringe thing, but then after the pandemic and J6 and all of the racist attacks on the Black community from police, we have started to see a lot more diversity at these prepper conventions because more people are thinking about how to be able to survive under intense moments of crisis. To me that says that there is something libidinal there, like a desire to have protection or to have the ability to react under circumstances which seem to be increasingly violent and no longer foreign.

Also to the points around building more robust structures outside of our current understanding of US governmental politics. I am someone who's very sympathetic towards dual power as a strategy to try to build something more liberatory. Part of this is because I think that everything we are seeing now should not happen just because a seat of power might be taken by one party. **The question for me is how do you build decentralized communal autonomies that protect the sort of interests of localities and do so in a way that also is not just recreating macro level structural oppressions at a smaller level.**



I have really had a lot of issues trying to figure out, if we are trying to develop dual power or a municipalist or communalist structure, how do you prevent the formation of localities interested in doing awful things and not just trying to create this beautiful autonomist utopia. It would be naive to think that we can just have a series of localities that are not gonna also have these kinds of localized problems. I do not have a good answer for what to do about that. It is just something I have been thinking about quite a bit. So I guess I will just leave with the question - that is something we should figure out more. Because you know, I do not think it would just be some sort of left flank that develops its dual power in opposition to an existing governmental structure. There is also a right-wing approach to it that is happening at the same time.

And those are going to be in conflict if they both exist simultaneously as well.

**Michelle:** The water that we are in right now, even if it is not right-wing governance, even a lot of mainstream liberal governments are facilitating the move to the right. And facilitating that we are constituents and we are consumers, but we are not actively involved in politics as citizens. How do you see the potential for radical municipalism being something that can also prevent right-wing radicalization? Do you see it having that potential? And how does that interact with existing spaces that are overwhelmingly right-wing? Is there a potential in that for helping to de-radicalize people?

**Gracie:** I am never gonna say that more opportunities for democratic participation and people being more active political agents are a bad thing, right? Radical municipalism could have the potential to usher in a more radical politics if it presented opportunities for people - which I think it is designed to do - to feel like the decisions they are making are actually going to be put into effect and that the things they are pouring their time into are going to come to fruition. Besides the standard idea of being “overworked because of capitalism”, I attribute a lot of the general apathy towards politics to this general emphasis of political life in the media. I think a lot more people have tried being politically or civically involved in some way but have been discouraged because they can not make anything happen. We had this big instance where they closed down a local affordable apartment complex and a lot of people said that they tried to call their representatives and nothing worked. A bunch of people are disillusioned from voting and from other political processes. I really do think that if we presented more avenues for people to enter into political life and see that it was fruitful, a lot more people would be interested in contributing to society in that way.

A lot of people right now are feeling this desire and call for being involved in their community to shape their future and the world around them but are just so disillusioned by the state of affairs.

If radical municipalism could figure out how to tap into that energy and be a way for people to practice governance that looks different and processes that are actually going to impact them or enact something they want to see, we could get a lot more interest in politics than people generally have.

That is a hard thing to figure out how to do too, right? How do we ensure that we can create something if we do not have a lot of funds, if we are doing this super grassroots in a very decentralized manner.



**Radical municipalism really could help, but I also do not think it is the magical answer unless some of these larger issues are being addressed that are preventing people from participating in the first place.**

**Ale:** I have at least a hopeful optimism around what radical municipalism can bring in an interim period, which is to say I do not think it in and of itself should be the end that we are seeking to establish. It feels like it is more open to adaptation and change across time than the sort of institutions we have now. I would hope that that kind of context would, 1) allow more direct involvement in some sort of democratic process. 2), would also give the opportunity to change if it is not working; now when we see things are not working, it does not open itself up to adaptation. It ends up just sort of tightening and restricting much more. I try to take a more long-termist approach. I see a shift into radical municipalism being a new kind of fertile ground for even more social struggle and activity that can lead to something that is temporally and spatially situated in a way we do not have now instead of just being top down and income passing.

And I really like Modibo Kadalie's work. He wrote in [\*Pan African Social Ecology\*](#): "we need to understand that our authority and validity are derived from ourselves and our social struggle, not from whatever state power happens to govern us" and that "our collective struggle for freedom continues from one generation to the next." This reminds me of how the nature of liberatory praxis is always in motion. It is not something that needs to be reified and sustained as a single thing across time. It is something that needs to be more fluid and adaptable. I do not think that our current structure does that.

There is likely a number of people who are fascist because they suck. I think more people are fascist because the conditions are bad and they have just been indoctrinated into a really shitty ideology.

I would hope that by having something like radical municipalism in place, it can create better conditions for the vast majority of people and then in doing so prevent the sidestep back into immense poverty, immense xenophobia and then have these sorts of feelings co-opted by populists who just wanted to control and then present an easy target, which is usually something like a racial identity or gender identity or a queer identity.

I hope we get to a point where there would be enough public popular education where it is much less abstract to see what a structure is and how it impacts our lives so that more people can be involved in shaping that structure in ways that benefit them and not just end up taking out their rancor on identities that end up being positioned as inherently bad or awful.



*Ale works to challenge the development and deployment of harmful technology with a disparate impact on Black, Brown and poor communities, such as surveillance and digital security.*

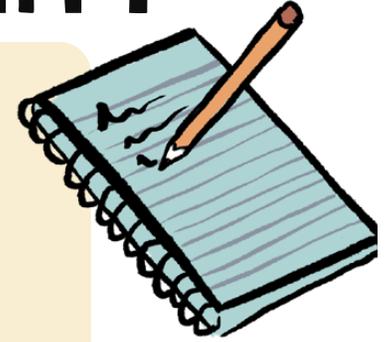
*Gracie is a researcher and organizer working within abolitionist and housing for all movements in Nashville, TN.*

*Michelle is a socially-engaged artist and organizer based in Lancaster, PA.*

# REFLECT ON POWER IN YOUR CITY

[Mapping Power in Detroit, Michigan](#) (page 64) and [Municipalism and the Right](#) (page 76) show us that power can be organized in very different ways, depending on local history and conditions. How is power organized in your city? Consider the following questions.

- What does constituted power look like in your city?
- What or who defines its power and the limitations on its power?
- How can you challenge the limits?
- What are some sources of constituent power?



# MAP LOCAL POWER



As described in detail in the [Mapping Local Power section](#) (on page 55),

- Begin by identifying the external constraints on local government.
  - Has your state or provincial government passed preemptive laws blocking certain kinds of municipal ordinances, like rent stabilization, environmental protections, or local minimum wage increases?
  - How do state or provincial law define and limit the kinds of municipal governmental structures allowed?
  - What is the scope of political authority granted to municipalities?
- Chart out the political structure of your municipality.
- Identify the process through which the structure of a city government may legally be changed.

**You are invited to map power from above and below in your terrain with comrades from your organizing project.** Here are some tools and resources that you may find helpful in your power mapping efforts.

## Power Mapping from Above:

- [Corporate Research Project](#)
- [Follow the Money](#) by [OpenSecrets.org](#)
- [Map the Power](#) by [LittleSis.org](#)
- [MuckRock](#)
- [Story-based Strategy 101](#) by Center for Story-Based Strategy – good for mapping hegemonic power
- [Strategic Corporate Research](#) by Tom Juravich
- [The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project](#)
  - [Evictor Book](#)
  - [How to Look Up Your Landlord](#)
- [Watch the Watchers](#) by Stop LAPD Spying Coalition

## Power Mapping from Below:

- [Dual Power Map](#) by Black Socialists in America
- [Global Tapestry of Alternatives](#) by AltMap
- [Mapping Community Ecosystems of Collective Care Toolkit](#) by Interrupting Criminalization
- [Mapping the Workplace in Organizing 101 Training](#) by the Industrial Workers of the World
- [Movement Ecology Map](#) by the Ayni Institute
- [Movement Ecology Pie Chart](#) by Ayni Institute – good for mapping constituent power and thinking about a diversity of tactics and movement choreography
- [Map Your Workplace and its Leaders](#) by Labor Notes
- [Social Solidarity Economy Maps](#) by [socioeco.org](#) – good for the mapping alternatives and dual power
- [Solidarity Economy Map and Directory](#) by Solidarity Economy Mapping Project
- [The Social Change Ecosystem Map](#) by Deepa Iyer

## Mapping Tools

There are free and open source platforms that can help you visualize a conceptual map of complex networks and relationships ([SocNetV](#)), ideas and concepts ([mind maps](#)), and places in geographical space ([GIS](#)). Nothing however beats paper and a pencil.

# REFLECT ON YOUR POWER MAP

- Where is there a concentration of power? Where are there gaps?
- For network maps, is there a particular actor that is well-connected to others?
- What is the realm of power that your organizing project is challenging or building?





# KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Understanding **local power** affects how we build power.

2

**Each municipality is limited in its constituted power** by its state, province, or central government; these boundaries can be challenged.

3

It is important to map out both **constituent power (power from below)** as well as **constituted power (power from above)** in crafting your municipalist strategy.

# PART 2:

# CHARTING A PATH



*Adapted from a presentation by Mason Herson-Hord*

As this mapping research comes together, how do we put it to use? We suggest that municipalist organizers **think through different “pathways to power” as strategic possibilities, to be considered against the realities of your local context.** What you learn about your city will suggest some opportunities and forestall others. The pathways listed here are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive—in many settings they may work together—but there are important trade offs to consider.

If you trace each through the specifics of your city, what barriers will you come up against, even in an ideal scenario? When might an institutional break or revolutionary rupture become essential for the success of your movement’s goals, and how does that inform your strategy?

WHERE WE STARTED

MALCOLM X GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT + NEW AFRIKAN PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATION

- ✓ BLACK SELF-DETERMINATION
- ✓ ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY
- ✓ ECOSOCIALISM

CONSIDERATIONS FOR MUNICIPALITY SELECTION

- LAND ACCESS for FOOD PRODUCTION
- VOTER TURNOUT + VOTING PATTERNS
- AVAILABILITY OF DEFENSIVE POSITIONS

PATHWAYS TO POWER

1. VISION
2. UNDERSTAND CONTEXT
3. BUILD POPULAR POWER
4. IMPLEMENT
5. EVALUATE + ITERATE

MOVEMENT FOR BLACK AMERICAN SOVEREIGNTY IN THE UNITED STATES

- EARLY EFFORTS
- COP WATCH
  - REPARATIONS
  - SELF-DEFENSE

THE JACKSON-KUSH PLAN



BASED IN JACKSON MISSISSIPPI

GOALS

ILLUSTRATE A TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA WITH ROOM FOR CO-CREATION

LOCAL CONTROL + AUTONOMY

HISTORICAL SHIFTS

Focus moves FROM NATIONAL TO LOCAL

WHAT WE NEED

SEPT 11, 2001



2005 HURRICANE KATRINA

How do we adapt to move forward in this environment?

How do we get the resources we need?

RECONSTRUCTION PARTY

VOTE

ELECTIONS IN NOLA + JACKSON

NEW LANGUAGE MEANT TO EVADE CENSORSHIP

NEW 5-YEAR PLAN

SOLIDARITY NOT CHARITY

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY + TRANSFORMATION



KALI AKUNO

COOPERATION JACKSON

# PATHWAYS TO POWER

Here are possible pathways to power that may fit your local context and organizing goals. As mentioned previously, these are strategic options and often can be used in tandem. We will dive deeper into charting a path by looking more closely at four of these pathways on the following pages.

- **An electoral pathway** - running candidates accountable to peoples' assemblies or a citizens' platform to change the rules of how our cities are governed and our corporations regulated
- **A civic initiative pathway** - organizing to place structural changes on the ballot for a direct vote of the people, to change the rules of how our cities are governed and our corporations regulated
- **A dual power pathway** - building autonomous institutions of direct and economic democracy to govern the city and social relationships in parallel to the state and racial capitalism, which we will seek to displace and dissolve
- **A preparing-lifeboats-for-crisis pathway** - orienting organizing work around institutions of survival and autonomous self-governance that can fill the void of political, social, and economic organization when our cities face climate catastrophe, economic collapse, or other disasters and the state weakens and retreats
- **A rebel cities pathway** - upon taking municipal power and the means of production (via any of the other pathways), collaborating and coordinating with other "rebel cities" against the nation-state and racial capitalism to reject its destructive policies and extractive policies
- **A trade union democracy pathway** - running rank and file workers in elections for union leadership, especially in key industries (such as logistics), and shift the political focus of unions from funding the Democratic Party to building a base and workers' control of industries

# CHARTING A PATH

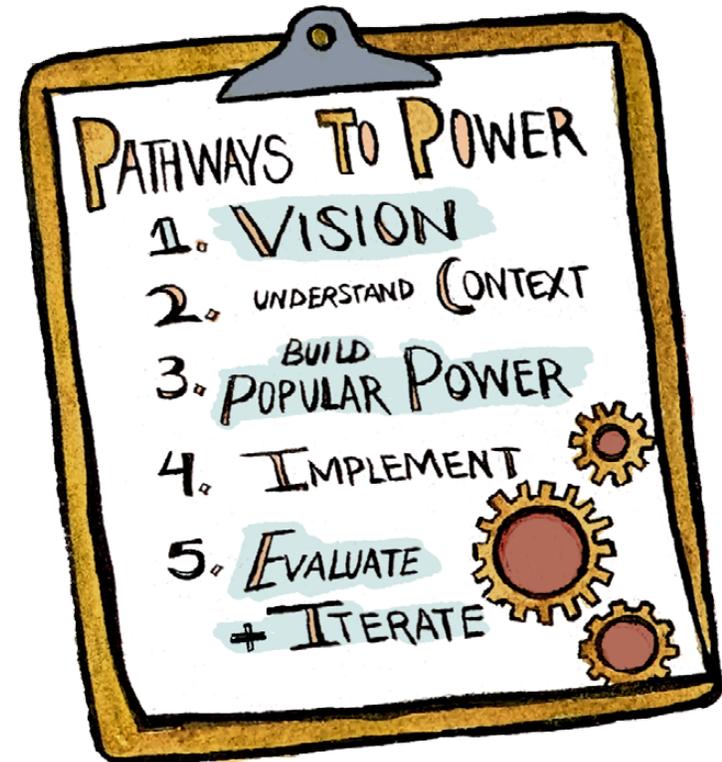
## Pathway 1: A Citizens' Platform and Running a Slate of Candidates

A movement gathers together people neighborhood by neighborhood into peoples' assemblies to discuss their vision for the city. Over months of democratic deliberation, they craft a citizen's platform that candidates will then carry into office. The strength of the movement's public engagement in the assembly process will be tested in the electoral arena when they put forward a slate of candidates answerable to the assemblies for elected positions. If successful, those elected would then involve social movements and people's assemblies more directly in governance in an experimental interchange between the streets and the halls of municipal power. Such a municipalist movement would need to experiment with different mechanisms to ensure those elected remain accountable to the people's assemblies.

An example of this model in practice is [Barcelona en Comú](#), a citizen's platform which was able to successfully elect one of its leaders as the city's mayor in 2015.

## Pathway 2: Replacing the City Charter

The specific mechanisms for this strategic pathway vary according to context and may also require winning municipal elections. Peoples' assemblies convene around the city to vision a new charter that would institutionalize forms of direct democracy vested with real governing authority to be carried forward through the charter revision process. The social base behind its crafting is then mobilized to actually pass it through referendum, city council vote, or whatever other official



mechanism exists for charter amendment. Even if initially successful, the movement must be prepared to defend its new form of governance from the state or province, which will likely act to constrain it or outlaw it altogether.

Although not quite revolutionary, one example of this model in practice was [Boston's 2021 charter reform initiative](#), which broke open the mayor's dictatorial hold on the city budget process and initiated city-level participatory budgeting.

### Pathway 3: Dual Power

Community organizations build forms of participatory, communal self-governance neighborhood by neighborhood—parallel to, but against the city government. These assemblies root their political legitimacy through the fullness of their democracy, where any person in the community can have a voice in collective decision-making—quite unlike the inaccessible and impersonal processes of the (allegedly) representative city government. When federated together through recallable delegates for citywide decision-making and coordination, these assemblies may constitute a “dual power” capable of challenging the official government for legitimate authority over the city. Through some sort of mass mobilization or insurrection, these two powers clash, and the city government is displaced and its powers dissolved into the federation of neighborhood assemblies.

An example of this model in practice is the [Zapatista uprising](#), through which a number of the village assemblies in Chiapas, Mexico declared their autonomy and threw out the state forces to set up a new governing model of their own.



*Zapatistas Territory sign in Chiapas, Mexico (2006).*

*English Translation:  
“North Zone. Board of Good Governance. Strictly prohibited: The trafficking of arms, planting and consumption of drugs, intoxicating drinks, illegal sale of wood, and the destruction of nature. Zapata lives, the fight continues... You are in rebellious Zapatista territory. Here the people rule - the government obeys.”*

*Image Credit: [Matthew T Rader](#), [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#)*

### Pathway 4: Preparing Lifeboats for Crisis

This pathway rests upon the assumption that other structural, historical, or ecological forces beyond what our own movement can marshal will undermine the state’s and/or city government’s ability to maintain its authority, creating a political vacuum that a movement with years of preparatory organizing behind it can step into. Climate disasters like floods and wildfires will devastate cities all around the world in the coming decades, often to an extent that will force ordinary people to rely on one another for survival rather than the state. Social dislocations downstream from climate change will also produce a variety of systemic shocks that may destabilize existing modes of governance. The preparatory work of this pathway closely resembles dual power, with perhaps relatively more emphasis on developing and sustaining resources for communal survival (lifeboats), such as food sovereignty initiatives and community disaster preparedness to collectively weather the crises to come. Fundamentally, the distinction between this pathway and dual power is that the movement does not seek to challenge the state directly, but rather waits for a historical opening where circumstances have radically weakened the state’s presence in our community.

An example of this model in practice was the Rojava Revolution, in which the revolutionary Kurdish movement stepped into the vacuum left behind by the withdrawal of Syrian government forces in the early months of the civil war, to actually implement their model of democratic confederalism (See: [Pye, n.d.](#) and [Dirik, 2016](#)).

There are many possible pathways other than these four, including hybrids among them. These pathways intend to spark rather than delimit strategic thinking. Most importantly, in our view, is the understanding that **developing a municipalist movement strategy around a given pathway to power ought to derive from a detailed study of your own particular context**, rather than from abstract ideological principles adopted from the historical movements that most resonate with you personally. **Our strategies should be iterative, with cycles of experimental practice, evaluation, and refinement.** Preliminary experiments among small groups of activists and organizers should be undertaken with an explicit understanding of their provisional, incomplete, and educational nature.

## Building a Bigger We

Our imagination should not be limited to the artificial borders of the city. To “build a bigger we,” [to paraphrase Kazembe Balagun](#), we need to think expansively and creatively about how to build power and to defend our position at multiple scales of geography. Like the example of charter reform in Boston, let’s think about growing our power in many places, not just one city. Kamau Franklin challenges us to think about liberated zones as inherently ephemeral if we don’t seek to include the entire world in its embrace. Only then, perhaps, can experiments in municipalist democracy endure longer than their predecessors when faced with major external threats.

“

**What happens to a liberated territory that is surrounded by a worldwide capitalist system? It gets surrounded, it gets acted upon, it gets directed, and it gets derailed. Massacres can also occur. So, when we look at the idea of liberated territory, it does not work unless we are challenging the larger state at hand.** It does not work unless we are sure that we’re not seeking only to capture small islands, which effectively become Bantustans. **The idea of liberated territory works best when there’s a complete understanding that this may be a place for us to organize in. But it’s a space which is going to come under constant attack.** And it is a space where we have to be able to mobilize from and to give up at times.”

- [Kamau Franklin, 2024](#)



*Kamau Franklin,  
Community Movement  
Builders*

# LESSONS FROM COOPERATION JACKSON



*A Q&A with Kali Akuno, co-founder and Executive Director of Cooperation Jackson*



*Kali Akuno,  
Cooperation Jackson*

*Kali Akuno is the co-founder and Executive Director of [Cooperation Jackson](#), an organization building local power towards economic democracy in Jackson, Mississippi. This organization grew out of the lineage of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and New Afrikan People's Organization. These groups supported the development of the Jackson-Kush Plan, a vision for Black self-determination, Just Transition, and solidarity economy, written by Akuno. This plan calls for the creation of people's assemblies, radical electoral organizing, and solidarity economics to liberate Black people living in the south. In this conversation, he shares organizing lessons learned in Jackson.*

**Q: What kind of structure and vision does municipalist organizing offer?**

**A:** The whole thing around running the Jackson-Kush Plan was to test to what degree did the radical ideas that our organization and movement was expounding resonate with the people in the community, many of whom we have been doing work with over a 30 year period. The plan was articulated to illustrate a transformative but developmental

agenda that was refined by a radical organization that was trying its best to uphold the practice of “from the masses to the masses” that synthesized the thinking and knowledge of the people as drawn from the people’s assemblies that upheld the deep democratic aspirations of the Black Radical Tradition. And drawing from this wisdom, the Jackson-Kush Plan was articulated in a way to leave the practice and formulations open enough and broad enough for a certain level of interpretation for folks to kind of see themselves and their interests represented within it that they want to co-construct.

We wanted to present a clear platform that was open enough where people could be in dialogue with the organization and with the social movement forces within this overall umbrella push to be able to do some concentrated work within.

One of the key things we realized at the municipal level was a lesson of scales. In other words what the concentrated forces of the left could actually have an impact - a scalable and measurable impact - in this reactionary period. And you can measure that by how many people you can reach to build organic relationships with, such as having a mobilization or a call tree, and be able to develop a broad, horizontal program of deliberate action and intentionality where folks are developing these things together.

The thing that we have to figure out from our vantage point is how to build a broad level of shared practice that enables us on the left to scale up power, shared practice, and to a degree, a shared language where we can then engage on federated levels to be able to scale up or scale down when necessary.

COMMUNICATION  
IS KEY.  
IT'S NOT JUST LANGUAGE  
USED TO COMMUNICATE  
BUT THE INTENT  
TO COMMUNICATE

**Q: What lessons have you learned on how to communicate what you're doing in Jackson?**

**A:** Communication is key. It's not just language used to communicate but the intent to communicate. While we were in office--and I worked for the mayor's office--one of the things I think we did well was passing a particular initiative around his 1% sales tax. We didn't let the City Council decide, instead we organized a popular referendum that was voted on in January 2014. We used all the available apparatus of bourgeois democracy permitted by our kind of local city charter, which is a strong Mayor and a weak council form of municipal governance. We put this question out as to whether we should tax ourselves in a certain way. We put that on the ballot.

And we did a broad level of education: from the mayor's pulpit and from the City Council pulpit. This is why we need this. So we made this a mass question: we brought it to the community. We explained to the greatest extent possible, what its benefits were, what its drawbacks would be. So people can make informed decisions. As a result of this practice and orientation, [the referendum passed by 90%](#).

Things that we did not do well: We didn't employ the "mass question" method consistently. For example, the rate hikes that were being forced upon us by the utility company. But the City Council and the Mayor in part had to sign off on it. There was internal unity amongst the Council about approving it. Chokwe disagreed with it. But this was the first decision that they were going to be able to construct a majority to override him.

Now, I think that if we should have applied the same piece to turning it into a mass question, and bringing that to the community and been like, "this is what's going down, the utility company is basically threatening us.

This is what the threat looks like. This is how it came down.” We had the documentation of their threats, we could have named and shamed them, and employed all the tactics we know that we use in our movements to take down more powerful entities, and opened up broad communication and have a very horizontal level of discussion and decision-making. I think if we would have done that, we wouldn’t have gotten some of the ire and pushback we did, doing that made it just seem like we just made the same type of nasty compromise decision that any other administration in the past would have, right? So, like how do we go about communicating with people in this municipalist project from whatever position that we stood at: that’s a critical lesson I would share with y’all from what we have learned in Jackson. It makes the world of a difference, even if you have to compromise to have a broad conversation so folks understand what the terms and the threats are. You allow yourself to be pushed by mass pressure and be really reliant on the people, the mass movement.

See, I think we could have mobilized enough leverage against the utilities if we were really explicit with the people and had the People’s Assembly and other forces respond, saying, “No, we’re not going to be pushed around by the utility company like that. And if y’all insist on doing that, then what alternatives can we create?” This is where if we have strong forces in the local solidarity economy, we can push back and say, alright, to hell with Entergy and the rest of these folks. Let’s create a municipal-controlled solar company. Then you can negotiate if that’s what you want to do from the basis of strength because you got an alternative and you got the support of the people. You got the power of the people.

Making all questions mass questions is a critical piece around how you deal with certain contradictions and how you deal with shifts.

But if it’s just resolved like in small groups, you’re gonna just perpetuate a limited set of interests. And you will ultimately do things that divide your movement, because people don’t understand. And then also I think: how much faith do we actually have in the people? How much faith do we actually have in the masses? If we keep going out, and we keep raising things up, I firmly believe, alternatives will not only emerge and pop up, but you’ll have people ready to fight for them. And sometimes even if we lose the fight, the muscles that we develop in building the capacity to self-govern, that lasts a lifetime. When people understand their power and grow into their power, they will eventually exercise it.

WHEN PEOPLE UNDERSTAND  
THEIR POWER  
+ GROW INTO THEIR POWER  
THEY WILL EVENTUALLY  
EXERCISE IT



[Read more](#) about the formation of Cooperation Jackson from its roots in the movement for African self-determination in the South.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Your movement strategy must be **rooted in a detailed analysis of your own local context.**

2

Our strategies should be **iterative**, with cycles of experimental practice, evaluation, and refinement.

Any preliminary experiments among small groups of marginal activists and organizers should be undertaken with an explicit understanding of their provisional, incomplete, and educational nature. This is largely what distinguishes a genuine popular revolutionary movement from social democracy reforms run by a progressive elite.

3

**Building power takes time.**

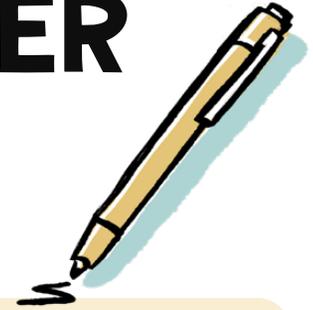
No revolutionary movement has secured political power without concerted, consistent popular education and organizing among ordinary people for years and often decades.

# REFLECT ON THIS MOMENT

- What is the current historical moment that you see us in, locally (in your context), as well as internationally? Why is this moment important?
  - For example, this historical moment could refer to late-stage capitalism, rising genocide, climate catastrophe, or local trends you notice in your own landscape in the year that you are reading this toolkit. What about the convergence of these events makes this moment unique for you? And for us?
- What role does your local organizing work play in this historical moment? How does your work relate to other actors in the movement?



# BUILDING PATHWAYS TO POWER



Trace out different possible strategies in your own context to identify concrete obstacles and opportunities.

Mechanisms of change are not mutually exclusive. It's unlikely that any one by itself would ever secure more than modest reforms. A genuinely popular movement is able to invoke them simultaneously; nor does the failure of one approach kill the movement itself.

In this exercise, you will build out different pathways to power for your own movement space. Envision how your organization or movement might go about pursuing these pathways in your local context:

- an electoral pathway
- a civic initiative pathway
- a dual power pathway
- a preparing-lifeboats-for-crisis pathway
- a rebel cities pathway
- a trade union democracy pathway
- other possible pathways

For each pathway, consider:

- **What obstacles do you encounter with this pathway?**
- **What opportunities for radical change does the pathway offer?**

*Examples:*

*Considering a **legal pathway** to democratizing municipal governance, could entail:*

- *looking back at your mapping research: determining whether their city has a charter, and if so, how it is amended, and whether that suggests a movement strategy of electing candidates, placing an initiative on the ballot, or some other means based on the idiosyncrasies of their local city government.*

*Considering a **dual power pathway** could entail:*

- *examining existing civic institutions in your city and determining whether they can be reformed into genuinely democratic bodies or whether they have to go their own way and assemble new institutions of self-governance from scratch.*

# PEOPLES' BUDGETS: AN IMPLEMENTATION OF DUAL POWER



A conversation with Desirae Simmons, George Ygarza, and Gracie R.



Desirae (Dez) Simmons,  
2023 Fellow



George Ygarza,  
2023 Fellow

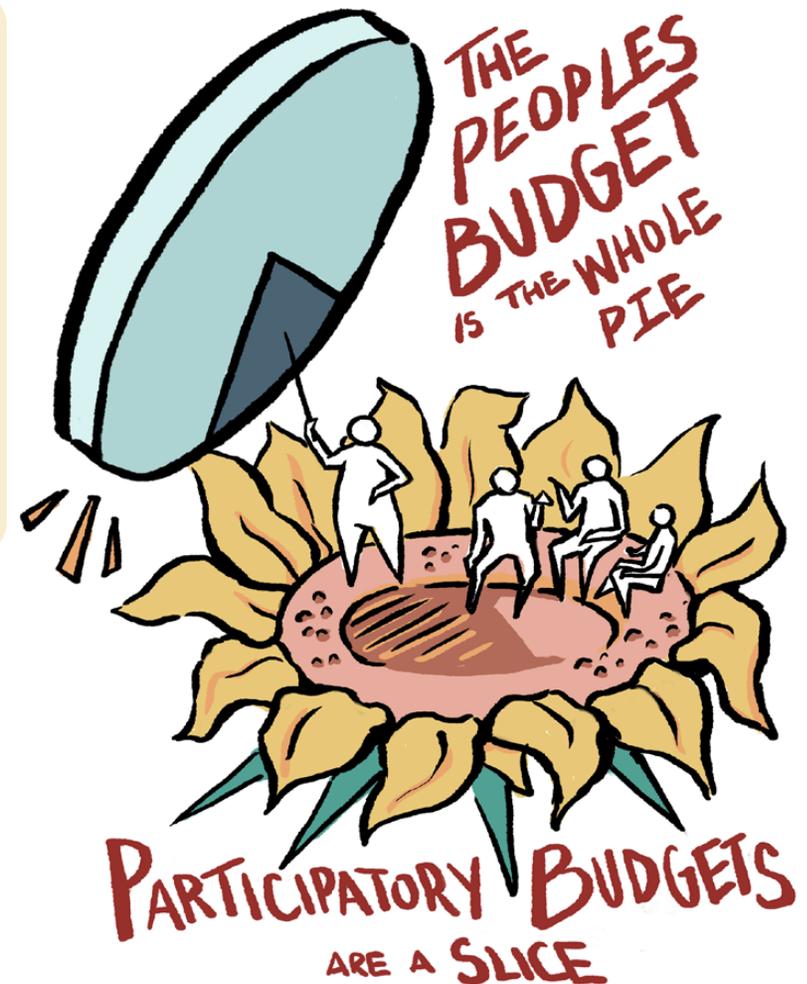


Gracie R.,  
2023 Fellow

In this conversation, George facilitates a discussion with Dez and Gracie on their experiences with participatory budgeting. Participatory budgeting often refers to a process in which local residents organize to get a percentage or amount of a city's budget onto an open ballot for collective decision-making. Participatory budgeting is a reform that reimagines how city budgets are set up, bringing economic decisions directly to constituents. We title this piece "peoples' budgets" to imagine an expansive collective governance of all municipal budget items— not just a small, agreed-upon portion of the budget.

**George:** How do each of you understand participatory budgeting (PB) as a tool for radical social and democratic participation?

**Gracie:** Participatory budgeting (PB) offers us an opportunity to transform how people envision democracy. Traditionally, democracy in America has simply been going out to vote every four or so years to elect people who are going to be making decisions for us. Alternatively, PB presents a way for us to choose together what and how we want things in our city to be like, whether that be



around getting people's needs met or how we deal with social problems. If done properly, people's budget platforms can get people to engage in a more truly democratic process to control and shape their communities. Participatory budgets present a more tangible aspiration to this end.

**Dez:** PB is a way to move real power out of the ivory tower and into the hands of the community. It's one thing to say, "Oh, we care about your input," but it's another thing to actually put the power of the purse strings into people's hands. To me, democracy is a practice, it's not an endpoint, and we are not given enough opportunities to practice it in our society. PB allows us to directly engage with real issues and include many different perspectives. PB presents a way for us to rely on democracy differently, to directly solve complex issues and practice democracy in our everyday life.

TO ME DEMOCRACY IS A  
PRACTICE  
NOT AN ENDPOINT.

**George:** What do you believe to be some of the main impediments to implementing PB?

**Dez:** I find four major impediments. The first is the process of shifting power. There are people who are used to being in power, in decision-making positions, for whom it's really hard to imagine that other people can make decisions as well.

People hold the misconception that everyday people are unable to make such decisions. Another impediment is making sure that you really are getting the fullness of the community into the space and into the room, so that it's not the same voices that already drive political will, but that we actually are having the fullness of the community in making these decisions. Another is time. More specifically, thinking about the timeline for the implementation of PB so that we can get ahead of other special interests and the community can provide their input before decisions are made. And then the fourth thing is trust. I think that very understandably, there's a lot of mistrust around building such a project together, especially within governmental structures. There's also a lot of mistrust in politicians. People wonder if politicians will actually listen. This is understandable, oftentimes people go through the process and then it doesn't actually come forward and the council doesn't pick it up. This leaves people disillusioned, believing that they have wasted their time.

**Gracie:** From the perspective of PB, one impediment is the way in which PB is currently structured, whereby the only funds being allocated are oftentimes from leftover budget funds. And so, it ends up being a lot more symbolic, like here in Nashville whereby councils sign up to spend previously allocated funds on traffic control measures or symbolic acknowledgments of historical markers, which are all good things, but also are not the things that people are really getting excited about or really wanting to change in their community. When people don't see a stake or see that an actual change is going to be made through this process people are disincentivized to participate.

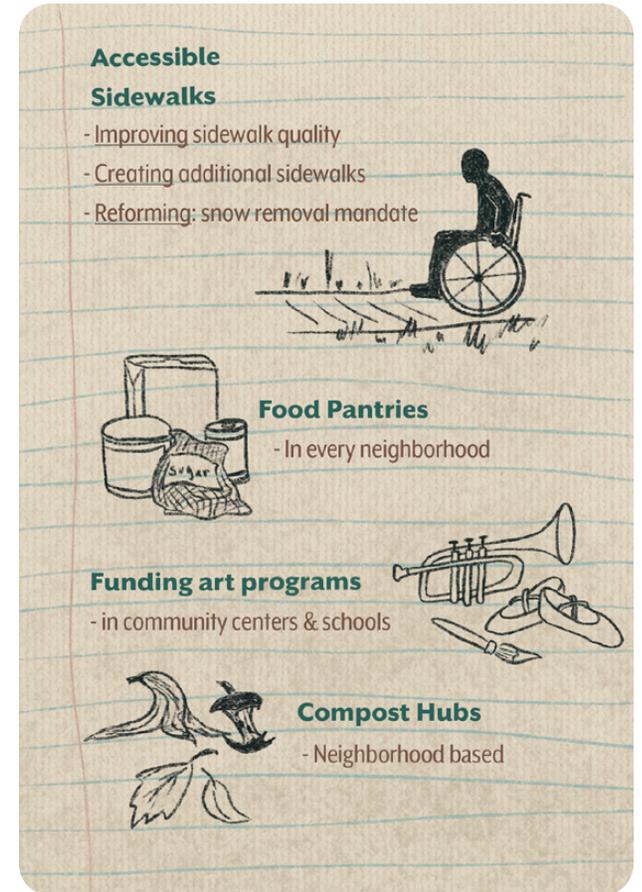
As Dez mentioned, time can also be an impediment, especially trying to get people involved in time to pass these proposals when you are kind of fumbling in the dark about what people want or about what the city is going

to do. It's hard to get folks tied in and interested in that. I think it's really hard to get folks invested. People here in The South are super propagandized and have a certain vision of what the government does and their role and their power in the government. And so, there's definitely a lot of barriers to getting people to recognize that there could be a world possible where we can participate more fully.

**George:** You are approaching PB from different entry points: Dez as someone in government and Gracie as someone in the grassroots. Where do each of you locate your critical points of leverage and intervention?

**Gracie:** There's two main leverage points which I think come from two sides of the same coin, especially here in Nashville. For us, it's meeting people where they are at, helping to get people to recognize that they are doing something good and something beneficial, and then showing that more is possible. We not only do that with a mass movement but with partners in council. And so, mass organizing around issues like a budget platform allows us to present other options and alternatives to sites of contention, such as at city budget hearings. Outside of this, social media can become a site of intervention. For us, it has been the mass assembly and really calling people out and providing other alternatives to move these kinds of projects forward.

**Dez:** Speaking from my position in council, my point of intervention has been to simply educate my colleagues on the elements of PB in order to demystify it. I do this in part by pointing to the numerous examples in other cities. To do so, it's important to know how your city government is organized. For example, here we have a weak council and strong city manager. So, for me here it is in speaking to my city manager and finance officer.



*The People's Budget small group convening with youth in Ypsilanti, Michigan, (February 2022). Illustrated by [Carolina Jones](#) during their fellowship with Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice.*

While doing all of this, it is important to be cognizant of timing, that is, when the appropriate time is to put this forward while considering all the factors. In thinking about all of this we have also considered working with other organizations so that we can leverage some of those relationships in order to make sure that a PB can happen. This can start small, with a small budget with a pilot program and scale up from there.

**George:** Building on the last question, how do each of you understand the notion of dual power, especially in the context of implementing PB?

**Dez:** Dual power helps us to think about the way things are pushed outside of government in the community, while at the same time helping me to think about my role on the inside and figure out how to make it possible. That is, finding out which barriers stand in the way of the community and council. Underlying dual power are push and pull factors in terms of really trying to think about what's possible in those different

spaces, what's possible on the community side, and what's possible on the government side. Ultimately, we will be able to distinguish between real and imagined barriers which we can just get out of the way.

Information sharing is also a key part of dual power. Communication across government and the grassroots is important, so that we can be prepared for the right opportunity and anticipate changes to understand the flow of local governance. Dual power rethinks internal processes and infrastructure regarding how participatory budgeting could work. I think most significant is that it is not tied to one single sector and so we do not have to rely on just one single entity to lead the outcome.

Dual power helps us to divide labor where engagement happens between the grassroots and allies inside government who can focus on process and infrastructure.

**Gracie:** Dual power helps us to overcome the contention between the inside or formal government structures and outside organizing structures. It helps us to create a pathway to shared governance.

For us, the importance of dual power is building up robust ideas and infrastructure outside of the government and outside of the system. From there, we can present alternative options both to counsel and to folks who sometimes aren't as involved. Dual power helps us to build systems that rival the current institutions while also allowing us to work through the system as well.

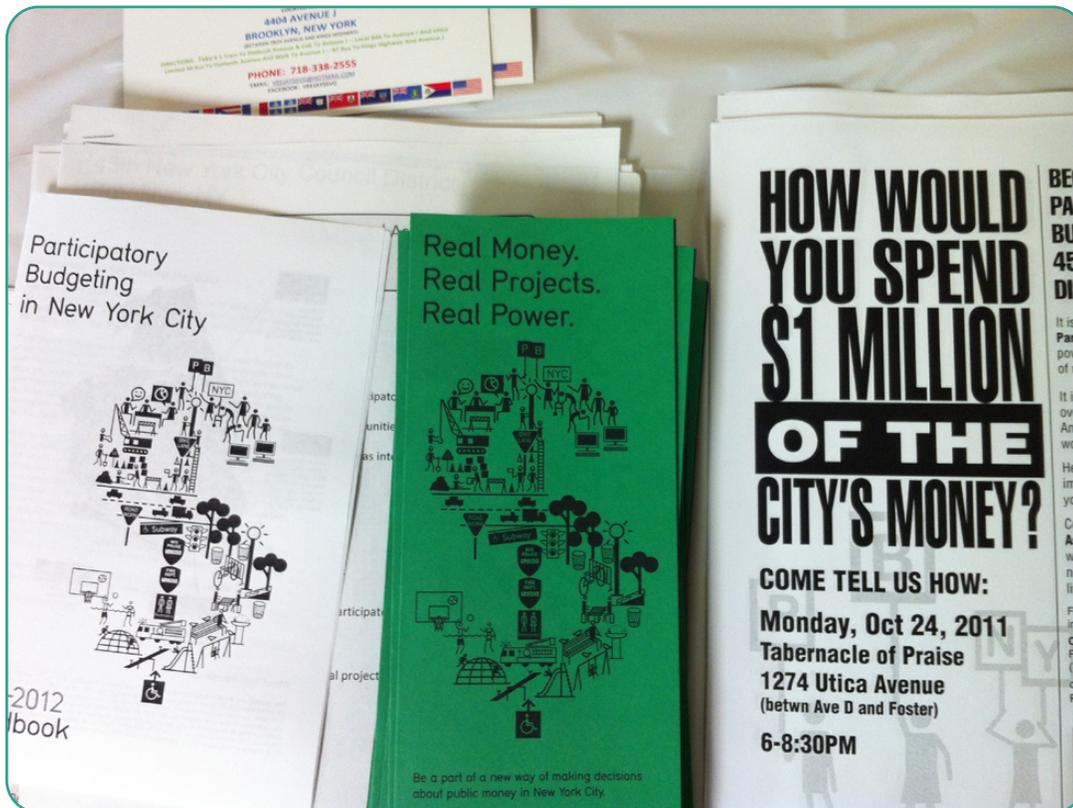
**DUAL POWER DOESN'T MEAN  
WORKING TOGETHER ALL THE TIME.  
IT CAN COME DOWN TO WORKING IN  
PARALLEL SPACES  
+ THEN ENGAGING AT DIFFERENT  
CRITICAL INTERVENTION POINTS**

Dual power for us doesn't necessarily mean working together all of the time. It can come down to working in parallel spaces or working separately, and then engaging at different critical intervention points, such as a big vote or some sort of event that juxtaposes what council members are saying and what the mayor is saying versus what they're doing in the community.

Understanding dual power has really helped me to better navigate, work, and live here in the South, in terms of how we make change and how that can be possible.

It has also helped me think about how to create alternative institutions and alternative side projects that can inform the government and can augment current democratic processes while also presenting the possibility to be scaled up and be robust enough to meet community needs sometimes without conventional institutions.

Dual power allows us to bring about a form of self-determination in our own lane, for our own community. Dual power provides us the opportunity to use government when we can, but also know that that's not going to be the



New York City Participatory Budgeting Pamphlets, (2011).  
Image Credit: [Daniel Latorre](#), CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

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*Desiraé (Dez) Simmons (she/they) is a community organizer, activist, and advocate serving in multiple grassroots organizations and coalitions. She has served on Ypsilanti, Michigan's City Council as a Ward 3 Representative since November 2022.*

*George Ygarza (he/they) is a first-generation popular educator, organic scholar and militant researcher. Before becoming a certified Middle School History teacher, George spent five years as a substitute teacher in the post-industrial city in which he was born.*

*Gracie R. (they/them) is a researcher and organizer working within abolitionist and housing for all movements in Nashville, TN. Gracie organizes with the Nashville People's Budget Coalition.*

# 05.

# TAKING ACTION:

## MOVING FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

*Adapted from a presentation by Mike Tekh Strobe*

***Taking Action: Moving from Theory to Practice*** invites you to celebrate your learning experience and concretely name next steps to bring concepts to life in your organizing practice. This section serves as a closing ritual for reflecting on the content in this toolkit. Adjourning is a necessary and vital part of the stages of group development. Rituals help us make sense of closing one chapter and intentionally reflecting upon the next one. Here you can share your key personal and political learnings from the toolkit.

*“Every goodbye ain’t gone.”*

– African-American proverb

" DANDELIONS



THE DANDELION FLOWER HEAD CAN CHANGE INTO A WHITE, GLOBULAR SEED HEAD OVERNIGHT. EACH SEED HAS A TINY PARACHUTE THAT ALLOWS IT TO SPREAD FAR + WIDE IN THE WIND. THE ENTIRE PLANT HAS MEDICINAL PROPERTIES, DANDELIONS ARE OFTEN MISTAKENLY IDENTIFIED AS WEEDS. AGGRESSIVELY REMOVED, BUT ARE HARD TO UPROOT; THE TOP IS PULLED BUT THE LONG TAPE ROOT REMAINS.  
RESILIENCE. RESISTANCE.  
REGENERATION. DECENTRALIZATION." ADRIENNE MARIE BROWN

# TRANSITION TO PRACTICE



MICHELLE SAYLES. com

# PERSONAL REFLECTION

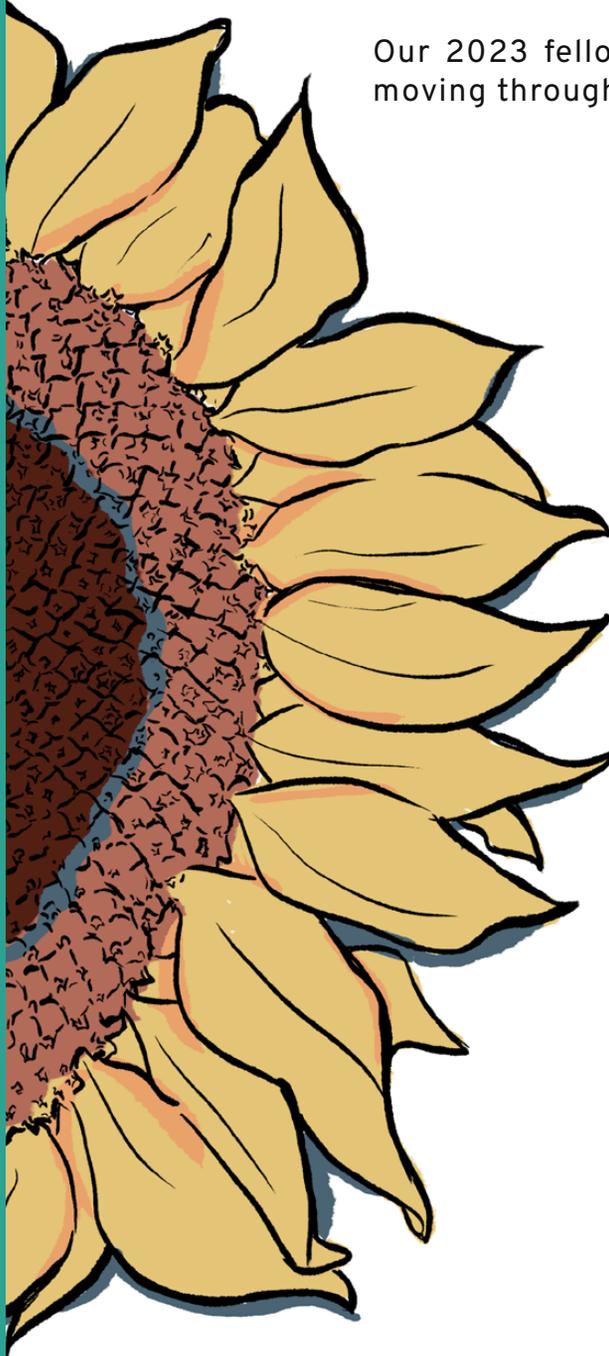


*Taking Action: Moving from Theory to Practice* is a reflection-based section for you to consider key learnings and next steps after participating in the previous toolkit sections.

- What learning has resonated most for you in this toolkit?
- What area do you plan to work on in the next three months? What is your next elegant step?

# 2023 FELLOWS' PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Our 2023 fellows shared the following **key takeaways** from their own experiences moving through the content presented in this toolkit:



Different contexts demonstrate **the common forces which connect diverse struggles** in unique places.



**Base building** enables conversations to establish organizing principles and approaches to local democratic engagement.



**Increasing participation** beyond those who already agree.



Focusing on **how to collectively build power** without complete ideological alignment. Trusting people to reach shared solutions regardless.



**Slowing down organizing efforts** to ensure adequate capacity to put ideas into practice.



**Mapping power** to understand all stakeholders involved in community issues.



**Learning governance structures** and context at the municipal level is key for grassroots experimentation and building power.



**Learning is horizontal** with opportunities to build skills collectively.



**Developing democratic, participatory agency** through institutions like cooperatives and assemblies. No amount of ideology can replace learning from tangible experience.



**Gathering people** through assemblies, especially populations excluded from power structures which can be politicized or just community-focused.

# 2023 FELLOWS' NEXT STEPS

Our fellows shared the following **next steps** as they continue building their municipalist frameworks:

**POLITICAL EDUCATION**

Planning **educational activities** to share learnings with local groups and put ideas into practice.

Continuing **political education** within existing groups and digging deeper into rebel cities, sovereignty, and related concepts.

Self-facilitating spaces for **study, skill-building, and strategic planning**.

Creating **learning opportunities** for those unfamiliar with municipalism to learn from these materials.

**CREATING PARTICIPATORY SPACES**

Building **participatory institutions** like people's assemblies and participatory budgeting processes.

**BASE-BUILDING**

Using momentum from **mass mobilizations** like Palestine solidarity to move people into local self-governance.

**Fostering connections** between regional organizers for continued learning and mutual support.

**DEVELOPING STRATEGY**

Developing **long-term municipal strategy** with local organizations, informed by power mapping.

**CHANGING MATERIAL CONDITIONS**

Building **local infrastructure** for food, land and housing sovereignty and survival programs.

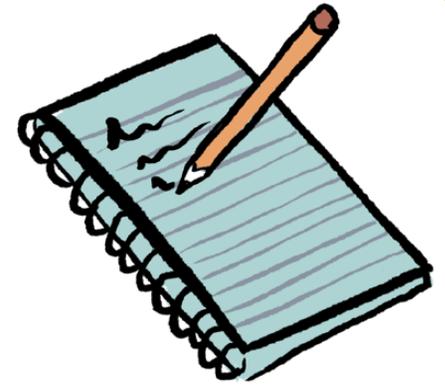
# GAUGE MY GROUP

On a scale of 1 to 5, assess your organizing project to see where you stand in the following areas of group development.



- Every member of the group has a clear idea of our shared vision and goals around which we have organized.
- We have taken a collective inventory of the resources, skills, and capacities of each member to understand how we fit together as a group.
- All members of our group have strong bonds of trust with one another.
- We have a clear and consistent process for making decisions that we could explain briefly to a new person.
- Pathways to participation are clear to current members and could be easily explained to a new person.
- Our group has an agreed-upon procedure for resolving tension, conflict, or harm between members that is regularly evaluated.

# A SAFE EXPERIMENT



After completing the Gauge My Group assessment, consider the ways that you can build your collective skills moving forward.

Reflect upon and sketch out a proposal for a safe experiment your group could take to become better organized.

# KENSINGTON CORRIDOR TRUST'S COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE



by Jasmin Velez, 2023 Fellow & Lead Community Organizer



Jasmin Velez,  
2023 Fellow

[Kensington Corridor Trust \(KCT\)](#) is a neighborhood trust working with residents and small business owners to spark new life on Kensington Avenue in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. But more importantly, it is building a model for collective ownership of real estate. **Through the trust model, residents and small businesses can actively shape and make decisions about what their neighborhood will look like.**

The Kensington Corridor Trust was founded in 2019 by a launch team of four organizations: Impact Services, Shift Capital, Idea Factory Lab, and Philadelphia Industrial Community Development Corporation. The goal of the four partners was to find solutions to address vacancies along the 1.4-mile corridor stretch on Kensington Avenue. Kensington - a neighborhood in lower northeast Philadelphia - once thrived with booming manufacturing and many locally owned small businesses. Today, the neighborhood has faced decades of disinvestment and experiences extremely high rates of property vacancy and crime.

Most recently, this area has been challenged by an opioid epidemic that has become integrated into the reputation of the neighborhood. Joseph Margulies initially introduced the idea of **neighborhood trusts** in a journal article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review ([Margulies, 2019](#)). This piece argues that community revitalization and development are far more impactful when the community leads and owns the neighborhood's assets. KCT has now adopted this resident- and business-led model, a change that was only possible through the transformation of the region's founding governance structure.

Institutional representatives of the founding partners formed the first KCT board. After its creation, it quickly became apparent that more community and local business voices needed to be included in shaping the Kensington Corridor Trust to ensure a community-owned and informed process. To achieve this, many of the original founding board members voluntarily ceded their seats to give more residents and business owners space to govern. This process did not happen overnight, and required a lot



Defining KCT's Neighborhood Trust Model  
 Graphic Recording by Haley McDevitt of [Illustrating Progress](#) (2021)

of difficult conversations. What came out of that process set the tone for future governance decisions. As the organization transitioned from fiscal sponsorship and officially formed as a hybrid 501(c)3 and Perpetual Purpose Trust, it was clear that any process moving forward for leadership and representation needed to model the lessons learned from those early years.

Formally shaping the Perpetual Purpose Trust involved a yearlong engagement process with community members. The group collectively learned to navigate legal jargon as well as the operating and legal structural concepts needed to establish KCT, producing a process that is accessible to community members today. To serve in this working group, folks had to live in Kensington or own and operate a small business in the neighborhood. Community members were interviewed to identify important themes that needed further exploration during community group conversations. These sessions included live illustrations of the conversations, which resulted in beautiful imagery that provided another way to share and navigate the work.

Decision-making protocols were designed, resulting in community deliberation and decisions around compensation, term lengths, and who would represent the community on the Perpetual Purpose Trust. This intentional and longer process made it a genuinely engaged and community-led experience that allowed for successful implementation. Open elections now occur every two years for nine seats, and community members can nominate themselves or others to serve on the Perpetual Purpose Trust and be part of the decision-making process around future investments, considerations around pathways to ownership, and more.

The legal formation of the Perpetual Purpose Trust, combined with the 501(c)3's board, has resulted in leadership representative of the community. This process is fundamental to the organization. Given how much disinvestment the community has faced and how little certain voices are heard within a large city such as Philadelphia, this alternative approach allows residents the space to advocate for what they want to see. They have the decision-making power over what businesses they want on the corridor, who to partner with, and, eventually, how profits can be reinvested to serve other neighborhood needs. This model creates space for local leadership to continue to emerge without overly relying on decisions from the outside looking in. The community has a strong voice and must be supported in amplifying it. The long-term goal is to continue seeing more resident engagement and involvement in the Trust and, beyond that, actively organizing and supporting policies that improve the neighborhood. If this can happen with the neighborhood trust model, the community is well-positioned to shape Kensington's future.



Kensington, Philadelphia (2020)  
Image Credit: [Luis Acosta Studio](#)

Our biggest lesson has been the importance of community involvement every step of the way. We wholeheartedly believe that if this model is ever replicated or scaled in another community, whether in Philadelphia or elsewhere, **the driving force should always be centered around the community's voices: no one knows their home better than they do.**

**COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION**  
**+ DEVELOPMENT**  
**ARE FAR MORE**  
**IMPACTFUL**  
**WHEN THE**  
**COMMUNITY**  
**OWNS** **LEADS +**  
**THE NEIGHBORHOOD'S**  
**ASSETS**



*Jasmin Velez is a dedicated community organizer and advocate with a strong focus on fostering equitable neighborhood development and environmental stewardship.*

# EVALUATION AND ITERATION IN LOS ANGELES

*A conversation with David Cobb and Yvonne Yen Liu*



David Cobb,  
Solidarity Research  
Center

*In this toolkit, we share a number of different organizing strategies, but how you might use them should be informed by your vision of a better city and by reading the social conditions in your terrain. This is an iterative process of posing a hypothesis for how we move from the current moment toward our vision. It involves selecting one or more strategies, and then evaluating and revising that strategy based on the outcome. In many ways, building power is like a research inquiry: it poses a theory, puts it into practice, and reviews the results.*

*Recently, Yvonne sat down with David Cobb, the co-founder of [Cooperation Humboldt](#) and the People's Network for Land and Liberation, to chat about how we can evaluate and iterate on our strategies. David is a board member of the [Solidarity Research Center](#), of which the Municipalism Learning Series is a project.*

*For context, this piece is being shared at a reflection point for the project to build a municipalist movement in Los Angeles. [Los Angeles for All](#) has been facilitating People's Movement Assemblies for the past three years, bringing together Angelenos across race, class, neighborhood, and movements to create an*

*alternative polity and economy. The organizers feel that this effort has stalled. Yvonne reflected that, "Our movement is not growing in size, and, subjectively, we are not shifting hearts and minds. We are also not changing material conditions for people." The situation in Los Angeles informed this conversation.*

**Yvonne:** The Municipalism Cohort Fellowship walked our fellows through the creation of a strategic plan to build power in their place. First, we started with visioning the world that you want to build. Then, we went into an assessment of current social conditions - what is the world right now. After doing the assessment, we discussed how to build a democratic and empowered base. Then, you carry out an experiment to realize your vision based on your assessment of current conditions and the strategy needed to shift things. This is followed by evaluation and iteration.

The last step, evaluation and iteration, is really hard. It's also really humbling because it's an opportunity to say to yourself, I fucked up, I wasted a lot of energy and time.



Yvonne Yen Liu,  
2023 MLS Fellowship  
Facilitator

**David:** I would encourage you to not say that you fucked up or that you wasted time and energy, because you learned things from it. I think this is subtle, but a really important point: we all make mistakes. And we will keep making them. The point is to try to learn from them. You made rational decisions based on your judgment call, and assessed and made the best decision at the time. But then you learn and you see things differently, which is an important part of the process.

**Yvonne:** I have been having conversations with organizers here in Los Angeles and telling them that, quite frankly, our project hit a wall. Los Angeles for All and the People's Movement Assembly hit a wall.

**David:** Let's dive in there because I agree with you...I would have predicted that you all were going to hit a wall because you didn't actually have a program that you were implementing. When I talk about the People's Network for Land and Liberation, for example, I can talk about decommodifying land, building worker cooperatives, doing art and culture, doing political education, and building the community production center. That's a program. We're trying our best and learning a lot along the way. But this is our experiment, our program. I never saw from observing Los Angeles that there was clarity around what the experiment or the program was.

**Yvonne:** From my perspective, I didn't know what the program was. I was trying to figure it out and invited a lot of people to try to figure it out together. But nobody has a clue. We've been meeting for three years and people are still asking fundamental questions about what the purpose of a people's movement assembly is. I think the goal of building power is big and amorphous to most folks.

**David:** It is conceptual. People are not fighting for abstract ideas. I operate with that as a conviction.

**Yvonne:** We never figured out how we are sheltering and feeding people and making sure that they're not being criminalized nor incarcerated. We have people that do that work that were part of our journey, but it wasn't something we did together as a group. The two things that I am reflecting on are: 1) political clarity, and 2) addressing material conditions and people's basic needs. Both inform how we think about our strategy. I don't think it changes our vision, but it changes our strategy.

**David:** 100% agree with you. To me, what I was calling a program and you're calling political clarity: it's the same basic concept.



*Los Angeles People's Movement Assembly Strategy Retreat (2024)  
Image Credit: Los Angeles for All*



Cooperation Los Angeles event (2023)  
Image Credit: Los Angeles for All

**Yvonne:** Going deeper into evaluation and iteration: how do you evaluate your strategy?

**David:** I don't think like a researcher. What I do ask myself is: what did I think was going to happen? I put something into practice, then I ask myself: did that happen? And almost always, the answer is no, not the way I thought it was going to. Then I ask: was my theory, program, or practice wrong? The answer is almost always: all of the above. This is why it's an art and not a science.

For example, when I look at Cooperation Humboldt which is now moribund, I think that I did not bring people to a level of Marxist consciousness. I took people who were basically progressives and liberals, and made them go through a study group cohort. They learned to speak some of the language but they never developed revolutionary consciousness.

I learned a lesson from that experience: the importance of constantly being clear. We are talking about restructuring the entire society. We can only say that we have won when you can genuinely say that we've restructured social relationships. You can't short circuit political education. If you are going to be a revolutionary, then you have to embrace studying. If you say you're a revolutionary, then I will ask you: what are you reading? What's taking your imagination space right now? **Political education has to be an ever ongoing process for all of us, not just the people we're bringing into the movement.**

**Yvonne:** Political education is something that we did a lot with Los Angeles for All. Whether it landed or not is another question. Whether it was linked to a program to change material conditions: it was not. The left, in general, doesn't put our strategies and theories of change through the wringer. There isn't a lot of evaluation and iteration.

There is a strategy that was created 200 years ago that people doggedly believe in, despite truth or reality telling them that they're wrong.

**David:** The ability to continually question our theory and our effectiveness of practice is something that is easy to say and hard to do. We all come with our assumptions, which are often unexamined. Being willing to examine those assumptions and have the intellectual and personal humility to acknowledge what the data tells us – that is the discipline of what we call the constructive critique and self-critique.

**Yvonne:** The other side of political education is having a group of people that you can build with. It's hard to build when someone is not on the same page as you. However, I don't personally feel like it's my place to tell someone: you should think the way that I do.

**David:** I agree with that. In my culture and my language, when I talk about the struggle for clarity, what I mean is understanding what your theory is, what your practice is, where you're coming from, and what your politics are. I don't want to convince you one way or the other: I want to know how I can best understand you. I want you to understand where I'm coming from too, so we can relate to each other.

My bedrock conviction is the concept of class struggle. How many people have we brought into consciousness to understand what class struggle is? That is something we don't do. We can objectively measure how many worker owners there are, or how many community land trusts exist and how many people they house.



*Los Angeles Rising Picnic sponsored by Los Angeles for All & the Los Angeles Anarchist Bookfair (2023)  
Image Credit: Los Angeles for All*

I'm really interested in asking: how many people understand that class isn't just socioeconomic, but also who owns the means of production? You need a couple of other folks who are in this struggle with you in a consistent way. Otherwise, you're going to end up frustrated quickly.



*Yvonne Yen Liu (she/her) is the Co-Founder of Solidarity Research Center. She is a Research Fellow at the Transnational Institute and is based in Los Angeles, California. She is a practitioner of research justice with over 20 years of being a nerd for social movements.*

*David Cobb (he/him) is a "people's lawyer" who has sued corporate polluters, lobbied elected officials, run for political office himself, and been arrested for non-violent civil disobedience. He believes we can- and must - provoke and win a peaceful revolution if we are to survive.*

# PEOPLE

## We appreciate our toolkit sponsors:

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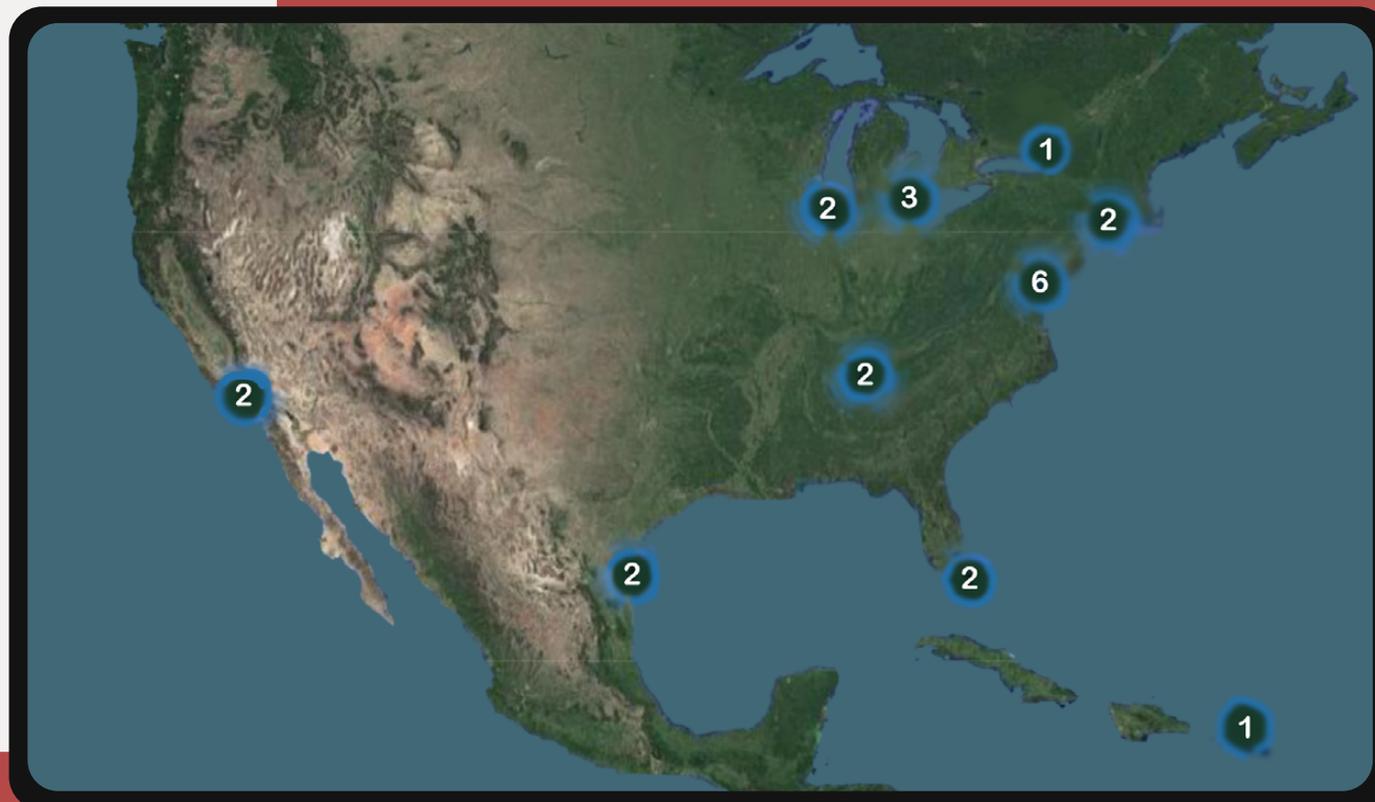
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*Photo grid of the 2023 Municipalism Cohort Fellows.*



*Bottom right: Geographic distribution of fellows across North America.*

# PEOPLE

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### Guest speakers:

- Denzel Caldwell, [Black Nashville Assembly](#)
- Kali Akuno, [Cooperation Jackson](#)
- Kate Shea Baird, [Barcelona en Comú](#)

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Photo grid of  
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organizers.

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# MUNICIPALIST INSPIRATIONS

Here is an expanded list of movements and traditions around the world that inspire us as municipalists. See [Global Municipalist Inspirations](#) for concepts and geography. This list is by no means exhaustive!

## Africa

- [Abahlali BaseMjondolo](#) (South Africa)
- [Grassroots Economics](#) (Kenya)
- [Ottosdal](#) (South Africa)
- [Reclaim the City](#) (Capetown, South Africa)
- [The Mandela Park Backyarders](#) (South Africa)

## Asia

- [ASSEFA](#) (India)
- [Demosistō](#) (Hong Kong, China)
- [Ecological Agriculture Development Association](#) (China)
- [Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal \(FECOFUN\)](#) (Nepal)
- [Gram Panchayat](#) (India)
- [People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning](#) (Kerala, India)
- [vTaiwan](#) (Taiwan)
- [Zone One Tondo Organization \(ZOTO\)](#) (Philippines)

## Europe

- [Barcelona en Comú](#) (Barcelona, Spain)
- [Commercy](#) (Commercy, France)
- [Decide Madrid](#) (Madrid, Spain)
- [Don't let Belgrade d\(r\)own!](#) (Belgrade, Serbia)
- [Expropriation of Landlords' Movement Berlin](#) (Berlin, Germany)

- [La PAH \(Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca\)](#) (Spain)
- [Self-Organized Housing Syndicate](#) (Germany)
- [X-Net](#) (Barcelona, Spain)
- [Zagreb is Ours](#) (Zagreb, Croatia)

## Latin America

- [Acapatzingo Housing Community](#) (Mexico)
- [Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca](#) (Colombia)
- [Ciudad Futura](#) (Rosario, Argentina)
- [Consejos Comunales](#) (Venezuela)
- [Cooperativa Central de Servicios Sociales del Estado Lara](#) (Venezuela)
- [Black Communities Process in Palenque, Alto Cauca, Palenques and Quilombos](#) (Colombia/Brazil)
- [La Victoria](#) (Santiago de Chile)
- [Local autonomous governments \(LGAL\), Zapatista autonomous government collectives \(CGAZ\)](#)
- [MAREZ in Oaxaca](#) and/or [La Asamblea](#) (Oaxaca, Mexico)
- [Movimiento de Pobladores en Lucha \(MPL\)](#) (Santiago, Chile)
- [Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra \(MST\)](#) (Brazil)
- [Nossa BH](#) (Belo Horizonte, Brazil)
- [Social Convergence](#) (Chile)
- [Venezuelan Communes](#) (Venezuela)
- [Xingu Indigenous Territory](#) (Brazil)
- [Zapatistas - Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional](#) (Southwestern Mexico/Chiapas)

# MUNICIPALIST INSPIRATIONS

## SWANA

- [Beirut Madinati](#) (Lebanon)
- [Masha'a](#) (Palestine)
- [Rojava - Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria](#) (Northeastern Syria)
- [Peoples' Democratic Party \(HDP\)](#) (Ankara, Türkiye)
- [Tajmâat](#) (Kabylia, Algeria)

## Turtle Island (North America)

- [Black Freedmen's Towns](#) (The US South, notably Texas)
- [Black Nashville Assembly](#) (Nashville, TN)
- [Black Panther Party](#) (Oakland, CA)
- [Cahokia](#) (present day Illinois)
- [Cooperation Humboldt](#) (Humboldt, CA)
- [Cooperation Jackson](#) (Jackson, MS)
- [Creek and Seminole federations](#)
- [Detroit People's Platform](#) (Detroit, MI)
- [Dishgamu Humboldt](#) (Humboldt, CA)
- [Downtown Crenshaw](#) (Los Angeles, CA)
- [Haudenosaunee Confederacy](#) (Great Lakes region)
- [Los Angeles for All](#) (Los Angeles, CA)
- [Navajo Nation Chapters](#) (Dinéétah)
- [Occupy Wall Street](#) (New York, NY)
- [Post-colonial maroon communities, Fort Mose and the Great Dismal Swamp](#)



*Preparations for a Palestine Liberation rally from Detroit, MI.  
Image Credit: Ali Gali*

- [Portland Assembly](#) (Portland, OR)
- [Richmond Progressive Alliance](#) (Richmond, CA)
- [Seattle People's Party](#) (Seattle, WA)
- [Vancouver For All](#) (Vancouver, Canada)
- [Young Lords](#) (Chicago, IL)

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### Mapping Local Power

#### Power Mapping from Above:

- [Corporate Research Project](#)
- [Follow the Money](#) by [OpenSecrets.org](#)
- [Map the Power](#) by [LittleSis.org](#)
- [MuckRock](#)
- [Story-based Strategy 101](#) by Center for Story-Based Strategy – good for mapping hegemonic power
- [Strategic Corporate Research](#) by Tom Juravich
- [The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project](#)
  - [Evictor Book](#)
  - [How to Look Up Your Landlord](#)
- [Watch the Watchers](#) by Stop LAPD Spying Coalition

#### Power Mapping from Below:

- [Dual Power Map](#) by Black Socialists in America
- [Global Tapestry of Alternatives](#) by AltMap
- [Mapping Community Ecosystems of Collective Care Toolkit](#) by Interrupting Criminalization
- [Mapping the Workplace in Organizing 101 Training](#) by the Industrial Workers of the World
- [Movement Ecology Map](#) by the Ayni Institute
- [Movement Ecology Pie Chart](#) by Ayni Institute – good for mapping constituent power and thinking about a diversity of tactics and movement choreography
- [Map Your Workplace and its Leaders](#) by Labor Notes
- [Social Solidarity Economy Maps](#) by [socioeco.org](#) – good for the mapping alternatives and dual power
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- [The Social Change Ecosystem Map](#) by Deepa Iyer

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# RESOURCES

## Other resources

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- [Black Socialists in America - Glossary of Socialist Terms](#)
- [Black Socialists in America - Resource Guide](#)
- [Economics for Emancipation](#)
- [Fearless Cities Network Map](#)
- [Mutual Aid & Self & Community Care Resources](#)
- [Participatory Budgeting Project - Resource Library](#)
- [Remember the Future, a podcast by ART.COOP](#)
- [Solidarity Economics 101 Resource Index](#)
- [Solidarity Economy for Artists](#)
- [Solidarity Economy Map & Directory](#)



*Indignados demonstrating against austerity policies during the 15-M movement protests in Spain (2011).  
Image Credit: Michelle Sayles*



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