

FROM THE BASE

REVOLUTIONARY LEFT COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN THE U.S.

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1. ABSTRACT

This paper studies the growth of a new model of community organizing that I will call revolutionary Left community organizing.¹ The study looks at what the main tenants of this new model of organizing are; what historical organizing traditions and models it has evolved out of or drawn from; and what this new model's implications are for building a strong Left political movement rooted in working class communities of color in the United States.

The research for this study draws from a thorough review of the academic work in the field of community organizing, a historical survey of community organizing in the United States, and a series of in-depth interviews with lead organizers who are pioneering this new organizing model. The paper examines the growth of a number of leading organizations in the field, studying their influences, their contributions to a national and international Left movement, and their impacts on both their membership and the political economy of their regions.

2. TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Abstract

2. Table of Contents

3. Introduction

4. Central Tenants of Revolutionary Left Community Organizing

- 4.1. Sharp understanding of the political economy
- 4.2. A strong membership base of working class people of color
- 4.3. Rooted in Left ideology
- 4.4. Political education and leadership development
- 4.5. A strong organization to contest for power
- 4.6. Militancy
- 4.7. Meticulous organizing methodology
- 4.8. Reforms toward revolution

5. Anti-Imperialism and Third World Marxism

- 5.1. Lenin's Imperialism
- 5.2. The Revolutionary Subject — The Class to Which the Future Belongs
- 5.3. Marx's Theory of Primitive Accumulation
- 5.4. National Oppression and Self-Determination
- 5.5. What is Third World Marxism?
- 5.6. Mass Line
- 5.7. Leadership and Revolutionary Democracy

6. Historical Traditions and Influences

- 6.1. Early Industrial Unionism
- 6.2. Unemployed Councils of the 1930s and Communist Organizing
- 6.3. Alinsky and Populist Community Organizing
- 6.4. The New Left
- 6.5. Third World National Liberation Movements

7. Strategic Implications for Building the Left

7.1. The Current Stage of History

- 7.1.1. Neoliberalism, Neocolonialism, & Imperial Aggression in the Third World
- 7.1.2. Imperialism & the Underdevelopment of Oppressed Nations in the First World
- 7.1.3. The Growing Power of the Right

7.2. What the Left Needs and What This New Organizing Model Provides

- 7.2.1. A Mass Base
- 7.2.2. A Material Assessment
- 7.2.3. A Strategy
- 7.2.4. Working Class Immigrant & Oppressed Nationality Leadership
- 7.2.5. A Feminist Praxis
- 7.2.6. An International Movement

7.3. Current Failings

- 7.3.1. Lacking the Numbers
- 7.3.2. Reliance on the Non-Profit Structure
- 7.3.3. Lacking the Resources
- 7.3.4. Lacking the Development

8. Conclusion

- 8.1. Our Historical Memory: Learning from the Past, Looking Towards the Future

9. Cited Works

3. INTRODUCTION

Community organizing is the act of bringing together a sector of society or a neighborhood to fight for change. In short, it is about a struggle for power by people who ordinarily hold little formal power (Staples xiii). This paper traces the emergence, not of the practice of community organizing in general, but of a specific model of community based organizing; that of contemporary revolutionary Left community organizing. It is important to make this distinction, because there are many community organizing models that differ from each other in practice, politics and ideology.

Community organizing is by no means inherently radical, revolutionary, or even ideologically “Leftist”. Community organizing has been used to build power for both the Left and the Right. It has been used for revolutionary purposes and for reactionary purposes alike. Community organizing has as much potential to build radical consciousness and fight for progressive social change as it does to maintain the status quo and further the entrenchment of oppressive institutions. The form that it takes largely depends on the type of conditions the community faces, its class and racial makeup, the motives and politics of the organizers, and the national and international political-economic situation at the time. As Robert Fisher points out in his book *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America*, communities are groups “whose values, goals, and activities are not inherent but rather mirror the class and racial conflicts of the larger system” (xxii). Community organizations based in rich communities most often express the conservative and protective interests of those people. Hence in these communities you often see neighborhood police watches and other methods of protecting real estate value and property. This is largely because it is in their class interests to do so.

Working class communities, and more acutely working class communities of color, facing problems of unemployment, lack of affordable housing, police violence, and deportation have little to gain from using community organizations as a vehicle to maintain the status quo, as they are not benefiting from the existing power structure. It is generally in their material interest to fight for progressive change. It is because of this material interest that historically many Leftists have maintained that revolutionary movements must be rooted in the working class, because their class position demands social change. This doesn't mean that working class communities are by

nature progressive. There are many reactionary tendencies that express themselves among the American working class, (such as varying levels of patriotism, individualism, distrust of politics, and frequent anti-radicalism), and thus just like any other social grouping, they should not be romanticized.

The model of community organizing whose major tenants, historical roots, and strategic implications are addressed in this paper is that of today's revolutionary Left community organizing. This is a very specific tendency, though it is not the only form of Left community organizing being carried out today, and these are not the only organizations engaged in it. None-the-less, for the sake of specificity and depth we will look at this specific model, in part, through the work of a handful of organizations: POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights) in San Francisco, California; Just Cause Oakland in Oakland, California; The Labor/Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles; St Peters Housing Committee in San Francisco's Mission district; and the Miami Workers Center in Florida. This model sees community organizing as a strategic way to build the power and radical consciousness of working class communities. They aim to do this by building independent fighting organizations within oppressed communities that, through winning strategic campaigns, raise people's hopes in the possibilities of change and better the material conditions of oppressed people's lives. They simultaneously develop the organizing skills, political analysis, and experience of members so that they can fight for their own liberation.

4. CENTRAL TENANTS OF REVOLUTIONARY LEFT COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

4.1 SHARP UNDERSTANDING OF THE GLOBAL & REGIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

Contemporary Left Community Organizing prioritizes the development of a sharp understanding of the political economy and the role of different forces within it. Utilizing a materialist understanding of the world and social change Left community organizers believe that fundamental power shifts happen in society when a specific historic moment comes about. That is, when the material conditions create the opportunities for change and when the social groups in whose interests it is to make that change are prepared to carry it out and overcome their opponents. As POWER's Amandala Project states, "the window of opportunity to make change opens and closes over time. Not all moments are like every other moment. In order to make change we must be able to assess when the window of opportunity is more open, and we prepare ourselves to jump through the window when the opportunity presents itself" (16-17).

POWER has taken a leading role in developing this understanding of the need for organizers to build assessments of the political economy. After a lengthy study of US-led imperialism, and its relationship to the political economy of San Francisco, a wing of the organization named the Amandala Project wrote a book called, *Towards Land, Work, and Power: Charting a Path of Resistance to US-Led Imperialism*. In it they state:

A lot rides on the skill of the organizer. However, the organizer needs more than just skills if she hopes to contribute to the building of a larger movement. Skills alone are not enough. An effective organizer must also have a sharp analysis of how power operates and of how change might happen within a particular system. We call those organizers who combine skill and analysis 'conscious organizers'. (14)

As they state, developing this sharp material analysis enables the organization to understand the terrain they are operating on and to make strategic assessments of when to take up specific fights in specific areas. It enables the organization to also

understand how different power groups will relate to the organization and its campaigns with respect to their interests and priorities.

Most organizers in this tendency find it especially pertinent to have a thorough analytical understanding of the systems of capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and the State. Understanding how each of these systems came into being, and how they operate, provide the organizer with the analytical capabilities to contextualize working class people's daily struggles for survival into a systemic understanding of power. Such an understanding is important in helping organizers to determine where to begin discussions about what strategic interventions have the potential to fundamentally alter power relations.

This model also prioritizes thoroughly understanding the political economy on a regional and local level. Amandala Project organizers point out,

All of us are working, living and struggling within the context of globalized capitalism... But as organizers, we are also rooted in a particular community which has its own unique history and dynamics... Although each local community is closely connected to the same global political economy, each city plays a unique role to keep the system going. Imperialism has a geography. Different cities and regions fit together in the world economy like pieces in a puzzle... It would be really difficult to make sense of each of these economies taken by themselves...

For POWER and our work here in San Francisco, having an understanding of how our city and the Bay Area relate to the global context is an important grounding to our work... U.S.-led imperialism exists and impacts people throughout the world, but we all live it and fight it in its specific and local embodiments. By better understanding the context of our experience and community and how they are impacted and shaped by imperialism, we are in a better position to bring about change. (81-82)

Understanding what role within the political economy a specific locality plays partially enables the organizer to be what POWER calls a "skillful tactician". By understanding how local power structures function, developing a clear picture of the balance of

forces, and assessing the role working class communities of color play, can inform the organizer about what strategic leverage they have to apply in campaign fights. In the long term, understanding the role of a specific region in the global political economy enables organizers to make assessments about what the broad strategic implications are of building a local power-base for working class people of color.

For example, POWER organizers have come to understand San Francisco as a “command post” in the world economy, largely because of its dominance in the area of technology. They see a crisis of economic stagnation currently plaguing the global system of US-led imperialism, which is also threatening the ruling elite of San Francisco. In response to this crisis SF’s ruling elite has crafted an agenda for how the city can be transformed to enable profit growth during a period of overall economic decline. This agenda of urban development threatens to eliminate the working class communities of color in the city. Understanding San Francisco’s role in the global economy has enabled POWER organizers to gain a complex understanding of the agenda of the local ruling class, and pin-point how exactly they are carrying out this removal; in this case through a dual strategy of state actions and market forces (Amandala Project 83). Understanding this strategy and how it is being carried out enables POWER to make strategic interventions to defend their members’ communities. They do this, for example, by taking up campaigns such as their current fight to halt the passage of a city redevelopment zone in Hunter’s Point, one of the last remaining working class African American neighborhoods in San Francisco. Organizers and neighborhood residents fear that the city will fund a redevelopment zone that would create the conditions for further economic displacement in a city that has already lost 30% of its African American population over the last 10 years.

4.2 BUILDING A STRONG MEMBERSHIP BASE OF WORKING CLASS PEOPLE OF COLOR

In order to solve the problems working class communities are facing, oppressed people need to gain a level of control over the material aspects of their daily lives. This is fundamentally the role of the community organization. As veteran organizer Lee Staples points out, “Those who struggle to gain more control over their lives need to generate as much power as possible. Their strength lies in their numbers and ability to take collective action” (1). There are three different forms of power groups can

wield to defend their interests. One is monetary, the second is electoral, and the third is “People’s Power”. An organization is as strong as its membership, and must grow in order to be able to wield the kind of power necessary to secure gains in the material conditions of working class people’s lives.

A strong tenant of Left community organizing is that in order to build local power for working class communities, the organization must be a base-building organization. By base-building, organizers are referring to building the numerical base of the organization. The vast majority of Left community organizing projects are membership-based organizations where individuals join as active members and normally pay some sort of regular dues. This structure helps people feel a sense of ownership and responsibility to the maintenance, growth, and ultimately victory of the organization—deepening people’s commitment.

Concretely, the base-building work is done through what organizers call “contact work”, which is any type of activity that brings the organizer into direct contact with the base—normally through some form of outreach. Often times contact work takes the form of door knocking campaigns, house meetings, doing outreach on buses, at peoples’ place of employment, or at social service centers. For example, Just Cause Oakland recently led a fight against the construction of a Wal-Mart that members assessed would have a devastating impact on the local economy and would create the kind of exploitative jobs that people are forced to take out of economic desperation. In the previous year voters in the city had passed an anti-big-box ordinance that banned stores like Wal-Mart from setting up shop. The Wal-Mart developers had found a loophole in the law, and started construction on leased Port of Oakland land, inside the city limits but not technically under city jurisdiction. Just Cause organizers spent months going door-to-door talking to neighborhood residents about the incoming super-store, and recruiting members to participate in the campaign, which lead up to a community town hall condemning the actions of the developers and pressuring them for a community benefits agreement.

Some Left community organizations actually provide social services in-house as a mechanism to both meet people’s material needs and providing a concrete avenue for people to enter the organizing work. The Black Panther Party, in the 60s and 70s, dubbed such programs “Survival Pending Revolution”. For example St Peter’s Housing Committee does tenant and immigrant rights organizing with Latino residents of

San Francisco's Mission district. They provide ongoing tenant rights clinics and case management helping residents file legal complaints against abusive landlords, fight evictions, do lead abatement, and defend themselves in front of the rent board. These services are vital to family's ability to remain in the city. They build in their members a high degree of trust and loyalty to the organization as well as enabling them to get involved in the organization's broader fights for immigrant rights.

The membership is the foundation of any community organization and much of the time and resources of the organization end up going towards building the membership and deepening existing members' involvement in the movement.

4.3. ROOTED IN LEFT IDEOLOGY

One of the most central and unique aspects of this model of organizing is that it is explicitly ideological. Most modern progressive organizing models adopt a fairly populist approach² and are most often aligned with the highly influential organizing model established by Saul Alinsky. Alinsky's model argues for community organizations to be non-ideological, and focused on an ultra-pragmatism that aims to bring together the broadest possible formation of community members and leaders to win small material victories (Boyte 50). It cautions against taking up issues seen as divisive. As Robert Fisher points out, "Most neo-Alinskyites... avoided politically divisive issues related to class, racism, sexism, and nativism, and saw a program of conscious political education around an anti-capitalist vision as more of a hindrance than a help" (155).³

Revolutionary Left community organizing departs from this position; advocating the need to build community organizations which are explicitly Left and that can weigh in on the battle of ideas within society, putting out counter-hegemonic politics and demands. The Miami Workers Center—a Florida-based organization that organizes around welfare reform, affordable housing, tenants and voter rights—sees counter-hegemonic media work as "tilling the soil", providing what they call an "air war" to clear the way for the "ground troops" (their contact work on the ground). Through this "air war" strategy, they engage in the media putting out Left analysis and vision that counters the hegemonic capitalist discourse, thus laying some of the groundwork for their organizers to build a membership base around material reform fights. As Robert

Fisher points out, “...in poor and working class neighborhoods, people get involved to defend their neighborhood, and participation usually produces increased frustration and anger. But what becomes the object of the group’s anger depends on its politics, ideology, and the extent of political education around issues of class, race, and gender” (155). Many less ideologically based organizations that start out waging progressive campaigns, over time, shift rightward, and often even take on a racist position in relation to economic troubles within the community.

Left community organizations have an ideological framework that is flexible and changes over time based on changing conditions, but provides organizers with an analytical tool to understand society and how oppressed people can intervene to change it. Organizers have a maximum program that understands capitalism⁴, imperialism⁵, white supremacy⁶, and patriarchy⁷ to be the key contradictions that need to be shifted in order to move towards a just society. This world-view necessitates a protracted struggle to overthrow the current power structure and build a new society.

This world-view also necessitates that organizers root their organizing amongst those communities in whose material interests it is to change society (STORM 53). They advocate the importance of working class people of color’s leadership, and specifically prioritizing the leadership of working class women of color — what some call “Sisters at the Center”. The importance that Left community organizations place on working class, and specifically working class people of color, is based on their analysis that given the material interests of the different social classes this is the social class that is most invested in overthrowing capitalist society and establishing a classless society. As Adam Gold, co-director of Just Cause Oakland, puts it,

In whose interests is it to fight in the first place? It’s in poor people’s interest to change the situation, but it’s not in middle class and rich people’s interests. So if you’re interested in changing the way society works, then you have to think about whose interests its in to change it. And I think within the US, working class communities of color are the ones who stand the most to gain from changing things. They actually have an interest in fighting. The communities we organize are going to fight all the way because they are going to be better off when things change.

Being rooted in Left ideology, while avoiding the pitfalls of dogmatism and sectari-

anism, allow community organizations to develop long-term strategy that can help guide them from today's world of rampant inequality toward their visions of a free society. Without ideology and vision there would be no guiding light helping them to contextualize oppressed people's daily struggles within an understanding of power and how to overcome it.

4.4. POLITICAL EDUCATION & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Political education and leadership development with members is of primary importance to Left community organizers. The long-term goal is not simply to win reforms to slowly shift conditions in oppressed communities. The goal is to bring people into a lifelong struggle for full liberation. In order to do this, Left organizers work to develop peoples' consciousness along the lines of race, class, and gender—in order for them to more fully contextualize their place in the struggle. The Labor/Community Strategy Center in LA talks about this as the “role of the conscious organizer.” They say, “the organizer at the Strategy Center cultivates her base by contextualizing the experiences of oppressed people in an analysis that recognizes that the vast majority of people's sufferings are systemic manifestations of U.S.-led imperialism. Therefore, paramount to our base building is the political education of oppressed people” (7). One of the ways organizers at the Strategy Center carry out this work is through the building of one of their mass organizations called the Bus Riders Union. The Bus Riders Union (BRU) fights the transit racism reflected in the policies of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). In doing outreach on the buses of L.A., BRU organizers contextualize people's daily experience of oppression into a coherent anti-imperialist vision and strategy. This is done through taking the daily problems that people are facing, talking about their origins within a global system of economic and political inequality; talking about the common cause this gives them with other oppressed people; and welcoming them to join together with a working class organization that can help fight against this inequality in material ways.

Along with consciousness, Left community organizations prioritize helping people develop the analytical abilities necessary to understand the world and how to intervene in it to make change. And since in this model, it is the people themselves that carry out that change, they need to develop their organizing skills. Fisher contends,

Political education must be an integral part of neighborhood organizing... [it] should help people develop the confidence necessary to rely on themselves, win the personal dignity and self-respect basic to participation, and challenge existing authority when necessary. It... must also reveal the roots of people's problems in the workings of the economic and political system... The role of political education, which is an analysis that grows out of people's political experience, is to broaden people's perspective and to give them more information on which they can make more reasoned assessments of the conditions, problems, and alternative solutions they face. (227)

Most Left community organizations have political education and leadership development programs built into their organizational structures. POWER has a wing of the organization called POWER University, and Just Cause Oakland has a wing called AS-SATA (Assata Shakur School of Analysis Theory and Action)—both of which conduct regular classes in both political analysis and organizing skills to help advance their membership's ability to engage in broad social justice organizing. Most organizations also see campaign work as the practical school in which people learn those skills. As Dawn Phillips, organizing director at Just Cause Oakland related in an interview,

Building skills relates a lot to the campaign work. Its really building the skills for people to be able to know, for example, how you take on the state; how do you take on a big private developer; or how do you take on corporate interests. Those come down to very specific things, whether its knowing how to testify at city council meetings; knowing how to do an action; knowing how to talk to the media; or knowing how to talk to your neighbors, even, about what you're doing and why you're doing it. For me its part of that skill development that provides people with the ability to advance what they want to see changed.

Political education and leadership development are one of the most central elements of Left community organizing. Prioritizing this area of work sets this model apart from many other models of organizing. For the revolutionary Left, political education and experience in struggle is really the context through which members become leaders, and a though this development, a revolutionary movement is built from the ground up.

4.5. CONTEST FOR POWER

Left community organizers develop organizations in order to build the power of working class people to determine the future of their communities. Organizers see building working class fighting organizations as one of the only ways that oppressed people can fundamentally alter their conditions. Left organizers hold strong to the notion that power and fundamental change grow from organization. It is only through organization that people under attack can gain any kind of leverage and strength. Poor people don't have the financial ability to hire teams of lobbyists to push through their agendas on Capital Hill, and even if they did, their interests are in such clear opposition to those who are running this country that their needs would still not be met. For example, no matter how many lobbyists poor people had, or how good their media strategy was, the ruling class would never turn over all the urban housing stock to being tenant owned and controlled. It would be too fundamental of a threat to their power. Therefore Left organizers see their responsibility as building strong enough organizations that eventually they can go head to head with the ruling class and compete for power. As Willie Baptist, Education Director at the Kensington Welfare Rights Union said, "The fight, as we see it, is not a fight for pity, it's necessarily a fight for power... Unless we can generate the necessary kind of strength, through organization and building a movement, there's nothing in the history of this country that suggests that we can rearrange the priorities of this nation" (2).

These community organizations become the voice through which working class people weigh-in on, and attempt to fundamentally shift the conditions of their communities. They become the backbone of working class people's struggles for dignity and justice. In his classic book on community organizing, *Reveille for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky wrote,

The power of the people is transmitted through the gears of their own organizations... By their own organizations, we mean those organizations in which they participate, which they own, and through which they express their interests, hopes, sentiments, and dreams. These are the organizations that are genuinely of the people, by the people, and for the people—organizations that by their very character formulate and articulate a dynamic democratic philosophy. (53)

The establishment of community organizations as alternative institutions through which working class people build and exercise their power is a fundamental act in the process of shifting inequality on a world scale. Without these organizations—these vehicles for change—oppressed people would be left to ineffectually beg for crumbs from the bread that they baked.

4.6. MILITANCY

The American Heritage Dictionary defines militancy as: “Having a combative character; aggressive, especially in the service of a cause.” Organizing in a militant fashion is considered by most Left community organizers to be an essential element. Confrontation, militancy and direct action have a number of results that organizers see as key. As Adam Gold, from Just Cause Oakland said in an interview,

We believe in fighting to win. The actual act of fighting does a number of important things. We engage in campaigns both to build people’s understanding and consciousness around what it means to fight; why we need to fight; what you can get out of fighting; and who the real enemy is. These are things that you can’t really learn in a classroom. As many workshops as you go through, you will never really understand it until you’re staring a CEO, or the Mayor, or whoever your target is, right in the face, confronting that power and getting results from it.

This approach to organizing often initiates a process of radicalization amongst the organization, by having people go up directly against their targets. As well as giving people a sense of their own power over their lives. One of the means by which organizers often assess potential campaigns is around whether or not it will emphasize direct action and confrontation with a target. Often campaigns that don’t emphasize militancy, confrontation, and direct action can rely too heavily on the use of lawyers and other experts to produce reforms. While using the services of these experts is sometimes necessary, an over-reliance on them can limit both the effectiveness of the fight and the development of the base of the organization. As Lee Staples relates in *Roots to Power: A Manual for Grassroots Organizing*, “ The best victories will be those achieved through direct action on the part of large numbers of people. Campaigns

featuring a high level of direct action enable leaders and members to experience their own collective power. The organizational lesson is, “We won because lots of us stuck together and fought like hell” (65).

Left organizers maintain that people develop their skills and consciousness through struggle. As Rosa Luxemburg pointed out in her classic essay, “The Mass Strike”, “...in order to be able to overthrow [the system], the proletariat is required a high degree of political education, of class consciousness and organization. All these conditions cannot be fulfilled by pamphlets and leaflets, but only by the living political school, by the fight and in the fight, in the continuous course of revolution” (182).

4.7. METICULOUS ORGANIZING METHODOLOGY

Different organizations within the emerging model of contemporary Left community organizing have different organizing methods, though they have commonalities. One of the clearest shared approaches is the use of a meticulous organizing methodology. By this I mean that the method used to find, recruit, develop, engage, and retain members—and the method used to wage campaigns—is very specific, deep, and intentional. Basic methods range from meticulous door knocking, member visits and house meetings, like Just Cause Oakland; to intensive daily service provision like St Peters Housing Committee; to recruitment and agitation on the buses like the Bus Riders Union; amongst many others that the organizations use to bring new people into the struggle and engage them in campaigns. Organizers are thoroughly trained and developed over a long period of time in the skills needed to build effective organizations.

4.8. REFORMS TOWARD REVOLUTION

Left community organizations have a particular orientation towards carrying out reform-based campaign work that fits within a long-term strategy to reach a broader revolutionary goal, sometimes referred to as a “maximum program”. Left community organizers see strategic reform fights as important in a number of regards. First, they have the potential to better the material conditions of people’s lives who are

usually struggling just to get by. Second, they are an entry point for people to come into long-term social movements. Third, in a way, they are like scrimmages for the big game where people learn the necessary skills of how to struggle for freedom (Poblet). And finally, winning reform fights gives people a sense of hope and a sense of their own power—which also helps build organizations.

Maria Poblet of St Peters Housing Committee put it like this, “Nobody is going to just go fight imperialism. It has to be attached to their material interests.” And as Adam Gold of Just Cause Oakland puts it,

We believe in fighting to win. In changing the material conditions, you are actually winning things that make people’s daily lives manageable. This is important for several reasons: First, for purely humanitarian reasons, we care about people, they deserve decent lives, and we want them to survive; secondly winning is important because it builds movements. When you fight and win, more people want to be a part of your movement, because they want to win too.

An example of a strategic reform fight is the campaign that Just Cause Oakland used to found the organization: their fight for a “Just Cause for Eviction” city ordinance. Oakland was without rent control or any type of eviction protections. The city, majority of which is working class people of color, was also undergoing a huge wave of gentrification. These populations were rapidly being displaced when landlords were evicting people left and right without cause and tripling the rents. Just Cause Oakland fought for a number of years and eventually passed a very stringent eviction protection law that greatly slowed down the displacement process. This campaign was seen as a way to shift the material conditions and make the city a place where working class people could afford to remain living.

In discussing the need to engage in fights for material reforms organizers often refer to a passage from Amilcar Cabral, leader of the social revolutionary national liberation movement in Guinea-Bissau:

Keep always in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone’s head. They are fighting... for material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the fu-

ture of their children. National liberation, war on colonialism, building of peace and progress—independence—all that will remain meaningless for the people unless it brings a real improvement in conditions of life. (qtd. in Davidson 280-81)

But Left community organizers don't see all reform fights as being strategic places for their energy. They often have to look at a reform fight through the lens of their maximum program, and together with their priorities for the current period assess whether it's the right fight at the right time. For example, as a service provision organization, St Peters Housing Committee has to assess when their reform fights for tenant and immigrant rights are strategic. As Maria Poblet put it,

We could win some major change, but to what end? There are definitely people we could collaborate with, who have very good relationships with city hall—who could definitely pass pro-tenant legislation, but this legislation might actually work against our movement building goals. It doesn't always, but we have to be clear that it is going to help build a movement, and not just improve conditions, because they are not the same thing. And, as a service providing organization, we can see this very clearly. While we do things all the time that improve people's living conditions and don't build a movement, we still think that is important because sometimes they do help build a movement. It's a balance. Our analytical framework and our political vision help us do that.

This new model of Left community organizing take an explicit ideologically, politically driven approach to building the power of working class communities to fight for material changes in their lives. Their progressive political framework sets Left organizers apart from many of the models of classical community organizing. Left organizers' politics and understanding of how change happens in society—being driven both by the material conditions and by people's capacity to engage in struggle—frame how they carry out the work, prioritizing political education and leadership development, base-building, and working for material reforms. As well as the prioritization of developing sharp assessments of the global and regional political economy, building strong

organizations, and using confrontational tactics. These methodological tenants, along with organizers' political analysis, defines this model as a distinct new tendency—departing both from classical populist community organizing and from classical Marxist method—creating a vibrant new form of working class organization.

5. ANTI-IMPERIALISM & THIRD WORLD MARXISM

Every Left community organizer interviewed for this project strongly identified with the revolutionary tradition known as “Anti-Imperialism”. This tradition provides for much of the theoretical and broad strategic foundations upon which most of the Left community organizing examined in this study is based. “Anti-Imperialism” often refers simply to a political or moral position against empire building and the conquest of nations. In this context “Anti-Imperialism” is used by the revolutionary Left to identify both politically and strategically with a strain of thought that organizers have developed out of Marxism-Leninism to fit their particular context in many parts of the Third World. This loose political and strategic framework is often referred to as “Third World Marxism”⁸ (Elbaum 2-3). Third World Marxism takes classical Marxist economic theory and revolutionary strategy developed for specific application in the advanced industrial capitalist nations and reworks them broadly for application in the colonies of the Third World, and specifically for practical application in the Third World’s struggle for national liberation. To understand Third World Marxism and its departure from classical European Marxism there are first a few components we must grasp from the original theory. The first necessary component is understanding what imperialism is and how it developed; the second is understanding generally which class classical Marxism understands as the revolutionary subject; the third is understanding Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation; and finally understanding the Marxist conceptions of national oppression and self-determination.

5.1. LENIN’S IMPERIALISM

Lenin, famous strategist of the Russian Revolution, elaborated on Karl Marx’s economic theories—updating them theoretically and upon them building revolutionary strategy for his given context. Lenin believed that the political economy in the early years of the 20th century was significantly different from that upon which Marx had based his ideas. According to Lenin, capitalism had entered a new phase of “imperialism” which he understood to be the “highest stage of capitalism”. According to Lenin this new stage in capitalism’s development was marked by capitalism’s global expansion to secure new markets for its surplus goods, as well as cheap raw materials and

labor. As the Amandala Project describes in *Towards Land, Work, and Power*,

Until the end of the 19th century, capitalism was largely a national system of exploitation of the working class by the capitalist class. But capitalism had to break out of its national borders like a snake that had outgrown its skin. With the development of new technologies such as the steam engine and electricity, the capitalist class was able to produce more commodities than they could sell in just their national markets. The system had to grow or die. (40)

In order to grow the imperialist nations of Western Europe, Japan, and the United States set-out to conquer the nations of Africa, Asia, and the Americas through a brutal process of colonization whereby they seized foreign territories and controlled them through direct military force. During the end of the 19th century, Europe expanded its colonial control over Africa from 10% to 90%. The United States annexed half of Mexico's territory in 1848, and then battled Spain in 1898 to obtain its colonies of Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines (Amandala Project 32). The imperialist nations then used these colonized Third World nations to extract natural resources and labor in order to produce their commodities, and also as a controlled market within which to unload their surplus goods.

Under imperialism private corporations and banks extract value by-and-large, but these corporations rely heavily on the imperialist state to carry out the political and military control that make their ventures possible. Thus the transition from capitalism to imperialism is also a broadening from exploitation of workers by bosses within advanced industrial nations to the addition of super-exploitation of whole peoples by imperialist nations. Lenin points out the need this process creates for movements for national liberation within the Third World to free themselves from the yoke of imperialism while at the same time utilizing their right to self-determination to internally struggle for socialism.

5.2 THE REVOLUTIONARY SUBJECT: THE CLASS TO WHICH THE FUTURE BELONGS

The second position that is important to understand in order to grasp Third World Marxism is the strategic role that classical Marxism places on the urban industrial prole-

proletariat as the revolutionary subject. For Marx and Engels the working class, in their inevitable struggle with the bourgeoisie, is the political force that will accomplish the destruction of capitalism and a transition to socialism (Bottomore 526). For Marx and Engels the future historical significance of the proletariat is ultimately not that it is oppressed, but rather that it is the only class which is capable of overthrowing bourgeois society and establishing a classless society. The rationale behind this is that the proletariat is the only class that survives entirely based on the sale of its own labor power and does not draw profit from any kind of capital. The working class sells themselves as opposed to selling products like the petty-bourgeoisie and capitalists. In the Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels stated, "Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a genuinely revolutionary class. The other classes decay and go under in the face of modern industry..." (13). Here they are referring to the process, during the emergence of industrial capitalism, of the rise of a huge class of wage laborers, whose position in the economy gives it the power to make a revolution. Their position is in part their relationship to production and their close proximity to and common situation with the rest of their class in the factories of the urban centers.

Classical Marxism has privileged the industrial factory worker (classically found in the imperialist nations) over the peasant (who classically makes up most of the Third World) as the revolutionary subject in part because of the many obstacles they saw standing in the way of peasants leading a revolutionary movement. Modern theorist L.S. Stavrianos identifies these obstacles as being both economic and social, including:

The independence of peasants' productive units; the tyranny of the peasants' work routine, which is broken only at grave peril for the peasant's family; and the temptation to withdraw from conflict back into independent subsistence production... the village is the center of continuity and security, in which each peasant has an acknowledged place in the order of things. Ties of family, Church and community are strong, while the life of the guerrilla is notoriously arduous and precarious. Finally, there are the powerful psychological inhibitions induced by millennia of subjugation and obedience. Peasants traditionally have been excluded from the decision-making process in the wider world, so that they lack

knowledge and confidence to articulate their aspirations and to act upon them. (450)

The reason the Third World has historically lacked a proletariat class is ultimately the product of capitalist development—which systematically required their nations’ underdevelopment. This has meant that the Third World has historically consisted mostly of peasant classes, which formed the base of their revolutionary subject. Today this class formation is shifting, as the nature of imperialism is shifting, moving industrial centers out of the imperialist nations and into the Third World where they can find cheaper labor, less stringent environmental regulations, and direct access to raw materials—thus increasing their profits. The result is that Third World workers are increasingly concentrated in industrial settings.

5.3. MARX’S THEORY OF PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION

As Marx reflects in *Capital, Volume 1*, “...primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology” (784). Primitive (or ‘original’) accumulation describes one of the processes that leads to, or creates the foundations of, capitalist production. It is a process marked by theft and extreme violence. While capitalism as an economic system was getting off the ground, the capitalist class needed a bulk of capital in order to build the initial infrastructure that the new industrial economy would rest upon. They essentially needed loot to jump-start their economy. Where did this capital originally come from? Largely it came from the pillaging of the Third World’s natural resources and the enslavement of its peoples through the process of colonialism and Europe’s imperialist expansion. This theft and super-exploitation provided the economic base from which capitalism could flourish.

In defining the rough political framework of Third World Marxism, Left organizers draw heavily on this theory to help explain the underdevelopment of their nations and their people’s need for national liberation.

The great wealth and productive power of the advanced capitalist countries is premised on the oppression and exploitation of the underdeveloped countries; and the poverty and backwardness of the under-

developed countries is a result of their subordination to the advanced. Monopoly capital and underdevelopment are mutually dependent, antagonistic poles of the imperialist system. In this sense, the condition of underdevelopment is qualitatively different from that of lack of development. The former is a condition produced by imperialist penetration, while the latter is a condition of youth. Underdevelopment can only be overcome by the revolutionary termination of imperialist domination and a program of socialist construction, while the lack of development merely requires a natural process of maturation. There are virtually no parts of the world that can be considered undeveloped: the problem is not lack of development but underdevelopment, not youthful immaturity but imperialist oppression. (MLEP 217)

The process of pillaging the Third World to jump start industrial capitalism is seen as the beginning of the process of underdevelopment—which continues through today’s economic policies. Third World Marxists maintain that this process can only be reversed by overcoming imperialist domination—hence the need for national liberation and socialism.

5.4. NATIONAL OPPRESSION AND SELF-DETERMINATION

One of the central components of Third World Marxist thought is the relationship between oppressor and oppressed nations under imperialism. Having a theoretical understanding of the role of national oppression has enabled Left organizers both within the centers of capital and within the colonies (or former colonies) to understand their material position in society and to formulate strategies for their struggles for national liberation and socialism.

Throughout the history of Marxist thought there has been a constant tension between advocates of a political analysis in which race and nation play a central role and those who argue that race and nation are secondary to a “fundamental” class analysis. The definition of “nation” that I am utilizing here is taken from Left organizer and theoretician Harmony Goldberg. She defines “nation” as “a group of people with a shared history, culture and consciousness” (2-3). There are clear distinctions to be made be-

tween the concepts of a state, a nation, and government. The state is the political expression of the economic structure of society and, therefore, the representative of the people who own or control the wealth of the community. The main function of the state is to guarantee the existing social relationships within a given society through centralized political power and a monopoly on violence. Government in its most basic form is the political organization of a given society, and does not inherently contain the repressive aspects of a nation-state. None-the-less, the important distinction here is between the concept of “nation”, or the identity of a people, and the form of political organization of a society. States may be made up of a single nation, or they may be multi-national (2). A nation of people may have a state or government structure that represents them (whether in their interests or not), or they may be part of a multi-national state, or they may be denied the right to build a state or government representing their nation (for example the Palestinian nation or the Black nation in the U.S.).

Third World Marxists have often been the key advocates for a revolutionary politic that situates race and nation in the center. Their theory and practice is building off of foundations in classical European Marxism-Leninism. Lenin’s theoretical work on imperialism lays the groundwork for the Third World Marxist politic around the struggle for national liberation and socialism. As Harmony Goldberg points out,

Lenin theorized that the transition from competitive capitalism to imperialism required that capitalist nations dominate less-industrialized nations in order to capture new markets and to gain new territories for expanded production. Colonialism was a key mechanism for the survival of capitalism; if colonialism could be challenged, capitalism could not survive. This meant that the oppressed nation’s struggle for liberation from imperialist domination came to be seen as a central aspect of the international struggle for socialism. (3-4)

Lenin also discussed the distinction between the progressive nationalism utilized by Third World independence movements to strengthen resolve for their nation’s self-determination and the oppressive nationalism utilized by the imperialist nations to rationalize war and conquest. This distinction is still being debated within the movement today.

Stalin later contributed to the theoretical understanding of what constitutes a nation with the right to self-determination. His own practice and the practice of the Soviet Union notwithstanding, his support of self-determination in Marxism and the National Question is strong, as can be seen in this quote,

Social-Democracy in all countries... proclaims the right of nations to self-determination. The right of self-determination means that only the nation itself has the right to determine its destiny, that no one has the right forcibly to interfere in the life of the nation, to destroy its schools and other institutions, to violate its habits and customs, to repress its language, or curtail its rights.

The right of self-determination means that a nation may arrange its life in the way it wishes. It has the right to arrange its life on the basis of autonomy. It has the right to enter into federal relations with other nations. It has the right to complete secession. Nations are sovereign, and all nations have equal rights.

In fighting for the right of nations to self-determination, the aim of Social-Democracy is to put an end to the policy of national oppression, to render it impossible, and thereby to remove the grounds of strife between nations, to take the edge off that strife and reduce to a minimum. (321-322)

While many reject the extreme repression of Stalinism, Stalin's writings on this question, and particularly his definition of what constitutes a "nation" became the basis on which Marxists would later take positions in support of national liberation for oppressed nations in the Third World and even within the confines of the United States.

Building on this theoretical foundation Left organizers have developed theory and practice centering the struggle for national liberation within the struggle for socialism, and holding up the strategic role of oppressed nations, especially within the Third World, within those struggles.

5.5. SO WHAT IS THIRD WORLD MARXISM?

Utilizing the above theories within classical Marxism as key reference points, Left organizers and intellectuals within oppressed nations built a loose political and strategic framework to suit their need for a revolutionary practice. This practice links their nations' struggles for national liberation and their class' struggle to end their exploitation by the capitalist class in general; and aims to build a politic and practice that can lead their nations to full self-determination and ultimately to a classless society.

This body of politics places racial and national oppression front-and-center alongside class struggle. In doing so it identifies imperialism as the central contradiction facing humanity and upholds the struggle for national liberation, self-determination, and socialism as the answer. In order to win national liberation, self-determination, and socialism, Third World Marxists believe that on a strategic level oppressed nations and particularly those of the Third World need to play a leading role. A clear break of Third World Marxism away from classical Marxism is on the question of the revolutionary subject. For them, the revolutionary subject is no longer the urban industrial proletariat of the imperialist nations, rather it is the Third World generally and specifically the peasants along with their increasing working class.

Revolutionaries in the Third World adopted Lenin's understanding of imperialism to frame their context. Drawing on this framework, the Amandala Project has defined imperialism as "a global system of political economy based on the super-exploitation of whole nations and peoples by the world's imperial powers and transnational corporations. To sustain this unstable multi-national system, the imperialist state serves as a manager for global capital" (39).

The Labor/Community Strategy Center states:

Certainly, the working class and poor peasants, principally women, in every country are exploited by domestic or regional capitalists. But the decadent nature of imperialism's concentration and centralization of power in very few transnational finance capitalist enterprises, backed by very few nation-states, gives birth to a new form of class struggle on a world scale. In this internationalization of antagonism between exploiters and producers, class struggle often takes the form of national liberation struggle. Indeed in some countries an identity is reached between these struggles. (5)

They understand imperialism—the conflict between oppressor and oppressed nations—to form the central contradiction of our time. Some, like the Labor/Community Strategy Center, also understand imperialism to be intrinsically patriarchal. As they point out, “We use the term ‘imperialist patriarchy’ to refer to the system of relations of domination under capitalism and imperialism which could not exist without the subjugation of women and colonies” (6). Much like property ownership in many pre-capitalist societies, the capitalist system of production and distribution has always been patriarchal. Thus, the exploitation of workers, nations, and the oppression of women all come together to provide the capitalist class with substantially higher profits.

For Third World Marxists, as the central dynamic of oppression shifts from simply the exploitation of worker by capitalist to include and center the exploitation of whole peoples by nations, the revolutionary subject also shifts. A simple way to think about who is the revolutionary subject in a given situation is identifying 1) who has a material interest in changing the way society is functioning, and 2) who is strategically positioned to be able to carry out that change. While industrial workers in the advanced capitalist nations may have been the key revolutionary subject positioned to deal with the insular capitalist economy through which they are exploited — imperialism has shifted the ground on which we stand.

Mao Tse-Tung, one of the leading Third World Marxist theoreticians and strategists, threw classical Marxism on its head, and laid the basis for Third World revolutionary movements for the next five decades, on the question of the revolutionary subject. Mao proclaimed that the revolutionary vanguard could only be the poor peasants of the Third World (Stavrianos 594). In discussing national liberation movements in Africa with a social revolutionary character, Stavrianos writes, “European Marxism, with its dependence on the urban proletariat, was obviously irrelevant for... the colonies of Africa, where proletarians were virtually nonexistent” (733).

The imperialist nations have found ways, using both material and ideological privileges, to align white workers with the white ruling class— so as to inhibit them from uniting with workers of the oppressed nations against their common exploiters. Because of these privileges, white workers in the imperialist nations materially benefit from the spoils of imperialist conquest and it is no longer in their material interest to overthrow imperialism. They also in large part ideologically associate their interests with the

white ruling class and against oppressed nationalities. Thus the development of the First World comes at the direct expense of the underdevelopment of the Third World. Because of a huge restructuring of the global economy white industrial workers in the First World are also no longer strategically positioned in relationship to production to be the ones to lead key struggles for change.

So if it is not in the interests of white workers in the First World to be the revolutionary subjects in an internationalist socialist project, then in whose material and ideological interests is it? Who has the relationship to production necessary to be able to overthrow capitalism? And who is in a position that opens up potential for high levels of organization? W.E.B. Dubois eloquently leads a discussion on this in his classic *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*,

That dark and vast sea of human labor in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa; in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States—that great majority of [humanity] on those bent and broken backs rest today the founding stones of modern industry—shares a common destiny; it is despised and rejected by race and color; paid a wage below the level of decent living; driven, beaten, prisoned and enslaved in all but name; spawning the world's raw material and luxury—cotton, wool, coffee, tea, cocoa, palm oil, fibers, spices, rubber, silks, lumber, copper, gold, diamonds, leather—how shall we end the list and where? All these are gathered up at prices lowest of the low, manufactured, transformed and transported at fabulous gain; and the resultant wealth is distributed and displayed and made the basis of world power and universal dominion and armed arrogance in London and Paris, Berlin and Rome, New York and Rio de Janeiro.

Here is the real modern labor problem. Here is the kernel of the problem of Religion and Democracy, of Humanity. Words and futile gestures avail nothing. Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts which, in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal. The emancipation of [humanity] is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown, and black. (15-16)

Third World Marxists respond to this question of who is the revolutionary subject today by answering that it is the working class oppressed nationalities all over the world, including the peasant classes, with those in the Third World playing a leading role. Expounding on this position the Amandala Project asserts,

Their struggle will be facilitated by their greater numbers and their control of the territories which the imperialist nations need for cheap resources and new markets. However, even with these factors on their side, the people of the Third World cannot defeat the imperialist forces by themselves because of the United States' monopolistic control over weapons of mass destruction... In order to successfully defeat U.S.-led imperialism, the people of the Third World must lead other forces in a broad, anti-imperialist movement. (75)

This begs the question of what the role of oppressed nationality groups inside the imperialist nation-states is? The Amandala Project answers,

Our role is to build a strong movement to address the issues that working class people of color in the United States face that also recognizes that our fights are against the same systems and same enemies as those of the people of the Global South. We play the role of forcing the imperialist states to address the conditions within their borders, as well as around the rest of the world... Although the people of the Global South will play a leading role within the global struggle against U.S.-led imperialism, Third World peoples inside the United States will play an important role too. Working class people of color within the imperialist super-power can, and must, lead a broad anti-imperialist united front which involves people of color from various class positions as well as anti-racist whites. (77)

Discussing the need for working class Third World immigrants to be in leadership of Left movements in the United States, Maria Poblet from St. Peter's Housing Committee reflects on the strategic importance of their organization's Latino immigrant base, positing them as a potentially key revolutionary subject today:

Strategically immigrant workers are positioned to offer a threat to impe-

rialism not simply because they are oppressed by the system but more importantly they are strategically positioned to screw imperialism since it principally depends on their exploitation. People challenging that exploitation, changing the terms of that exploitation, or even negotiating the terms of it are big threats to the viability of the system.

Beyond their strategic economic relationship to imperialism, immigrant workers also have a high level of class-consciousness. Immigrant workers have real, lived, familial relationships to the Third World and to Left movements in the Third World. Immigrants, and specifically Latino immigrants, are also the largest growing group in the U.S.; and the largest growing group joining organizations, unions, and forging grassroots struggles. This is not a coincidence. It is directly related to immigrants having experienced the impacts of imperialism in their home countries and on their social position here.

Immigrant workers, overwhelmingly, have had opportunities to participate in Left social movements, to understand what organizing is, to understand what people's power is. They carry with them the kind of historical memory that people in this country need, and that Third World leadership can bring.

5.6. THE MASS LINE

Based on the principle that “the people, and the people alone are the motive force in making world history,” (Mao 257) many organizations utilize an organizing principle and methodology called “the mass line”. The mass line is an organizing methodology rooted in Marxism that was codified during the Chinese revolution. As a method for revolutionary organizing it highlights the need for conscious organizers to root themselves amongst the people, and to carry out their work with humility and constant engagement with the revolutionary subjects. The Chinese revolutionaries believed that leadership depended primarily on responsiveness to popular needs and aspirations, which could be ascertained only by constant contact with the peasants in the villages (Stavrianos 599). In their book *National Liberation: Revolution in the Third World Nor-*

man Miller and Roderick Aya describe the development of mass line:

To maintain mass militancy, revolutionaries in China, Vietnam, and elsewhere have generated a nonbureaucratic style of leadership; the Chinese have codified it as the “mass line” — from the masses, to the masses... Chinese revolutionaries have evolved a political method to synthesize popular initiative and impeccable organization. Intensive programs of cadre recruitment from local communities bring articulate, politically conscious leadership into persistent interaction with the masses at the grass-roots level. In this context, the mass line involves summarizing peasant grievances and aspirations in terms of broader political experience and revolutionary theory. Compiled and interpreted, these ideas are once again presented to the people in articulate form for public criticism, approval, and implementation. The practical consequences of these policies are reevaluated in the same terms, continuing the interaction of leader and led over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. (xvii)

In its application in Left community organizing in the United States, mass line organizing method points to the need for the starting point to be the felt needs and wants of the people. Mao discussed this practice as oneself with the masses”. He said,

One must act in accordance with the needs and wishes of the masses. All work done for the masses must start from their needs and not from the desire of any individual, however well-intentioned. It often happens that objectively the masses need a certain change, but subjectively they are not yet willing or determined to make the change. In such cases, we should wait patiently. We should not make the change until, through our work, most of the masses have become conscious of the need and are willing and determined to carry it out. Otherwise we shall isolate ourselves from the masses. Unless they are conscious and willing, any kind of work that requires their participation will turn out to be a mere formality and will fail... There are two principles here: one is the actual needs of the masses rather than what we fancy they need, and the other is the wishes of the masses, who must make up their own minds instead

of our making up their minds for them. (236-37)

In carrying out the Third World Marxist principle of “from the masses, to the masses”, a recent campaign development process that Just Cause Oakland carried out began with a community survey in which organizers spent months in the field knocking on people’s doors and having house-meetings in the organization’s base communities. These surveys served as an investigation into what working class people of color in the base communities were focusing on as the most pressing issues affecting their neighborhood and testing where they were at, in terms of their levels of revolutionary consciousness. This enabled the organization to make some assessments of where the community was at. Along with research and study of the political economy of the region, in process and dialogue with the membership of the organization, they were able to hone in on what the next phase of campaign work for the organization would be. After framing it with relevant political analysis, the organization then returned to the communities through door-knocking, house-meetings, and town-hall meetings to test for resonance. Through this process they were able to refine how they were discussing the issue and framing the campaign with regards to how the base was responding to it and whether or not they were taking it up as their own fight with a high level of determination.

To put it another way, in rooting themselves amongst oppressed communities, Left community organizers first assess where the community is at in terms of needs and consciousness. Then they use political analysis, garnered through direct contact, study, and research, to sum up where the people are at. Then they develop talking points, policies, plans, and ways to fight back that people will take up as their own. Left organizers believe that it is in this way that revolutionary theory becomes a material force, i.e. when people are acting on it, it moves out of the land of ideas and becomes a material factor in the class struggle. They see this as one of the only ways to test whether the theory, analyses, and plans are correct, while at the same time creating the basis to deepen their theory (FRSO 5).

Left community organizers in this tendency forcefully assert the need for organizers to have a high level of humility in relationship to the oppressed communities they are organizing within. This humility is in part informed by Mao’s discussion of the method of mass line:

... See that no comrade at any post is divorced from the masses... teach every comrade to love the people and listen attentively to the voice of the masses; to identify himself with the masses wherever he goes and, instead of standing above them, to immerse himself among them; and, according to their present level, to awaken them or raise their political consciousness and help them gradually to organize themselves voluntarily... (315-316)

Here, in discussing the process of building deep relationships and trust with the base, and the development of political consciousness and its relationship to oppressed people's self-organization and commitment to the freedom struggle, Mao begins to get into the role of the conscious organizer.

Being rooted amongst the people is of vital importance to Left community organizers. Without this foundation they have little ability to build the organizations needed to win progressive changes in the lives of working class people, and they certainly have little ability to build a working class movement. Building trust amongst the base, as well as developing and testing their messages and tactics are key to a winning strategy—and none of this can be done while removed from the daily experiences of working class communities.

5.7. LEADERSHIP AND REVOLUTIONARY DEMOCRACY

Though they draw a lot of political analysis from the Marxist tradition as well as a great amount of inspiration and guidance from the insurgent strategies developed by Third World revolutionaries like Mao Tse-Tung and Amilcar Cabral, many of the organizations studied here are highly critical of the colossal failures of many post-revolutionary socialist societies on questions of democracy (STORM 51). Innovating within the Marxist tradition, most Left community organizing projects are constructing forms of organization that are mass-led and rooted in revolutionary democracy and member leadership. This tendency is in stark contrast to the high degree of political repression and almost total lack of any form of democracy that the pursuit of socialism has so frequently been associated with.

The role of the organizer in helping lay the groundwork for communities to come

together and enact fundamental and lasting social change is a delicate balance. Organizers must both offer key leadership to help guide the social change process and be humble artists of democratic and collective action. I have yet to find a thorough guide or roadmap illustrating the role of the organizer. But there are oft-discussed principles that should guide the organizer's practice; those of humility, humanism, honesty, love for the people, accountability to the membership and the organization, and effective leadership. It is a work of art when an organizer can embody all of these characteristics—both offering expertise and guidance and at the same time opening the space and creating the conditions for others to democratically determine their own future and develop their own leadership capacity.

There are two principle figures that Left community organizers often hold up when discussing the principles that effective revolutionary organizers should exemplify in trying to navigate the delicate balance of the need for leadership and the importance of a democratic practice. One is Amilcar Cabral the deceased head of the PAIGC, Guinea-Bissau's national liberation movement. And the second is Ella Baker, a deceased leader of the Civil Rights movement in the United States.

Over the course of the struggle for national independence and socialism, in the 60s and 70s, for the West African nation of Guinea-Bissau, Cabral pioneered a form of "Revolutionary Democracy" that was both effective in its practice and embodied many of the humanist qualities that organizers are searching for in their struggles for a free and just society. The central aspect of Cabral's leadership, "lay in his unparalleled ability to combine political effectiveness with a high degree of adherence to human decency as a principle of political action... Cabral sought to establish a state structure which would pursue socialist policies effectively and without recourse to political oppression" (Chabal 154). Even within the nation's armed struggle he rejected all forms of terrorism and maintained his leadership through persuasion rather than coercion or force. It was to his credit that he released Portuguese prisoners unharmed, pardoned his political enemies, held democratic elections after the party was already in power, and sought to co-opt rather than isolate his rivals (10). Cabral is looked to as an example of a revolutionary leader and organizer who upheld democratic principles on both a societal level as well as the level of internal organizational practice. His party operated in a way that favored "a mode of 'democratic politics' that sought consensus through consultation... [and] genuine collective leadership..."

(Chabal 157). Cabral's example stands out to modern Left organizers because he was not just principled, but ultimately his humanist approach to revolution led to the success of the movement. His example stands as a model of leadership that upholds the principles of democracy and collective action, while leading to success in the struggle for material change.

Left community organizers often state that a good organizer is one who can develop the leadership of another. Ella Baker's model of leadership is the guiding light for this concept. Baker, a leader of the civil rights movement in the U.S., helped found the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. She is looked to as an example of how to cultivate oppressed people's leadership and facilitate collective action, while providing tender political and strategic guidance. In talking about her method of democratic leadership, Left organizer Chris Crass writes,

Ms. Baker had an innovative understanding of leadership, an idea which she thought of in multiple ways: as facilitator, creating processes and methods for others to express themselves and make decisions; as coordinator, creating events, situations and dynamics that build and strengthen collective efforts; and as teacher/educator, working with others to develop their own sense of power, capacity to organize and analyze, visions of liberation and ability to act in the world for justice. Ella believed that good leadership created opportunities for others to realize and expand their own talents, skills and potential to be leaders themselves. This did not mean that she didn't challenge people or struggle with people over political questions and strategies. Rather, this meant that she struggled with people over these questions to help develop principled and strategic leadership capable of organizing for social transformation. (6)

Ella Baker provides an example of leadership that is focused primarily on developing the leadership capacity of others. The legacy she provides is one of egolessness and humility—key traits to the organizer committed to others leading.

Lee Staples asserts "Groups do not form and take action by spontaneous combustion. Someone has to pull people together and help things get organized. Whoever does this is functioning as an organizer... The role includes being a recruiter, leader,

enabler, agitator, consolidator, trainer, strategist, and tactician...” (8). To that list the Amandala Project — and Left community organizers in general — would add that the organizer must also be an intellectual in order to make material and strategic assessments of the given period.

Staples finishes off his discussion of the role of the organizer by stating very clearly: “It is the organizer’s job to get other people to take the lead” (8). Contemporary Left community organizers go to great lengths to infuse their work with this kind of democratic leadership. Every organization that I interviewed had built into their organizational structure member-leadership bodies that focus on simultaneously guiding the organization’s work and politics and developing the leadership capacity of oppressed people. Jaron Browne from POWER talks about one of the ways this manifests in their work: “We do an intensive amount of leadership development and have an entire wing of the organization called Power University that is about building the capacity of the members of the organization to lead the organization on all levels, and building people’s political and ideological framework as well.” Leadership development enables POWER members to then actively participate in a number of leadership bodies that ultimately determine the work and direction of the organization. In most cases within this political tendency, the drive for revolutionary democracy and egalitarian forms of leadership are rooted in organizers’ desires to prefigure the world they are trying to build through the manner in which they engage in political struggle.

The political tradition of Third World Marxism provides this tendency of Left community organizing with an analytical framework with which to understand the world and how change is made. With the aid of this political framework, revolutionary Left community organizers work to contextualize the daily experiences of working class people with an anti-imperialist analysis that points out the roots of their problems within a system of inequality and exploitation. The political framework also points to a clear solution in the equal distribution of resources, and control over the means of production. This political framework offers them a strategic guide, an analysis with which to understand the world, and a legacy of struggle and liberation within which to root their aspirations.

6. HISTORICAL TRADITIONS & INFLUENCES

It is beyond the scope of this project to either attempt to give a historical lineage of community organizing in general, or even to give a complete lineage of this specific model. Therefore, this chapter is a study of five pieces of social movement history that were most influential on the development of this model of Left community organizing. The five in review are early militant industrial unionism; depression era socialist and communist organizing; Saul Alinsky's populist model; the New Left; and twentieth century Third World national liberation movements.

Tracing the lineage of a community-organizing model cannot be a perfect science. It is a highly subjective task of looking at social movement history and assessing what organizing models or traditions a contemporary model has been influenced by. The process of having the organizing infused with ideas and practices, that developed during an earlier period of social struggle can certainly be a conscious and intentional process, but it is often an organic process of younger organizers being influenced by veterans of earlier movements. Some of the historical trends or legacies that I identify are clearly visible in many current organizations and will be immediately recognizable; while for others the relationship is subtler.

6.1. "THE WORKING CLASS & THE EMPLOYING CLASS HAVE NOTHING IN COMMON!" – EARLY INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM

Today's Left community organizing is a direct descendent of early militant labor organizing in the United States. Though many organizers were trained in the modern mainstream labor movement, and many are former AFL-CIO organizers, those leading this new tendency now emphasize the need for independent organizations. In *Towards Land, Work, and Power*, the Amandala Project clarifies that, "By independent we mean that organizations operate independently of the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO, the more traditional institutions seen as organizing or representing the working class. This is both a break from traditional structures in these institutions and the political leadership guiding these institutions." (145)

Though independent from the AFL-CIO, many organizations within this new model are strongly rooted in worker organizing. Because of their autonomy from this traditional, and often non-confrontational leadership, they are able to carry out more militant, class-struggle-focused worker organizing. They build on the history and traditions of early militant, pro-organizing, industrial unionism, such as the Knights of Labor (KOL), the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and the early Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). From this legacy of organized labor one can see these new base building organizations drawing a number of characteristics: the classical Left understanding of the strategic position of workers; their commitment to working class base building; their militant orientation; their orientation towards internal democracy and rank and file participation; and their eye towards movement building and cross sector organizing. Also a commonality between the two is their commitment to organize across the lines of race, gender, and language. Especially in early labor organizing, this commitment set these organizations apart from much of the rest of the movement.

Different schools of organizing, just like different schools of politics, place different emphasis on social groups based on who they think hold the key to the kind of social change they desire. Shared by both early industrial unionism and this emerging model of Left community organizing is an emphasis on the working class as the social group that holds the key to social transformation from a capitalist society to a socialist one. This understanding is based on the strategic position of workers in relation to production, and based on how their class position defines their material interests within society. According to these models this makes them the only class capable of overthrowing capitalism and establishing a classless society. One of the main pioneers of radical working class organization, the class-conscious approach to the Industrial Workers of the World's organizing can be seen here in an excerpt from the agitational preamble to its constitution,

... The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace as long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until all the toilers come together on the political as well as the industrial field. (qtd. in Boyer and Herbert 165)

Sharing this uncompromising understanding of the relationship between the working and owning classes, echoes of this revolutionary internationalism can be heard amongst the battle cries of today's Left community organizers. As Maria Poblet, from St Peters Housing Committee put it,

We have what you could call Marxist politics, in terms of the irreconcilable nature of the struggle between working class people and the capitalist class. That's part of our framework for how we do the work. If we thought that we could elect someone who could represent the working class or we thought that the Mission district needed to just be Latino and that was it, then the work would look really different then it does now.

With its focus on working class communities, and specifically working class communities of color, today's Left community organizing has a particular orientation to the need for a mass social movement to enact the kind of fundamental social change it sees as necessary. As stated earlier, this requires an emphasis on base-building. This is not a new concept. Base-building also played a large role in early militant industrial unionism. Just as today's Left community organizations spend ample amounts of their time door knocking, having house meetings, and utilizing endless means to recruit and further engage members—the same thread runs through the history of industrial unionism. There has long been a split between more conservative and protectionist trade unions historically controlled by the AFL, and the generally radical industrial unions.⁹

Historically, this split focused around the conservative craft unions of the AFL, and the generally radical unions of the KOL, IWW, and significant forces within the CIO, which emphasized the need to build a unified working class movement to overthrow the capitalist class and establish a classless society, run by and in the interests of workers.¹⁰ Because of this maximum program, industrial unionism had a much stronger movement building approach to the work. Unlike narrow craft unionism, they saw the need to organize the unorganized sectors of the workforce, in order to build a powerful working class movement. Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais point out in their study of American labor history,

The IWW was essentially a reaction against the craft union structure of

the AFL and the conservative policies of its top leadership...[the IWW] organize[d] all workers, regardless of skill, sex, or race, into industrial unions... it set out to organize the unorganized on the basis of the unity of the working people. e IWW opposed not only the craft unionism but also the safe and cautious approach of the AFL leadership to big business. Desiring to revive the militant class struggle of an earlier period, it advocated militancy on both the economic and political fronts. (164)

These early industrial unions also share with modern Left community organizing their orientation towards internal democracy and rank and file participation. They depart from the AFL type unionism in their rejection of top-down bureaucratic leadership structures that often leave workers with little to no control over their unions.¹¹ According to labor historian Philip Foner, this early industrial unionism firmly believed that “the leadership must arise from the workers, and remain, at the same time, with the workers” (144). That modern Left community organizers share this position is evident in the way the organizations have largely structured member-based leadership bodies that guide the direction, work, and strategy of the organizations. As Adam Gold from Just Cause Oakland put it to me in an interview,

We want to be a democratic organization. We all value democracy and democratic decision-making as an important aspect of people’s development of consciousness. It is not just simply in order to have everyone come to a meeting, but by having people actually able to see their opinions enacted in a decision and then carried out is an important part of feeling and being a constructive part of society. And that is not what happens in this society that we live in, really. So being able to have that within our organization is a value that people hold.

Today there are a number of developments in the labor movement that signify that Left community organizers aren’t the only ones who have departed with these conservative elements exemplified by the AFL-CIO.¹² The advent of a number of fighting unions and workers’ centers, some independent of the AFL-CIO and a few even affiliated (such as the United Farm Workers), marks an important turning point for the growth of a successful militant working class movement.¹³

6.2. “FIGHT!—DON’T STARVE.” – UNEMPLOYED COUNCILS OF THE ‘30S & COMMUNIST COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

With the advent of the Great Depression in 1929, the Left in the United States launched a number of highly successful organizing drives of unemployed workers, tenants, and Southern sharecroppers. The most influential formation leading these organizing drives was the Communist Party of America (CPUSA). In this era of economic devastation, the CPUSA sent cadre into the field to organize the unemployed workers, tenants, and Southern sharecroppers around the slogan “Fight!—Don’t Starve.” The influence, however organic, of the CPUSA from this period on today’s Left community organizers is evident in a number of different areas. Five of the most prevalent include the need:

1. For sharp assessments of the global and local political economy and the shifting material conditions;
2. For multi-racial or multi-national organizations rooted in an anti racist politics and strategy;
3. To develop revolutionaries from the working class through mass work;
4. To win real material benefits in working class people’s lives;
5. For counter-hegemonic demands and militancy.

Long before the depression even hit, the CPUSA was preparing for these organizing drives, putting the party in a very strategic position, based on a sharp assessment of the global political economy. Robert Fisher details in *Let the People Decide*:

... The party anticipated the impending collapse of capitalism and was surprisingly well prepared, certainly more so than any other group, to address the crisis and mobilize their forces around it. The Sixth World Congress of the Communist International (Comintern), the Moscow-based, policy-making body for Communist parties world-wide, predicted in 1928 the imminent economic collapse and ordered Communist parties to initiate more openly revolutionary actions. Concerned about ‘the Negro Question,’ the congress also insisted that the CPUSA make

the organization of African-Americans a preeminent priority. (39)¹⁴

This level of study is far too rare in the world of community organizing, and is one that contemporary Left community organizers place a high value on today as well. Many of these organizers argue that without this sharp assessment of the material conditions in society, it is very difficult to calculate with any accuracy where and when to strategically intervene in certain struggles.

In *Capital*, Karl Marx states, “Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded” (329). Certainly drawing on some of the political positions upheld by the CPUSA during this period modern Left community organizers uphold the need for multi-racial or multi-national organizations to build a united working class movement. After a long struggle by the small number of Blacks in the CPUSA, they temporarily broke through the narrow class reductionism that so sharply defined the Old Left. By the early 1920s they were able to assert that Black workers were a strategic sector within the class struggle, and that there would be no successful working-class movement in the U.S. without Black workers at the center. In that same period, Lenin was developing his theory that all nations had a right to self-determination, and the working class possessed national identities. He insisted that the communist parties give direct support to revolutionary movements of the oppressed nations (Kelley 46-47). This opened up space for the Black communists to assert the position that their oppression was “national” in character, and that for the CP to be for full Black freedom they would have to recognize Black’s self-determination and self-organization.

The CPUSA saw their mass work in the realm of unemployed organizing, tenant defense, and sharecropper organizing, as the training ground through which new cadre could be recruited and developed. They aimed to use these mass organizations as “transmission belts” to bring in new members (Leab 327). Robert Fisher points out that, “the goal of the CPUSA was not simply to politicize people at demonstrations or to give people a sense of their own power through protest victories. The fundamental goal of the party was to build an effective communist organization that could lead a working-class revolution in the United States” (41). While none of the modern Left community organizations are tied to a national party or cadre organization, they are revolutionaries and do have the goal of using mass organizing work to build the political consciousness and organizing skills in members so as to develop new working class cadre as life-long revolutionaries. As Roy Rosenzweig points out in an article

on the unemployed councils called “Organizing the Unemployed,” “Not only did these radical organizations of the unemployed stop evictions and raise relief payments, they also helped to intensify the class consciousness of many of their members” (38).

The CPUSA understood that in order for working class people who are in desperate situations to be able to engage in the struggle, they must have their survival needs met. Because of this, they engaged in “bread and butter” fights for daily survival, taking on people’s individual cases of eviction, welfare benefits, employment, and so on. While blockading one family’s eviction, or storming welfare offices to secure one family’s benefits may not fundamentally shift relations of power in society, engaging in “bread and butter” fights enables people to get their needs met, opens up the space for them to join in organizing, and wins people’s allegiance to the organization. A number of Left community organizations today provide services, such as housing legal services or food provision, as a point of entry to bring people into the struggle, and to help meet their membership’s daily needs.

Finally, both the CPUSA and today’s Left community organizations identify the need to put out counter-hegemonic demands. As Roy Rosenzweig points out, “...the organizers of the radical unemployed movement confronted more than just police batons and tear gas. They sought to win the allegiance of the unemployed in the face of powerful ideological and cultural assumptions that militated against their success” (55). These organizations engagement in our society’s battle-of-ideas sets them apart from the vast majority of community organizations. While more populist models of community organizing put out very short term reform demands based on the expressed desires of community leadership, Left community organizations largely frame demands that are counter-hegemonic and challenge the logic of broader capitalist society, taking into account which issues are most strongly resonating with the community. For example, the Labor/Community Strategy Center in LA writes,

We select demands that create new forms of struggle that break out of a culture of accommodation to expand space for antagonistic, adversarial negotiation with corporations and the government. We select demands with counter-hegemonic content that can challenge the domination of capitalist ideology. We select demands that create collective learning experiences that expose the complex interrelationships of the U.S. political system we are challenging and create the basis for ideolog-

ical transformation. (8)

The influence of socialist and communist economic justice organizing during the Great Depression over today's revolutionary Left community organizing has been significant. This era is one of the few in U.S. history that organizers have to look to for examples of committed revolutionaries engaging in the daily material struggles of working class people—on mass—in a systematic and strategic fashion.

6.4. A TRADE UNION IN THE SOCIAL FACTORY: ALINSKY & THE BUILDING OF A POPULIST COMMUNITY ORGANIZING MODEL

The most recognizable name in the lineage of community organizers is Saul Alinsky. Alinsky emerged from the labor movement of the late 1930s and 1940s and was trained within the CIO. Alinsky's community organizing came out of a specific historical context, and was rooted within a specific trajectory of organizing experience. This included liberal social service work, confrontational industrial unionism within the CIO, and organizing work within the CPUSA's popular front strategy (in Chicago from 1937- 1938). Alinsky said that he aimed to take the skills he learned within the industrial union context and apply them to "the worst slums and ghettos, so that the most oppressed and exploited elements in the country could take control of their own communities and their own destinies" (qtd. in Fisher 56). As Robert Fisher says, he aimed to build "a trade union in the social factory—an instrument at the neighborhood level through which people could bargain, struggle, strike, and advance their interests, just as they did in the CIO" (56).

Over the years Alinsky constructed a highly influential model of urban populist community organizing. In the 1940s Alinsky built the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council—a populist neighborhood organization in the stockyards of Chicago—and helped seed organizations all around the country through the infrastructure of his Industrial Areas Foundation, which both still exist today.

Robert Fisher identifies five essential elements that define Alinskyist organizing:

1. The professional organizer is the catalyst for social change

2. The task is to build a democratic community-based organization
3. The goal is to win power
4. Any tactics necessary should be used
5. A people's organization must be pragmatic and nonideological (53-54)

Although there are many areas in which Left community organizing departs with Alinskyism, it is undoubted that this emerging model ends up drawing a lot of its organizing practice and methodology from the Alinsky organizing tradition. The clearest point of diversion between Alinskyism and Left community organizing is the question of the role of ideology and politics. Though Alinsky certainly had a world-view, he upheld an ultra-pragmatist and ultimately populist line, which said that community organizing needs to be nonideological. In stark contrast to revolutionary Left community organizers' position Alinsky maintained that ideology was just a hindrance to getting you to the bargaining table. And since winning material victories was the most important thing you could possibly do, he felt that just wasn't worth it (Alinsky Reveille 10).

Alinsky also diverges from the revolutionary Left in terms of his maximum program. Alinsky believed that the key contradiction in society that keeps people down is their lack of power over their lives. As such, he concluded that neighborhood empowerment and winning small material victories is the key to altering people's conditions. Alinskyist organizations would survey communities to get a read on what issues were most resonant, and then call together the existing leadership of the community (ministers... etc...) to try and get their support. They then would build campaigns on anything from installing stop signs and speed bumps, to fixing a dilapidated school. This approach was necessarily limited precisely because of its rejection of ideology and a structural analysis of power. As Robert Fisher points out, "Because Alinsky organizing does not question the economic foundation of the existing order or seek to replace the political system that maintains that order, his approach overlooks the possibility that capitalism is not set up to serve the poor and working class and that it is ultimately undemocratic" (64).

Though Left community organizing diverges from Alinskyism on the questions of ideology and vision, Alinsky was strong on tactics, and there are a number of practi-

cal and methodological tenants upon which revolutionary organizers draw. They draw from Alinsky's meticulous organizing method that prioritizes base-building through door knocking and house meetings, membership involvement and tracking, as well as a myriad of nuts-and-bolts tools utilized in the daily operations of building a community-based organization.

Though he never joined the party, Alinsky was heavily influenced by the strategy of the CPUSA during their Popular Front period in the 1930s. He drew from them the need to unite with the broadest grouping of potential tactical allies in order to win your demands. Left community organizations often engage in building Popular Fronts toward the same end, though are much more concerned with not letting their political focus get detracted or watered down by forces who are on a different political page.

The model of Left community organizing also shares with Alinskyism their use of confrontation and militancy to win demands from a given target. Both models often use confrontation to pressure their targets to give into their demands, whether through occupying the offices of state service agencies until they agree to give members welfare; through confronting politicians in order to stop a development project; or fighting an exploitative employer head on. This use of confrontational tactics was a main tenant of early Alinsky organizing and is firmly in the tradition of industrial unionism. We see it used regularly today, and organizers are trained from day one in the use of confrontational tactics to win the demands of the membership.

Although there are clearly substantial areas in which Left community organizing departs with Alinsky's politics and model—and today the tendencies are occasionally at odds—it is undoubted that Left community organizers end up drawing a lot of their organizing practice and methodology from the Alinsky tradition.

5.4. THE NEW LEFT

The period from the early 1960s through the late 1970s saw mass social upheaval in the United States. This social upheaval took its clearest form in the catalytic rise of the Civil Rights movement, a mass movement against the war in Vietnam, the explosive growth of Black Power ideology and struggle, and the development of nation-

al liberation movements in the US, of Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Asians, and Native Americans.¹⁵ Also of note was the growth of a revolutionary anti-imperialist ideology amongst whites (Berger 37), as well as the women's liberation and queer liberation movements. This period is popularly characterized as the New Left, with its most influential forms of Left organization making a clear break from the old Left of the 1930s with their rejection of the CPUSA; their embrace of race centered politics and participatory democracy; their focus on the Third World as a driving force;¹⁶ and their base in youth counterculture.

The catalytic force for this era of intense social struggle was the birth of the Civil Rights movement, with the African-American fight for racial equality in the Jim Crow segregationist South. The demands and political framework of civil rights soon shifted to calls for self-determination and socialism, and quickly evolved into the militant Black Power movement. The Black Power movement was initially defined by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), following on their highly influential community organizing and voter registration drives in the Black Belt South.¹⁷ It was later popularized and further evolved by the Black Panther Party (BPP), with their neighborhood defense and community survival programs based in the urban ghettos of the North and West.¹⁸ With the inspiration of the Black Power movement, other oppressed races and nationalities built militant organizations that embraced the popular revolutionary nationalism in communities of color, where Marxism and nationalism converged (Elbaum 3). These organizations were built around a program to fight for self-defense and self-determination. Among them was the Puerto Rican organization the Young Lords,¹⁹ the Chicano organization the Brown Berets, and the Native American organization the American Indian Movement (AIM).²⁰ The white New Left, was represented, largely, by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a massive national campus-based organization that primarily organized against the war in Vietnam, but for a time also took on neighborhood organizing efforts in working class communities of color.²¹

A vast array of organizing lessons arose out of the powerful era of the New Left, many of which have had a deep impact on the development of a contemporary model of revolutionary Left community organizing. From this period of struggle it is clear there has been a high level of influence on the development of the politics, ideology, and strategy of modern Left community organizers:

1. Militant, confrontational orientation to struggling for self-determination;
2. Relationship-based method of organizing and base building;
3. Democratic member-led organizations.

Some of this influence and inspiration has come from studying history, and much of it has come more directly as many of the organizations have members, and occasionally older staff or mentors, who were politicized and developed as members of these New Left revolutionary nationalist organizations, and bring their orientation and lessons directly to the work.

The New Left's influence on today's Left community organizer's confrontational orientation can most clearly be attributed to the development of the Black Panther Party and other national liberation struggles internal to the United States. These groups of revolutionary nationalists rooted themselves in working class communities of color. Like many Left community organizations today, they built fighting organizations whose program work was based on a combination of direct action, service work, and developing consciousness. The direct action, such as the Panthers carrying firearms on police watches, helped to shift people's immediate conditions while giving them a sense of their own power. The service work, such as the Panther's free breakfast program, helped struggling working class people to meet their needs, which gave them more time to commit to the struggle, and built a high level of trust and relationship to the organization. And they raised consciousness through political education programs and by contextualizing people's struggles into a systemic analysis that was antiracist and anti-capitalist.

The slow, relationship-based organizing method that has so much resonance with today's Left organizers was a trademark of early SNCC organizing in the South. The highly influential study of SNCC's model, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, is pretty much required reading for Left community organizers today. It imparts much of the wisdom that SNCC developed fighting the white supremacy of the Jim Crow state, the racist paramilitary organizations such as the Klu Klux Klan, and registering Black voters. To carry out this program they utilized a relationship-based organizing model that centers member leadership and internal democracy—using the then popular participatory democracy

model. Their methods were so successful that organizers are still building them today.

Today's Left community organizers have drawn substantial elements of both their politics and their organizing method from lessons they draw from the New Left era. The legacy of this period of social movement often serves as a reference point for inspiration and guidance to today's organizers. Some organizations even have programs named for this legacy of struggle. For example, Just Cause Oakland's political education wing is named ASSATA (The Assata Shakur School of Analysis Theory and Action), named after the former Black Panther Party member now in exile in Cuba. Left community organizers today draw from elements of the New Left's orientation to struggling for self-determination, their relationship-based method of community organizing and base building, and groups like SNCC's democratic approach to organization building.

6.5. THIRD WORLD NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT

In response to what Left organizers understand to be a growing tension between oppressor and oppressed nations under imperialism, throughout the last century mass movements for national liberation have swept most of the Third World. These movements have generally taken two distinct forms. The first is independence movements whose primary leadership have assumed a nationalist character, wanting to end foreign political domination but not to fundamentally alter social institutions or class relations. An example is India's political struggle to free themselves from British colonialism but not fundamentally shift the economic relationships of society. As L.S. Stavrianos points out in *Global Rift*,

They did not seek to challenge fundamental landholdings, plantations, commercial firms, banks, railways, mines or government debt arrangements. Such nationalist leaders or movements were more likely to be entrusted with political power because it was understood implicitly that they would not use that power to effect social or economic change. The colonies thus gained political independence but were not free of imperialism; rather they became dependent neocolonial states. (630)

The second is independence movements that have taken a social revolutionary character as well as being nationalist, like the democratic struggle for self-determination and socialism led by Amilcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau. They simultaneously fought for a new social order as well as political freedom from their colonizing power. Stavrianos points out that these social revolutionary national liberation movements:

...led to confrontations with both local and foreign vested interests, which usually joined forces to resist social revolution to the bitter end... Thus Britain was willing to grant independence to an India led by the Congress Party and the Muslim League, whereas France and the United States fought against the Communist Ho Chi Minh in Indochina for three full decades. Likewise in the Americas, the British readily granted independence to the nationalist-minded Federal Labor Party in the West Indies, but refused it to Leftist Cheddi Jagan in Guyana, even after he had won majority support in parliamentary elections. (530)

These movements most often turned to the politics of Third World Marxism in their search for a political and strategic framework through which to lead their nations to a both politically and economically free future.

The analysis of Anti-Imperialism is the most centrally defining analytical position of both the social revolutionary-minded Third World national liberation movements of the 20th century and contemporary Left community organizers in the United States. They share an assessment that there are nations that play the roles of oppressor and oppressed within the world's political economy.

This polarization came about through the birth of the imperialist system, which hence gave birth to the trend of movements for national liberation sweeping the Third World. This dynamic struggle between oppressor and oppressed nations is seen by both the leaders of social revolutionary national liberation movements of the 20th century and by contemporary Left community organizers as holding one of the central contradictions of this era, and holding the ability to unlock further struggles for oppressed people's economic freedom and political self-determination.

From national liberation movements, especially those which are social revolutionary in form, contemporary Left community organizers draw many of their central theo-

retical and strategic positions including: anti-imperialism, Third World Marxism and revolutionary strategy, and a reliance on Mass Line and mass organizing in their daily practice.

Today's Left community organizers in the United States draw broader theoretical and strategic guidance from Third World national liberation movements. Examples of how Left community organizations in the United States understand Third World national liberation movements' influence upon them can be seen clearly through examples from POWER, St Peter's Housing Committee and the Labor/Community Strategy Center. POWER talks about structures in their organization being directly influenced by ways in which social revolutionary Third World national liberation movements have structured their organizational forms. They developed a wing of the organization called the Amandala Project, which is a space where members and staff of the organization can engage in work from an explicitly anti-imperialist position. Within this organizational space, members engage in study, writing, strategizing, and direct action with the broader anti-imperialist movement through discussion and relationship building and also through joint activism. This sort of collaboration can most visibly be seen through the group's engagement in with the San Francisco anti-war movement. Steve Williams, executive director of POWER described the inspiration for the Amandala Project like this:

The inspiration for the Amandala Project came out of a couple of trips that staff and members were fortunate enough to take to South Africa. It was recognizing the relationship between the SACP (South African Communist Party) to many of the mass organizations, including COSATU (the trade union federation) and also the ANC (the African National Congress), and recognizing the particular leadership role that the SACP was able to play in relationship to those organizations, providing a clear conveyer-belt for working class rank-and-file members to really aspire and work to develop their own political consciousness and assessment.

St. Peter's Housing Committee often discusses the direct influence that Third World national liberation movements have had upon their organization's work and politics. This influence comes in part through their organizers', all of whom are Third World immigrants, study of history and Third World Marxist politics and strategy; – and in

part through the direct influence of their membership, many of whom were once participants in national liberation struggles in Central America. St Peter's Housing Committee lead organizer Maria Poblet discusses this impact and the consciousness people bring with them to the work:

There lies a lot of opportunity within people's consciousness and people's lived experience with imperialism. It is a very different context when people come from countries in the Third World. People coming from the Third World tend to see imperialism for what it is. For example, when I came to the US, I was like "Holy shit! They have everything here!" I mean I knew it and at that point I thought it was cool, and maybe I could get in on it. Then you get here and it dawns on you that the discrepancy between Third World people and people here is just fucked up. So there is a view that people have when they have lived in the Third World, and especially when they have been forced out of their countries by the policies of imperialism, of how oppressive that system is. It makes clear the relationship that the U.S. has with the rest of the world. Also many have participated in popular and radical social movements in their own countries in Latin America, like the national liberation movements of the 70s and 80s. Those massive movements were within people's lifetimes. People participated in them or their families did... Our organization is really a magnet for Latin American Leftists. The Mission district, our organizing turf, is great for that. This neighborhood has been a home for Latin American Leftists for a long time.

Many organizations stumble upon key advances in their organizing work. For example, the Labor/Community Strategy Center organizers often talk about how when the organization was kicking off its first campaign, they were doing door-knocking trying to build community support and recruit people to be members. In one of the first few days they stumbled upon a house that was full of recent working class immigrants from El Salvador. It turns out that the house was full of former FMLN members and people who had been very active in the country's national liberation struggle - which had a very clear social revolutionary character and was rooted in Third World Marxism. These neighborhood residents had been thoroughly developed as revolutionary organizers through this struggle and eventually had to flee their country's civil war.

They joined the Labor/Community Strategy Center's campaign and went on to play important leadership roles. They have since had a great influence on the politics and work of the organization.

In some places it is clear that Left community organizers today have studied, and drawn directly from these earlier movements. At times veteran organizers from earlier movement days have been the ones to train today's organizers, directly passing along their experience and lessons. In other instances this process of being influenced by history has come much less directly, being carried out by culture and word of mouth along multiple decades of Left movement building. Either way, direct or indirect, Left organizers are heavily influenced by those who have come before them. Drawing from these disparate organizing traditions; drawing politics, organizing method, strategy, tactics, and even cultural elements, emerges the beginnings of a new model of Left community organizing which is at once new and unique, and the same time a reflection of the decades of struggle that have come before it.

7. STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR BUILDING THE LEFT

7.1. THE CURRENT STAGE OF HISTORY

The political economy of the world today is marked by the continued growth of economic disparity between oppressed and oppressor nations, and the continued lack of political self-determination of oppressed nations, both within the First and the Third World. A recent U.N. Human Development Report found that the gaps between the poorest and the richest people and countries have continued to widen, continuing the trend of the last two centuries. They found that the past decade has shown increasing concentration of income among people, corporations, and countries (qtd. in Dollar 1). In his essay “Poverty and Inequality in the Global Economy” economist Michael Yates states:

It is remarkable to observe that most of the rich countries are those where capitalism first arose, while most of the poor countries have long histories of colonial and imperial domination. In terms of per capita GDP, no Latin American country ranks in the top 35, and no African country ranks in the top 55. More than one-half of the poorest 50 countries are in Africa. Sixty percent of the top 50 are either in Europe or North America.

The West’s neoliberal economic policies have continued the underdevelopment of the former colonies, and just when it appeared that the era of formal colonialism had indeed passed into the dustbin of history, we are now seeing the world’s top imperial power militarily occupying a subordinate nation in direct and flagrant violation of international law. To put it plainly, imperialism still exists. Not only does it still exist, it is celebrated today like no other point in recent history. This exuberant celebration of imperial dominance is exemplified by groups like the “Project for the New American Century”—a far Right think-tank at the center of American political power, figure-headed by people such as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Jeb Bush, and Paul Wolfowitz—who proclaim loud and clear that “American leadership is good... for the world; and that such leadership requires military strength” (Kristol).

In previous periods in history imperialist nations just stole from other nations. This

was the case with Spanish conquistadors' theft of gold, silver and copper from the Americas. This was the case with the British theft of Native American land. It was also the case with British, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch theft of Africans to be used as slave labor throughout the Americas (Amandala Project 42). Exemplified by the current U.S. occupation of Iraq, the super-exploitation of whole peoples by imperialist nations exists today just as it did in the era of classical colonialism. Today's imperial domination is carried out economically and politically through sanctions, forced debt and structural adjustment programs, unilateral military aggression, and forced exposure to the unequal playing field of the world market. Today the underdeveloped nations act as sources of great wealth for the imperialist nations: both as producers of goods for First World consumption; and through their payment of billions of dollars worth of debt from IMF/World Bank development loans designed to build the infrastructure needed to outsource imperialist nations' industrial production.

These social and economic policies are being put into action globally through the growing power of the Right wing. Following on the defeat of socialism in the Soviet Union and China, and the destruction of New Left social movements, the Right has risen to extreme dominance. They have reached this level of power by enacting a multi-decade, multi-faceted strategy of building a grassroots power-base through the church and an ideological hegemony through the media. The strategy is to boost a Christian moral crusade to save the American patriarchal family, against what they see as the onslaught of homosexuality, illegal immigration, and terrorism. To this end they have been remarkably successful and today enjoy far reaching powers and wide ideological support.

7.2. THE STATE OF THE LEFT & AN ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS

Part of the Right's success has depended on the failure of the Left to offer a clear material and moral alternative. More so the Right's ascendancy has depended on the Left's failure to build the mass base needed to advance a Left alternative. The clear exception to this trend is the currently developing Latin American power block of Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, Uruguay, Argentina, and Cuba. This exception aside, the Left's current lack of power and relevance in the rest of the world is partially due to the objective material conditions of the time, partially due to successful attacks from

the Right designed to neutralize Left movements, and partially due to failures the Left has made in its strategies over the last two decades.

Though approval ratings for president Bush are rapidly dropping, on a practical level the Left provides little in terms of an ideological counter-weight to the Right's hegemony. In the intellectual world of the media and academia progressives have lost the foothold they secured in the 60s and 70s. And on a mass level the Left provides little to no leadership or influence over the working class in the U.S. What little influence the Left does have in the U.S. tends to be limited to middle and upper-class people.

Given our current predicament in relation to political influence and power I am going to identify five areas that I argue are grave needs for the development of a relevant, powerful, and influential Left in the U.S. These areas are: 1) the construction of a mass base and a move away from ultra-left politics and practice; 2) the development of an accurate material assessment of today's global political economy and the development of a long-term strategy; 3) the prioritization of working class immigrant and oppressed nationality leadership; 4) the construction of a feminist praxis; and 5) participation in and growth of an international movement with common practice. I am going to argue both for the necessity of these tasks as well as the importance that I see in the growth of this new model of Left community organizing in accomplishing them.

7.2.1. TOWARDS A MASS BASE

No Left movement has ever accomplished the task of fundamentally shifting the relationships of power in society without being rooted in organizations that are mass-based. By mass-based I am referring to organizations that have an orientation towards building a sizable base amongst a given constituency—as opposed to a small activist or cadre organization. Cadre organizations normally organize a relatively small number of highly developed members. Mass-based organizations, on the other hand, unite hundreds of thousands of followers, sometimes millions. But the number of members is not the only criterion of a mass-based organization. The essential factor is that the organization bases itself on an appeal to the masses. Today's Left must be rooted within mass-based organizations that are building power in working class oppressed nationality communities. These communities have a strategic role to play,

given their relationship to production and their inherent interest in changing the economic and social relations of imperialism; and without organizations through which to raise their consciousness, develop their organizing skills, and to build community power, these communities will be unable to harness their revolutionary potential. Without the prioritization of the development of these organizations, the revolutionary Left in the U.S. runs the risk of remaining a middle-class intellectual sub-culture with little relevance or influence amongst the working class.

Most Leftists today shy away from immersing themselves in struggles that don't already have an explicitly revolutionary character, and as such often fail to orient their work to the day-to-day concerns of people or to root themselves amongst the oppressed. Many express a frustration with what they perceive to be apathy in working class communities. They regard them as brainwashed, sleeping, duped, bought out and in need of either being woken up, or side stepped altogether. They do not regard oppressed people as having the capacity and consciousness to emancipate themselves (Levant).

In the early 20th century, there were mass working class organizations fighting around material day-to-day struggles. Today, aside from a very weak and often politically reactionary labor movement, these mass organizations largely do not exist. In today's context it is pretty easy for those on the Left to avoid mass-based organizing altogether. It is the role of Left organizers to build Left poles within mass movements, but this is hard to do when the movements themselves are very weak. But this difficulty cannot deter them. Though small in number and thus far relatively modest in their impact, there are those on the Left who are finding ways of doing highly relevant organizing work applying non-sectarian Left politics and strategies to people's daily struggles.

7.2.2. A MATERIAL ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGY

The Left must develop a material assessment of today's political economy and from it a strategy to build power and prepare to step up when the opportunity of the right crisis within imperialism arises.

It is a task that all too often gets overlooked or pushed to the side by mass organiz-

ers. The assessment then remains in the hands of academics that are all too often distantly removed from both the base-building work and working class communities. This then leaves us with two tasks: one, there is both a need for organizers to carry out the work of becoming intellectuals, theoreticians, and strategists—and counter the anti-intellectual tendencies prevalent in the movement today; and second, the need for Left intellectuals working within the academy to humbly root themselves and their work within accountable relationships to mass-based organizations. Through this work we can open up opportunities to understand the crises within imperialism and prepare our actions in anticipation of them.

7.2.3. WORKING CLASS IMMIGRANT AND OPPRESSED NATIONALITY LEADERSHIP

Given the character of the working class, effective movements for fundamental social change in the U.S. must be multi-national and multi-racial in character. There is no race or nation within the U.S. or worldwide that is capable of overcoming U.S.-led imperialism on its own. In a period when working class oppressed nationality communities are poised to play such a vital role in the advancement of an effective movement for fundamental social change, it is vital that these communities provide leadership to the Left. It is these people who can speak most effectively to their people. It is these people who can ground their analysis in theory and lived experience. Though they play many vital roles to the movement, white organizers in the U.S. are largely not in a position to provide the leadership needed to build a base of oppressed nationality people. There are many barriers within the movement to working class oppressed nationality peoples providing this leadership—including white supremacy, national chauvinism, and the unequal distribution of resources. The white Left in the US has an ugly history in relation to these issues, one that has seriously stunted the movement's growth and development. Without seriously addressing these issues the chances of building an effective multi-national, multi-racial movement are very low.

7.2.4. A FEMINIST PRAXIS

We live in a patriarchal society. The definition I find most helpful in relation to patri-

archy is: “An economic, political, cultural and social system of domination of women that privileges men. It is based on binary definitions of gender—male/female—with strict gender roles. It also has rigidly enforced heterosexuality that places male/straight as superior and woman/queer as inferior” (Catalyst Project 2). Patriarchy is a system of male supremacy and domination that has its origins in pre-history and has shaped and been shaped by the emergence and development of class society.

Women’s oppression and the oppression of queer people is one of the main pillars of the existing oppressive social order. The fight for the liberation of all women and gender-oppressed people therefore poses a fundamental challenge to the status quo and must be a consistent feature of a successful international Left movement. The leadership of women and gender-oppressed people in revolutionary movements is a necessary condition for the successful liberation of all people. Patriarchal relations reproduce themselves everywhere including within the Left. Left organizers must constantly struggle against this tendency while recognizing that it will persist as long as patriarchy exists. Therefore, the Left must consistently raise feminist demands that mobilize and unite women and gender oppressed people within mass organizing, and consciously promote and develop women and gender oppressed people’s leadership in mass organizing projects and in the Left in general. Organizers must also challenge male privilege and develop feminist male leadership. In the movement, we need to fight for the continual development of a feminist theory and practice (Fire by Night 35-38).

7.2.5. AN INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT

The Left in the U.S. needs to prioritize participation in and development of an international social movement with common practice, for the impetus of a worldwide movement for fundamental social change does not lie within the confines of imperialist nations. The vast majority of people with a deep vested interest in changing this system, and those who over the last fifty years have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to do so, reside overwhelmingly in the oppressed nations of the Third World. Though there is a deep need to build a strong social movement amongst oppressed people here in the U.S., the role of U.S. social movements needs to be thoroughly studied and debated, in partnership with movements in the Third World. It is through

this relationship with the international Left that social movements in the U.S. can be the most productive and strategic in their fights for human freedom.

7.2.6. SHIFTING THE MATERIAL CONDITIONS

The growth of this new model of Left community organizing presents an important development for the Left in general. No other mass-based organizing model in use within the U.S. over the course of my lifetime has presented as much opportunity for the Left to address its most pressing needs. There are, indeed, many organizational forms that will be necessary in order to take on the tasks of this next period in movement activity. Mass-based organizations are only one. The organizations studied here are also not the only ones weighing in on the struggle. With that said, this organizing model is positioned to play an important role in addressing the above needs for the advancement of a strong Left movement. As is demonstrated in this study, this model can play a vital role in the construction of a mass base amongst strategic oppressed nationality communities; the development of accurate material assessments of today's global political economy and the development of long-term Left strategies; the development of working class immigrant and oppressed nationality leadership; the construction of a feminist praxis; and active participation in and growth of an international movement with common practice. Of course these organizations cannot do this work on their own, and by no means can they single-handedly solve the Left's problems, but their contribution is strong.

7.3 CURRENT FAILURES

Upon close examination there are a number of internal issues that can be identified as shortcomings, and could serve to hold organizations within the model from meeting their long-term goals of building a powerful Left base of oppressed people in the U.S. Four internal short-comings that I see currently serving to hold the model back are: 1) their organization's current lack of numbers; 2) their heavy reliance on the non-profit legal structure; 3) their lack of resources; and 4) their relative lack of development and experience. In addition there are a number of barriers to the organizing work that are a product of today's objective conditions, such as: reactionary hegemonic think-

ing amongst the base; lack of economic development in working class communities of color; attacks from the Right; and past failures of the Left. Community organizers can respond to these objective barriers in more or less helpful ways but for the most part they are beyond organizations' control.

7.3.1. LACKING THE NUMBERS

Given the potential base of millions of working class oppressed nationality peoples in the U.S., most of today's Left community organizations have a relatively small membership—numbering anywhere from a couple hundred dues-paying members to a few thousand. Seen alongside Left mass organizations of the Third World, such as the 1.5 million active members of the MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra or the Landless Workers' Movement) in Brazil, or the 2 million members of COSATU (the Congress of South African Trade Unions), these organizations are dwarfed in size and in impact. Given the underdeveloped state of the Left and lack of progressive working class mass movements in the U.S., one could argue that those numbers are the best that can be expected for this current period.

Differing priorities enable U.S.-based community organizations that utilize more populist models out of the Alinsky tradition—to attract a much larger membership. This model of Left mass-based organizing often places a higher priority on doing a deeper level of leadership and political development with members. This focus makes growth considerably slower and more intensive. This model also chooses to fight around issues that highlight class and race contradictions inherent within the imperialist system looking to heighten people's consciousness. These campaigns often require political struggle with neighborhood residents to counter the hegemonic thinking that has been drilled into people's heads.

For organizers in this model it is an important distinction between ideologically Left campaigns that forward a strategic political vision and ones that rely on populist sentiment. None-the-less it is a distinction that is not without its consequences—one of which is a considerable lack of numbers. Organizers see their work in this period as laying a solid foundation for when a more revolutionary period arrives.

7.3.2. LACKING THE RESOURCES

This may seem obvious, but these organizations need money in order to be able to do their work. It is worth noting that even with the ability to tap foundations, every Left community organizing project struggles with acquiring the resources they need to sustain their organizations. Nobody has deciphered a way to remain fiscally solid. Organizations rely on individual donors, foundations, the occasional government grant, member dues, and grassroots fundraising campaigns like mailings, t-shirt sales, house parties, and cultural performances to raise their operating budgets. While it is very rare for an organization to fold solely based on their funding this situation continues to leave most in a very precarious position and in many cases organizers end up going unpaid for lengthy stretches of time. It will not be the deciding factor in the success of these organizations', but their funding situation will impact the stability and effectiveness of their work.

7.3.3. RELIANCE ON THE NON-PROFIT STRUCTURE

Another point which could serve to hold back these Left community organizations from meeting their goals is a reliance on the 501©(3) non-profit legal structure. This legal structure allows an organization to be exempt from paying income tax, allows donors to make tax-free contributions, and gives them access to receiving grants from foundations, corporations, or the government. Over the last thirty years a vast array of established social justice organizations have become reliant on this legal structure in order to set up organizations that can financially sustain themselves and the staff organizers tied to them. This structure has allowed many organizers a stable work environment with the benefits of salaries and health care so needed to sustain their work over a long period of time. With their finances heavily regulated by the government, the risks and drawbacks are that the legal designation makes the organization mimic corporate structure and entrench itself in government regulations. They also in large part have to pander to foundations for future funding. Most organizers in this trend are highly critical of the 501©(3) structure as well, and there is a growing dialogue within the movement to attempt and address the contradictions inherent within it, complete with an entire conference devoted to the subject and a forthcoming book. None-the-less it will continue to be a problem that organizers will be grap-

pling with over the foreseeable future.

7.3.4. LACKING THE DEVELOPMENT

The final area that I'll point out is that, with a couple of notable exceptions, the vast majority of organizing projects in this Left trend are quite young, both in terms of the relative age of the organizations and the age of the organizers themselves. This youthfulness has its upsides and its downsides.

Organizers are largely fresh and energetic — important traits in a role that often risks leading to burnout and cynicism. This youthfulness also means that to large degree these organizations tend to avoid a sectarian or dogmatic political practice, and stale political theory. But it also means that their practice can be somewhat unrefined. It lacks the refinement that can only come with decades of application and reflection.

Many organizers were trained in organizing methodology either through trade unions or through classic community organizing schools. Others were self-taught. Almost all are politically self-taught, and came to the politics of Third World Marxism in their search for tools to advance their work as organizers and activists (STORM 51). This has allowed them to draw the best from various revolutionary traditions—allowing an important synthesis of politics, anti-dogmatism, and anti-sectarianism. But it has also meant that much of their politics and practice are experiments that have yet to be refined through decades of trial and error, critique and refinement. The trend is a powerful and effective one, whose refinement will come with time and maturity.

8. OUR HISTORICAL MEMORY: LEARNING FROM THE PAST, LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Over the past number of years a handful of organizations around the country have been advancing an exciting and groundbreaking organizing trend on the Left. Drawing on the rich and long history of Third World people's resistance to imperial domination and worker's resistance to the exploitative hand of capital—they have cultivated, in a brief period of time, a rich body of knowledge and experience. With careful reflection, this experience has the potential to guide community organizations through many more years of fighting for the oppressed, and to provide crucial lessons in strategy and method to the broader Left.

I have a very personal relationship to this study and to the work it examines. That I am biased in favor of it cannot be denied. As a youngster I had very basic feelings that something was not right about a world in which inequality was so pronounced. I had a basic understanding of fairness that was not being met, and I wanted to do something about it. Naturally, I was drawn to Left politics in my search for explanations and solutions. After becoming politically active and beginning my development as a political person amongst the upsurge of the Global Justice movement in the U.S. in the late 90s—typified by the Seattle 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization—I came to the not so original position that for the Left to be able to advance a liberatory agenda, organizers would have to be rooted in material organizing in oppressed communities. I was also convinced that the Left would have to get beyond the chauvinism of white middle-class activists in order to be effective. This work, of course, was already happening. I just didn't have a relationship to it and hadn't done the work of seeking it out.

Over the course of the next few years trying to find my place in the social justice movement I studied, got training wherever I could, engaged in movement strategy debates, did anti-racist political education and organizing with the white Left, did solidarity work with racial and economic justice organizing in working class communities of color—doing my best to familiarize myself with the work—and searched for a way to get trained as a community organizer. My first round of training came as a six-month internship as a tenant organizer at the San Francisco Coalition on Home-

lessness, under the caring tutelage of “Right to a Roof ” director James Tracey. Here, through a campaign addressing the eviction of a building of tenants on fixed incomes in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district, I began to learn the art of building power and leadership in working class communities. It was an instructive process, and I was deeply inspired by working on a campaign that won real material benefits in people’s lives—and which had a catalytic impact on the group of tenants, catapulting a number of them into long-term engagement with social justice work.

My next opportunity was to join the staff of Just Cause Oakland. I came to JCO because I had been searching for an organization that was engaged in effective material organizing while applying the Left politics that I was becoming increasingly committed to. I had considered going the route of labor organizing in one of the AFL-CIO unions, but was concerned about the mainstream labor movement’s lack of space for the application of radical politics. After the staff created the opportunity for me to join the work, it was here at JCO that I was rigorously trained by organizing director Dawn Phillips, over the course of the year that I was conducting research for this study. Though one’s learning is never over, and my development is quite far from complete, through my time as an organizer at JCO, through my research, and through engagement in various Left study groups in the Bay Area—I was trained in the method of organizing whose development is studied above. Personally, participating in this method of organizing on a daily basis, and having the privilege of working with incredible ordinary people taking extraordinary action to gain control of their lives and their communities, has brought me great hope in the possibility of oppressed people changing the course of history and rearranging the power structures of our society.

There are a few lessons for the broader Left that I think are important to draw from this method of organizing. The first is that hope for a sane and egalitarian future lies amongst the oppressed people of the world, and their struggles for dignity and survival. These are the people in whose material interests it is to redistribute the wealth of the world. And it is through these people’s collective struggles that the lessons can be drawn to inform the construction of a liberatory society.

The second is that ideology and political vision provide the Left with vital tools, which today are very often overlooked or shunned. Developing these tools takes engagement in political practice, as well as study and reflection. Without a sharp analysis of the problems of the world today, it is virtually impossible to craft strategies to over-

come them. And without a vision of the future we want to see, we condemn ourselves to wandering a never-ending maze searching for vague notions of freedom. Our work aims to prefigure the world in which we want to live. Vision provides us with a touchstone to which we can constantly return to assess the nature of our practice. Through prioritizing the work of developing vision, not only do we provide ourselves and our movement with the inspiration of a new tomorrow that is so needed to get through the desperation of today—but also we give ourselves a rubric with which to gage the correctness of our work.

The third is that strong organization—the key to shifting power in the world—take discipline, courage and humility. The discipline to engage in the thankless tasks of neighborhood organizing, study, and reflection; the courage to go up against the institutions of power in our society as well as challenge hegemonic thinking amongst the base; and the humility to be constantly challenged and develop and trust the leadership of others. These may appear to be personal traits, but they are ones that the organizer learns through the course of struggle, and without which is of little use to the movement.

And last but not least, in order to develop an effective practice, we must have a deep commitment to learning from the successes and failures of the past so they can provide us with a guide for the future.

This model of community organization serves as a reminder to all of those on the Left that the politics of working class internationalism are still relevant as ever to the oppressed people of the world. Even in these times of deep political and economic desperation, hopes of a new tomorrow can still rightfully burn in the hearts of those who seek it. As celebrated author and social critic Arundhati Roy eloquently stated, “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

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ENDNOTES

1 This is not widely used title. This model of organizing has yet to be defined in name by the organizers carrying it out. Until it is, I'll refer to this contemporary model as "revolutionary Left community organizing" for lack of a better term.

2 Like those adopted by organizations and networks such as ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), and PICO (Pacific Institute for Community Organizations).

3 For insight into Alinsky's populist organizing model see his book *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* and Horwitt's *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky: His Life and Legacy*.

4 For insight into organizers' analysis of capitalism Marx's *Capital*, Wage, Labor, and Capital and The Amandala Project's *Towards Land, Work, and Power: Charting a Path of Resistance Against US-Led Imperialism*.

5 For insight into organizers' analysis of imperialism see Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*

6 For insight into organizers' analysis of white supremacy see *The Wages of Whiteness* by David Roediger, *Racist America* by Joe R. Feagin, *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, and *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* by W.E.B. Du Bois.

7 For insight into organizers' analysis of patriarchy see Maria Mies' *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*.

8 Some call it Third World Marxism, and some don't. Within it some don't recognize a fully articulated body of politics and strategy and in-turn lump it in with the broader Marxist politic. Opinions aside I think it is helpful to delineate this loose body of thought developed for a very different context than classical Marxism, and for ease I refer to it as Third World Marxism.

9 Today this is exemplified by current splits in the labor movement. On July 25, 2005 the AFL-CIO split, partially over the question of base building.

10 This is seen on page 13, Volume 4 of Philip Foner's History of the Labor Movement in the United States, "By the summer of 1904, many progressive-minded elements in the American labor and Socialist movements were convinced of three basic principles: (1) the superiority of industrial unionism over craft unionism in the struggle against the highly integrated organizations of employers; (2) the impossibility of converting the conservative American Federation of Labor into a type of organization which would achieve real benefits for the majority of workingmen and women; and (3) the ineffectiveness of the existing organization of the industrial and radical type to build a movement which would organize and unite the entire working class. Clearly... a new organization of labor was necessary... It was this conviction that led to the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World." Also here: "While the worker, increasingly displaced by mechanical progress and deprived of his skill of craftsmanship, was sinking into the uniform mass of wage slaves, his power of resistance was being broken by the perpetuation of outgrown, artificial craft divisions which only served the purpose of keeping the workers pitted against one another, thus weakening their resistance to capitalist tyranny."

11 This is a departure that is also very clear today with the growth of a new and vibrant labor movement, based in independent workers' centers, which are autonomous from the classical union hierarchies. Some of these workers' centers fall firmly within this emerging model of Left community organizing, and some are separate.

12 The recent split in the AFL-CIO along some of these lines should also be noted. See "What Does the AFL-CIO Split Mean" by Chris Kotalik in Labor Notes September 2005

13 Some of these new workers' centers are: Miami Workers' Center, LA Garment Workers' Center, Asian Immigrant Women Advocates, Fuerza Unida, La Mujer Obrera, Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, Chinese Staff and Workers Association, and many more. To study the growth of this new worker center movement, see Ching Yoon Louie's Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Workers Take on the Global Factory and Tait's Poor Workers' Unions: Rebuilding Labor from Below.

14 In the next period of their engagement in mass work, the CPUSA would shift their line to a Popular Front strategy and virtually abandon the African-American struggle. See "Organizing the Unemployed: the Early Years of the Great Depression, 1929-1933".

15 To frame the explosion of radical movements in this period, author and movement veteran Max Elbaum used this helpful framing: "The biggest chasm was race. De facto segregation in housing, employment, education and society in general; the different ways in which oppression was experienced by whites and by different peoples of color; backward racial attitudes among white activists who had grown up in a racist society; the emergence of Black Power ideology and the call for whites to organize against racism within white communities — all these meant that most radical organizations of the time tended to be race- or nationality-specific. Organizations were thus exclusively or overwhelmingly made up of Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asians, Native Americans or whites" (59).

16 “Between 1968 and 1973, layer after layer of young people went in search of an ideological framework and strategy to bring that revolution about. Inspired by the dynamic liberation movements that threatened to besiege Washington with “two, three, many Vietnams,” many decided that a Third World-oriented version of Marxism (sometimes explicitly termed “Third World Marxism” and sometimes not) was the key to building a powerful left in the US, within the ‘belly of the beast’” (Elbaum 2).

17 For an highly detailed study of this movement see Payne’s, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*.

18 21. For good overviews of the Black Panther Party and the growth of Black Power ideology see Forman’s *The Making of Black Revolutionaries: A Personal Account*, Ture and Hamilton’s *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, Foner’s *The Black Panthers Speak*. Shakur’s *Assata: An Autobiography*, and Brown’s *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman’s Story*.

19 For a detailed study see Torres and Velazquez’s *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* and Melendez’s *We Took the Streets: Fighting for Latino Rights with the Young Lords*.

20 For good overviews see Smith and Warrior’s *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*, and Weyler’s *Blood of the Land: The Government and Corporate War Against the American Indian Movement*.

21 This program was called ERAP (Economic Research and Action Project). See Frost’s *An Interracial Movement of the Poor: Community Organizing and the New Left in the 1960s*.