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Building Political Power When Everything Is at Stake By Mónica Córdova & Lisa Owens

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Email: editor@ssir.org

BUILDING POLITICAL POWER WHEN EVERYTHING IS AT STAKE

Philanthropy needs more movement funders who stand on the side of racial and economic justice and against right-wing authoritarianism.

BY MÓNICA CÓRDOVA & LISA OWENS

Our organizations, The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing and The Hyams Foundation, are movement funders that share a common set of assumptions about the nature of power and the role that progressive philanthropy must play in defending democracy. As women of color and leaders of movement foundations, we are preoccupied with the question: *What role should progressive philanthropy play in responding to the rise of repressive, authoritarian policies that threaten the lives and well-being of the communities we are accountable to?*

We hope that readers are similarly preoccupied.

We maintain that racial and economic justice movements need political power to block right-wing attacks on multiracial democracy and to win governing power that can transform systems and build deep democracy.

Philanthropy needs more movement funders who stand on the side of racial and economic justice and who take direction from the movement-led forces working to expand democracy. We can do this by changing our practices in fundamental ways and aligning our grantmaking and investments with movement-identified strategies.

WHAT'S OUR ROLE?

At The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO), our mandate is to advance leadership nationally in the youth-organizing field and develop its capacity as a power-building force within social justice movements to transform social and economic conditions and advance lasting structural change. Youth-led and intergenerational organizing is our movement terrain. To succeed, we know that our work—which includes everything from resource mobilization to capacity building, political education, and funder organizing—must be grounded in a clear vision built in partnership with leaders in the youth-organizing field.

In 2018, leaders from organizations including Power U Center for Social Change, PODER In Action, and Youth United for Change came together to identify the primary challenges that hinder the ability of the youth-organizing field to build meaningful power. Following a

power-mapping session where they assessed their relative influence, these organizations called on FCYO to lean into our unique position as a funding intermediary and play a role in cohering this sector of the movement ecosystem. We were not entirely sure what that meant, but knew we had to try.

Fast-forward five years and we have learned a great deal about building a movement ecosystem and the importance of assessment, experimentation, and failure. Our success is not solely based on the amount of money we can move. It is also measured by our ability to assess conditions and create resourcing strategies that strengthen relationships and build a more powerful, strategic, and aligned youth-organizing field. We do this by curating an environment of discovery, offering organizations in our cohorts the ability to dream, test, fail, and adapt, again and again, until we win.

The Hyams Foundation is a movement funder based in Massachusetts. We work to increase racial, economic, and social justice and power within multiracial working-class communities in the state. Our role in the local ecosystem is to support BIPOC-led movement-organizing groups to build power to transform systems in the service of racial and economic justice. Over the past few years, we have become even more intentional about strengthening movement infrastructure to provide more support to organizing groups whose work and caseloads became almost unmanageable during the pandemic.

At Hyams we strive to be good partners in the social movement ecosystem. To us that means:

- Taking responsibility for understanding the state of the field, its strengths, and challenges.
- Being proactive about maintaining strong trusting relationships with BIPOC movement anchor organizations and coalitions. (A movement anchor organization plays a critical role in sustaining local, regional, and/or national coalitions and networks.)
- Actively working to support the sustainability of movement anchor organizations, their coalitions, and campaigns.
- Being proactive about maintaining strong relationships with progressive funders, including creating and participating in networks of aligned funders who support movement-identified priorities.
- Regularly assessing our utility as a partner in the ecosystem and making internal shifts to our operations, grantmaking, investment policies, and governance structures as we learn and grow.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

We are living in a time of heightened political crisis, characterized by the rise of a white supremacist, authoritarian far-right movement with a growing base. The January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol attracted white supremacist groups and militias, law enforcement and military personnel, small-business owners, religious fundamentalists, and a disgruntled base angry at a system they feel is not working for them. According to our trusted allies at Political Research Associates, it is significant that these formerly disparate groups of people were united under the banner of Make America Great Again (MAGA).

This far-right MAGA base is organized and continues to organize. It has been busy using its power to try to pass local and statewide policies that span issues that directly target multiracial working-class communities and US territories (such as Puerto Rico), including attacks on reproductive rights, gender-affirming health care, education, affirmative

action, voting rights, collective bargaining, affordable housing, climate resilience, and the list goes on.

We know that since the insurrection, this far-right base is increasingly willing to use violence and the threat of violence to intimidate political opponents and the communities they serve. According to the FBI, the seven states that have continued to see unusual levels of violent threats to election officials are the places where the 2020 election results were questioned by President Trump and his supporters: Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Nevada, and Wisconsin. This threat is real and growing.

On the other hand, youth-led, adult-led, and intergenerational grassroots, base-building organizations and their national coalitions and networks have been at the forefront of defending multiracial working-class communities against attack. They have tirelessly worked to preserve and expand democracy for all people while engaging in issue campaigns to increase wages, fight mass incarceration, defend public education, stop displacement, direct public funding to solidarity economy projects, create climate resiliency, and more.

Movement coalitions and networks are now positioning themselves to act as a unifying force by creating local and national strategy that will help them organize the majority of people in this country who reject the politics of white supremacy and authoritarianism and who can be organized to fight for the preservation and expansion of multiracial democracy.

WHAT IS POLITICAL POWER?

The most immediate goals of political power are to defeat the racist, authoritarian right's policy agenda and, where possible, win the reforms that improve aspects of daily life in our communities.

The longer-term goal of political power, or people's power, is governance and deep democracy. *Having political power means that the communities whose land, labor, traditions, and cultures were/are being extracted to build wealth for an elite class have the power to reshape society.*

More than simply electing individuals to office, winning real political power will give the multiracial working class and people living across the United States and in its territories the ability to:

- Roll back repressive laws and statutes. Enact laws that protect democracy and enshrine human rights. Respect the sovereignty of colonized peoples.
- Abolish old public institutions that exploit, extract, and dehumanize. Build truly democratic institutions and processes that put decision-making authority into the hands of people who have to live with the consequences.
- Organize civil society at scale. Fund a robust social movement ecosystem with many kinds of well-resourced organizations. Support people to develop exciting new capacities. Forge bonds of solidarity and interconnection. These bonds offer an example of what it looks like when political power is leveraged to build cultural power.
- Shift public money into the solidarity economy. Support and expand community land trusts, worker co-ops, and cooperative urban

Our work must engage young people in issues that directly affect them while developing their consciousness and skills to be lifelong organizers and activists.

farms in every town, city, and state. These models demonstrate what it looks like when political power is leveraged to build economic power.

- Regulate corporate profit and invest in the commons. Tax exorbitant corporate profits and individual wealth and reinvest back into the commons. Enact rent control and stabilize rents. Build high-quality affordable housing, schools, day and elder care, youth programming, and green space for all.

HOW DO MOVEMENT GROUPS ORGANIZE FOR POLITICAL POWER?

Movement groups build political power along three crucial dimensions:

- Base building to move significant numbers of our people into action.
- Strategic and tactical alliances to unite the sectors and constituencies capable of achieving our goals.
- Shifting public narratives to promote our vision of social justice and true democracy (drawing on the deep relationship between political and cultural power).

Movement groups use issue-based campaigns to win reforms, expand their base, develop their leadership, and change dominant narratives in society. As they build power, movement groups increase their ability to successfully make demands of decision makers or replace them with people who will. As they grow stronger, their coalitions and networks develop and advance strategy that enables them to win governing power to reshape society.

Seven years ago, in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, FCYO convened a network of 70 youth-organizing groups to build alignment on what it will take to achieve transformative political power. Their call to action is still timely and relevant to youth-led, adult-led, and intergenerational groups. (To learn more about FCYO's framework for building political power, please go to our website and download our report *The Power to Win Framework*.)

FCYO set three priorities:

1. We need power, not just empowerment. | While youth organizing often takes place on the front lines of social justice fights, many groups struggle to ground their work in a coherent long-term strategy for building power. Youth organizing often emphasizes youth empowerment over actual power. And groups commonly employ strategies that mobilize small numbers of leaders in an attempt to persuade decision makers. While it is possible to achieve some wins this way, it is nearly impossible to realize transformative changes or ensure that victories remain meaningful. To win the change we need, youth organizing must tap the social leverage of young people to organize entire communities, build bases at scale, develop strategic alliances, and shift public narratives. These lessons are grounded in our experiences supporting youth organizing but they are also applicable across the board.

2. We need campaigns that are fights for today and training grounds for tomorrow. | Campaigns are not just about winning policy change but also vehicles for political and human development. Our work must engage young people in issues that directly affect them while developing their consciousness and skills to be lifelong organizers and activists. We need leaders, both young and old, who can ground their struggles within a broader ideology and vision of social transformation. They should also have core organizing competencies, including how to build a base, develop meaningful alliances, and forge a strategy based on a concrete power analysis.

3. We need infrastructure that leads to broader political life. | Youth organizing should be an on-ramp to a life of movement work. When young people age out of youth-organizing groups, there should be clear pathways for them to continue engaging in political struggle as professional organizers, rank-and-file workers, or grassroots community leaders. Creating these pathways requires developing enduring collaborative relationships between organizations working with people of different ages, including youth, young adults, and more. Just as intergenerational infrastructure can lead to political life beyond youth organizing, we need a clear path for anyone to continue engaging in political struggle beyond their initial experiences.

WHAT CAN PROGRESSIVE FUNDERS DO DIFFERENTLY?

Progressive funders can advance movement-identified strategies to create lasting change by doing the following:

Continue to learn about organizing and fund it to build power. | Many movement-building groups lose so much time educating funders about what it means to organize for power. To be clear, base building and transformative leadership development are fundamental to any organizing methodology. There are also other tools in the toolkit. Groups rely on a variety of complementary approaches such as healing justice, youth and intergenerational media, and arts and culture work to build community, learn, and develop new skills. These approaches, however, are not the same as organizing. In our experience, if everything is perceived as organizing, then real organizing does not receive the resources it needs. Funders working to understand organizing and power building must commit to study the theory and praxis of various forms of organizing and learn from the history of people's movements around the globe. Without this intentionality, the concepts of organizing and power are liable to go the same route as "diversity," which has been emptied of meaning such that we can no longer discern where organizing occurs or where power is being built.

Build trusting relationships. | We must stop being passive patrons of change and step into true strategic partnership with trusted movement partners. Organizers are in it for the long haul, and we must also be. This means supporting organizing groups to strategize, experiment, and fail because success is often masked as an alleged failure. It is through failure that the most significant lessons are learned and leaps in strategy are made.

Conduct ongoing internal assessment and stay flexible when the time comes to pivot. | To be generative partners to movement organizations, we must have regular practices of looking inward and asking difficult questions about what we need to learn, grow, and shift to serve as better partners.

Work collaboratively with other funders. | Every progressive institution has a role to play in the ecosystem; we urge you to ask your movement partners what roles they need you to play. Follow their direction and organize other progressive funders to move resources to the ecosystem.

WHERE DO I START?

We invite you to consider what it would look like for your foundation to embark on the process of becoming a movement funder. What trusting relationships would need to be strengthened or built? What past harm

would need to be repaired? What exciting new possibilities might arise for the ecosystem you are part of? What initial step can you take now? Here are some concrete ideas and suggestions to help take the next step:

1. Build trusting relationships with movement anchor organizations and networks. Specifically, we recommend the following:

- Have a long-term, multiyear orientation as a partner to movements. Follow, don't lead. Experiment, learn, and course correct. Long term implies periods of intense activity and then lulls. Stick with it.
- Make commitments to the entire system: base-building organizing groups, the coalitions they anchor, the participating organizations, and the intermediaries/allies they depend on.
- Fund experiments in building movement infrastructure at scale—support projects that scale up administrative and finance capacity, technology, communications, leadership pipeline, successful executive transitions, land and capital projects, and organizational development.
- Fund movement groups' experiments in developing and refining strategy.
- Fund movement groups' efforts to scale up organizing efforts to build the big tent. Support them to expand their base and a wider base of allies. Do not abandon them when they experience challenges related to growth.

2. Conduct ongoing internal assessment and stay flexible when the time comes to pivot.

- Provide a great deal of support for staff. Help them learn to pivot and respond to movement-wide challenges and opportunities. Adapt internal processes to meet the movement's needs.
- Develop new structures to share power with movements, including de-siloing traditional grantmaking areas and committing to participatory grantmaking.
- Change internal foundation operations to streamline getting money out the door and simplify grant applications and reporting. Turn evaluation inward to assess whether we are being good partners and sharing power.

3. Work collaboratively with other funders.

- Support progressive funder networks. Organize or participate in progressive funder networks that are action oriented, rather than focused on funder learning as a goal.
- Host staff peer-learning exchanges with another aligned foundation. Share strategies for streamlining grantmaking and reporting. Start a pooled fund in partnership with movement advisory groups.

We hope that we have conveyed our commitment to being in community with our peers so that we can collectively move resources at the scale that is required to protect and expand multiracial democracy. In that spirit of community and fierce urgency, we say: Philanthropy must do differently to do better. We must get out of our silos. We must stop acting independently and unilaterally. Our movement partners demand a higher level of coordination and cohesion from us.

Let us move from performing our values about justice and equity toward embracing discomfort, curiosity, and risk. That is where the real transformation happens. □

Mónica Córdova is executive director of Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing.

Lisa Owens is executive director of The Hyams Foundation.