



**EAR** TO THE **GROUND**  
PROJECT

# **MORE** THAN WE **IMAGINED**

ACTIVISTS' ASSESSMENTS ON THE MOMENT & THE WAY FORWARD

BY **NTANYA LEE & STEVE WILLIAMS**

*We are a mirror,  
we are here to see ourselves and make ourselves seen,  
for you to see us so that you may see yourself,  
so that others can see themselves in our gaze.  
Here we are and we are a mirror.  
Not reality, but merely it's reflection.  
Not light, but merely a glimmer.  
Not the road, but merely a few steps.  
Not a guide, but merely one of many roads  
that leads towards tomorrow.*

*-Subcomandante Marcos*

*"Aquí estamos y un espejo somos"*



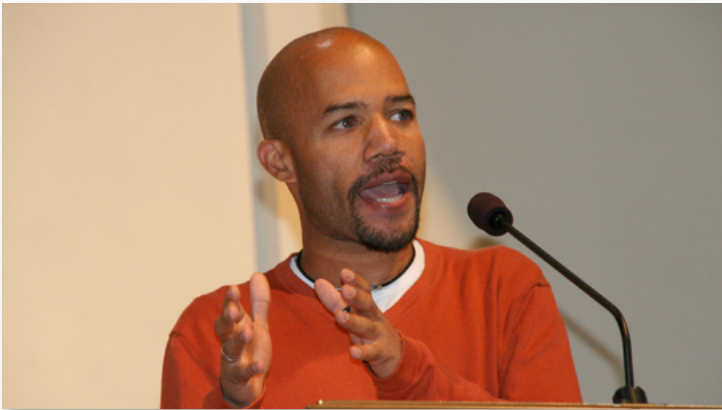
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**NTANYA LEE**

With a family history of activism and childhood roots in the Black working class of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, NTanya has spent thirty years working for social justice. Politicized by her experience of poverty, public assistance programs, and her mother’s resistance to the daily blows of oppression, NTanya spent her teenage years organizing her peers against Ronald Reagan’s military aggression and attacks on poor families. She organized for

racial and gender justice as a college student, and started the first LGBT student of color organization on campus. In the early ‘90s she was active in grassroots, racial justice school reform campaigns, and was a member of Black AIDS Mobilization. In both New York and Michigan, she organized progressive alliances between working-class Black and Latino community organizations and white-led LGBT groups to fight a wave of anti-gay initiatives pushed by the Religious Right. For eleven years she worked with Coleman Advocates as a youth organizer and then Executive Director to build the power of Black and Latino families to win education, housing and budget justice in San Francisco, California. Coleman Advocates is a founding member of San Francisco Rising, an electoral and movement-building alliance of base-building organizations rooted in the city’s poor and working class communities of color. NTanya and her partner Ayoka are raising their five-year-old in the Bay Area.



**STEVE WILLIAMS**

Born at the close of the 1960s to African American parents who left their southern homelands to try to make it in the North, Steve Williams grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; and West Chester, Pennsylvania during the reign of Ronald Reagan. Steve became politicized in college around racial justice and the anti-war movement of the early 1990s. His experiences organizing against poverty and homelessness with the Philadelphia Union of the Home-

less and the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness were formative to Steve’s development as an organizer and activist, along with trips to South Africa and Cuba. In 1997, Steve co-founded POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights), a community-based organization of low-income and working class tenants, transit riders and workers. He served as Executive Director at POWER for 14 years.. In addition to his professional organizing experiences, Steve has been an active volunteer in various local, national and international social movements through his involvement with the World Social Forum process, Grassroots Global Justice, the Right to the City, San Francisco Rising and Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement (STORM). Steve lives in San Francisco with his partner, Mei-ying, and their three-year-old son, Amil.

May 2013

Additional copies of the report can be downloaded at [www.EarToTheGroundProject.org](http://www.EarToTheGroundProject.org)

The views and opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the authors.



# MORE THAN WE IMAGINED

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# Introduction:

## EAR TO THE GROUND PROJECT

After more than two decades of on-the-ground organizing in distinct organizations, the two of us have spent the last sixteen months on a unique journey together. We conducted more than 150 interviews with movement activists, read the work of movement intellectuals, and spent a lot of time in conversation with each other— in doing so, we pushed ourselves to imagine the world, and our own work, in new ways.

The Ear to the Ground project became a national research effort and a profoundly transformative process for us as individuals. While the project led to this final report, it's political impact lies less in the words on these pages, but in the relationships and conversations created over the last year, and the ideas for new initiatives that emerged. It's been a year of 'on-the-ground' study that no book or report can replace or properly represent, but we hope that *More than We Imagined*, the report from the Ear to the Ground project, conveys the sense of the possibility that we feel.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

Like many of you, and in fact alongside you, we have worked to build a movement capable of exerting the power necessary to transform the world. For us, much of that work has taken place through community-based organizing. Each of us built or re-built grassroots organizations in San Francisco—Coleman Advocates and POWER (People Organized to Win

Employment Rights) which continue to wage important campaigns to make the City more livable for working class people and people of color. We won important victories around workers' rights, education reform and expanding public services. Our organizations allowed us to strategize and take action with amazingly talented and courageous people. Yet conditions in our communities and in the world around us were getting worse.

We both got involved in this work because we wanted to change the world, but more and more, we were consumed by the tasks of sustaining a single organization and a handful of alliances. We were frustrated by our own inability to develop the power needed to make fundamental and transformative changes in the world. For similar and distinct reasons, we both decided to leave our positions as Executive Directors at the end of 2011. Neither of us knew what was next, but we knew we were hungry for more. Though we were leaving our respective organizations, we knew that our fundamental commitment to social transformation remained. The historic events of 2011 challenged us both to take a leap.

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

In the aftermath of the economic implosion of 2008, ever-expanding wars, worsening ecological catastrophes, shocking corporate greed, and vicious attacks on immigrants and people of color, we asked ourselves, "Where is the outrage?" Langston Hughes, in his famous poem 'A Dream Deferred' wrote powerfully about whether or not an unanswered dream dries up like a raisin in the sun, or if it explodes. As neoliberalism's elites called for more and more austerity, we wondered the same. As the dreams of our communities around the world were deferred, would they just fester in the sun— or would they one day explode?

In 2011, we got our answer. Rotting outrage exploded when millions of people around the globe took to the streets. From Tunis to Madison, Montreal to Mexico City, Athens to New York City, millions of people around the globe took to the streets to demand change. These uprisings and mobilizations transformed the terrain on which social struggles take place. Hundreds of new activists are energized. Many experienced activists are open to exploring new and unconventional approaches.

Yet what did it all mean for our efforts to build an audacious movement? How were movement activists reading the conditions of this period? How do these activists understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the movement? What might be our strategy for moving forward in the coming period and beyond?

The two of us decided to embark on a project to interview other movement activists in an effort to sharpen our own ideas of what the movement might do in this moment of upheaval. The Ear to the Ground project was born.

Working from the notion that any attempt to build a national movement must begin with deep and careful listening, we set out to interview more than 150 organizers and activists on the frontlines of various struggles in the United States. For ten months, we talked to some of our movement's most brilliant thinkers and strategists, and extraordinary local activists, each paving a way forward for our movement.

We honestly didn't think anyone would be excited about this project. We only hoped that people would be polite enough to agree to an interview, but we assumed that we would be the only ones who thought that such a project might be useful. *We could not have been more wrong.*

It turns out we are not the only ones hungry for more. Instead, we discovered there were more of us out there than we could have ever imagined. The "us" that we discovered are hungry—hungry to be a part of something big and transformative.

After a year of interviews, scheduling meetings over Facebook, too many frequent flier miles and long-distance phone calls, we are confident that we have the makings of a team. This team doesn't have jerseys yet. We don't have a coach or a stadium, but we do have amazing folks who've been grinding away for years in their backyards, on street corners—waiting for the call to get in the game.

## OUR HOPES FOR MORE THAN WE IMAGINED

Despite this project's breadth, ultimately we did not get to connect with all of the important work that we wanted to that is happening across the country. The United States is a big country, and the Ear to the Ground project was by no means a complete assessment of the entire social justice movement. We spoke to 158 people involved in some of the most important social justice struggles today, but there are important areas of under-representation. In particular, the voices of organizers within indigenous, Arab and Middle Eastern communities, in Hawai'i, Alaska and in the Great Plains states are absent from this narrative. We did our best to interview a broad cross-section of the social justice movement, but there were gaps. This is important to acknowledge, not only because we hoped to have a truly representative sampling but also because the issues confronting and the work happening in those movements are unique and have important lessons to share with other movements. Despite its shortcomings, we are confident that *More than We Imagined* will contribute to a larger process of building the movement of movements that so many of us long for.

We collected more than 200 hours of interview data during the course of this project, rich with participants' stories and reflections. This report is neither a catalogue of participant responses, nor a comprehensive summary of everything we heard. The report does, however, seek to represent the most common reflections, most significant recommendations and best thinking of the movement activists we interviewed. In the future, we may publish more reports based on all of the data that we've collected, but we wanted to share this report as quickly as possible in hopes that it can contribute to the important discussions that are happening about future directions.

*More Than We Imagined* is divided into five sections. The first section provides more detail on the pool of organizers and activists who we interviewed, and the next section provides a brief summary of the participants' responses to some of the interview's key questions. In the third and fourth sections, we draw out key themes that emerged from the participants' responses and we share the most common ideas about what our movement should do next. The final section features our own recommendations.

There is a deep, palpable hunger to rise to the challenges and opportunities that this moment presents. Our goals for this report are threefold: that movement activists will see themselves reflected in the report's analysis; that the findings inspire all of us to explore how we might make our work bolder; and that the report can anchor ongoing debates about how to advance a long-term strategy for social transformation in the United States and beyond. ★

## WORD CHOICES

**PARTICIPANT:** Throughout the report, the term 'participant' refers to the people that we interviewed.

**THE MOVEMENT:** Throughout the interviews and this report, we use the term 'the movement.' This is a term that lots of activists use in different ways. In the interviews, we asked each participant to define that and other terms for themselves. For the purposes of this report, we are using this definition: "a movement is the sustained activism of various organizations and individuals working towards a common goal of political, economic, cultural or social change."

**SOCIAL JUSTICE:** "Social justice" is an broad framework for progressive social change work in the U.S. Social justice forces include thousands of grassroots base-building organizations, advocacy organizations, labor unions, activist networks, cultural work, media and communications projects, and many other efforts to make the world more just, egalitarian, healthy, and sustainable.

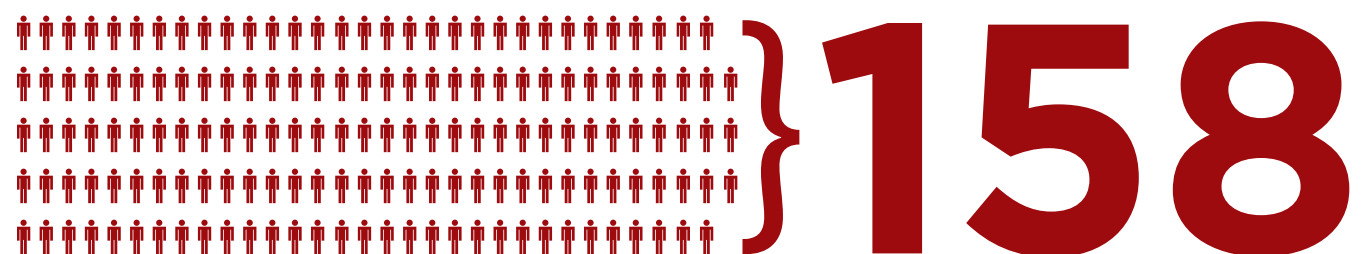
**THE LEFT:** In a time when the Right is so dominant, it can be challenging to determine what is "Left". Is any progressive Democrat a "leftist"? Is someone who opposes capitalism but does not have an analysis of white supremacy a "leftist"? Developing a common understanding of this and other terms will be an important project for the movement. For the purpose of this report, the term 'the Left' refers to people and political formations that seek to end systematic oppression such as capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy and white supremacy.

**A MOVEMENT OF MOVEMENTS:** The term 'movement of movements' was coined by Naomi Klein to describe the anti-globalization movement. We have adopted this term to describe what we hope to build: a movement that brings movements, organizations, activists from different issues, sectors and communities into a shared struggle against the intersecting systems that produce injustice and inequality.

**GRASSTOPS:** We use the term 'grasstops' to refer to those organizations whose work focuses primarily on advocating for the passage of legislation, especially at the state and federal government levels, largely employing insider tactics.

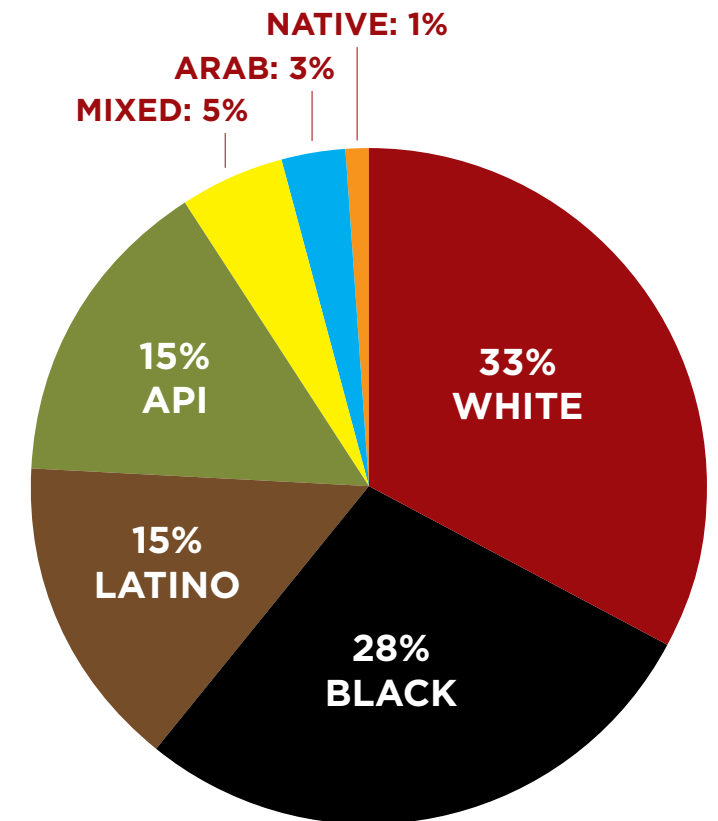
# Who We Interviewed

We conducted one-on-one interviews with 158 organizers, activists and leaders in the social justice movement in the United States over nine months. Though not a scientifically “representative” sample of our movement of many thousands, the organizers and activists we interviewed are diverse in terms of age, race, gender and geography; their organizational work represented more than twenty different issue sectors.

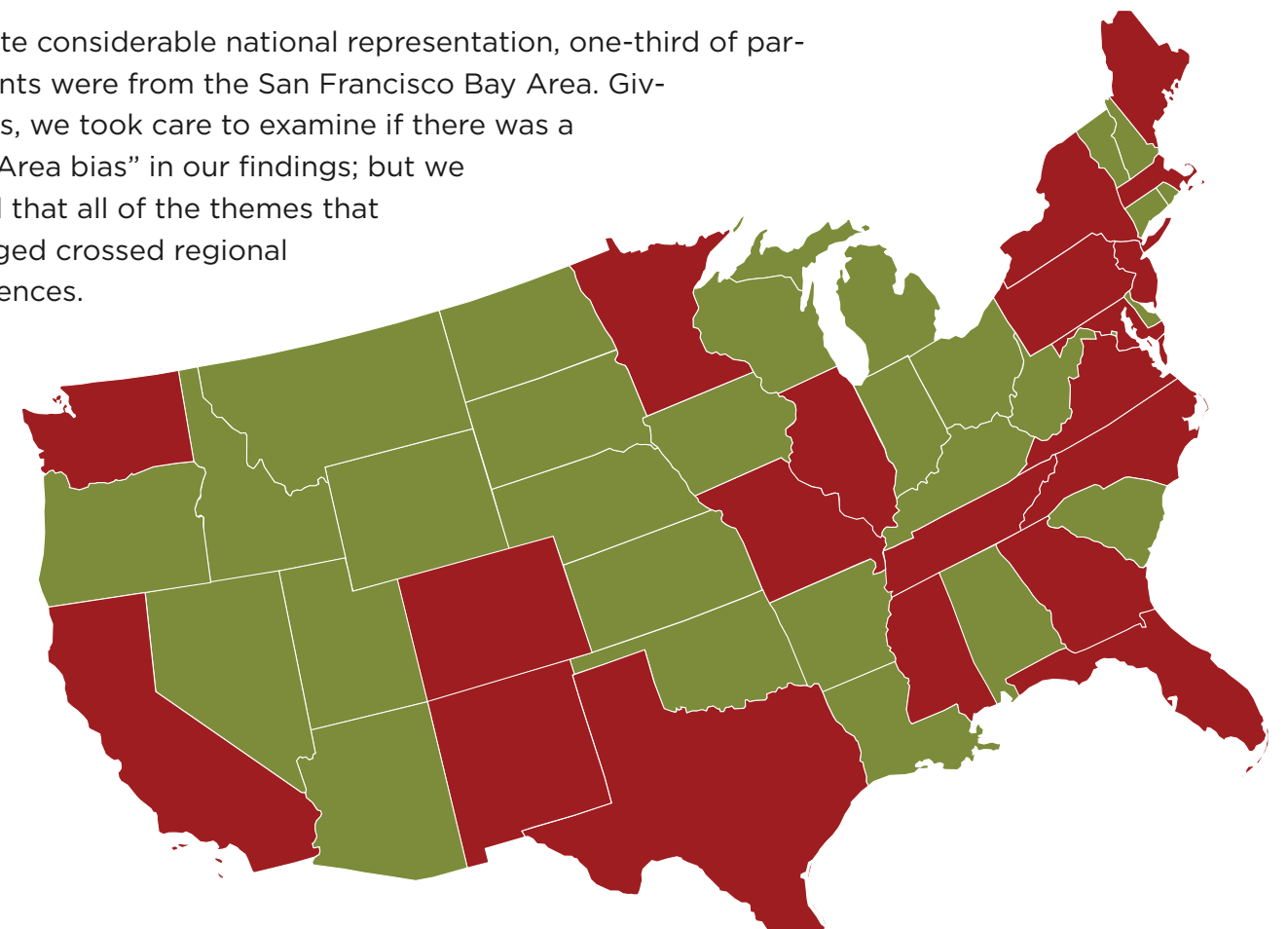


**RACE/ETHNICITY:** The supermajority of participants were people of color.

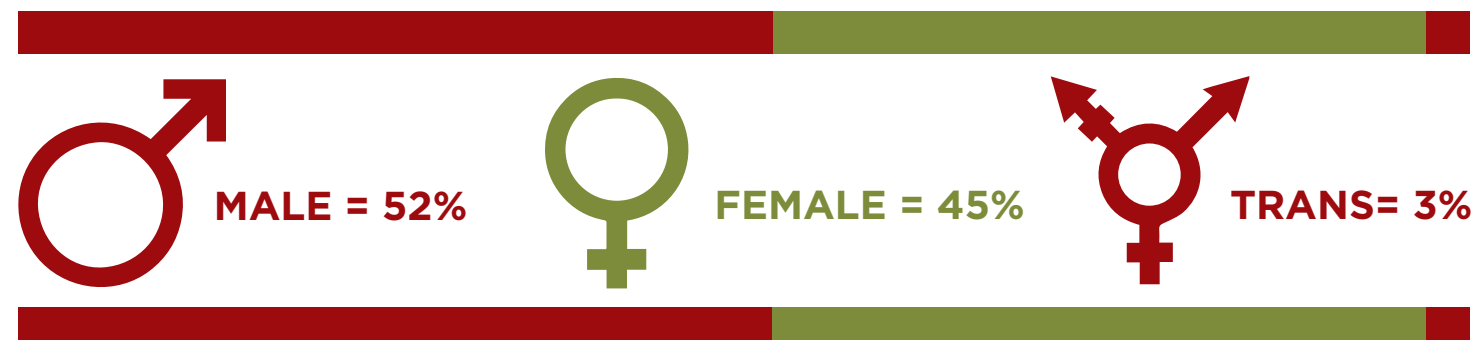
**GEOGRAPHY:** We interviewed participants from more than 30 different communities across the United States, including: Ann Arbor, MI; Detroit, MI; Chicago, IL; St Louis, MO; Boston, MA; Cambridge, MA; Brookline, MA; Hatfield, MA; Northampton, MA; Portland, ME; New York City, NY; Philadelphia, PA; Hoboken, NJ; Denver, CO; Albuquerque, NM; Dallas, TX; Donna, TX; Houston, TX; Killeen, TX; Durham, NC; Raleigh, NC; Atlanta, GA; East Point, GA; Jackson, MS; Miami, FL; Knoxville, TN; Los Angeles, CA; Beaumont, CA; Seattle, WA; Mitchellville, MD; Silver Spring, MD; Alexandria, VA; Washington, D.C.; and several Bay Area cities (San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, Albany, San Leandro, San Jose).



Despite considerable national representation, one-third of participants were from the San Francisco Bay Area. Given this, we took care to examine if there was a “Bay Area bias” in our findings; but we found that all of the themes that emerged crossed regional differences.



**GENDER:** 52% of participants identified as male; 45% as female; and 3% as transgendered.



**AGE:** Nearly 70% of participants were between the ages of 30 and 50. Veteran movement elders were well represented. Despite our efforts, high school students and other young people under 20 were not.

## PARTICIPANTS' ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIENCE & WORLDVIEW

**JUSTICE SECTORS:** Participants are active in more than twenty different justice sectors, including racial and economic justice; immigrant and migrant rights; environmental, climate, and food justice; labor and workers' rights; housing and tenant rights; educational justice; youth rights; reproductive justice; healing justice; LGBT rights; gender justice; peace and anti-war; transit justice; and criminal and restorative justice.

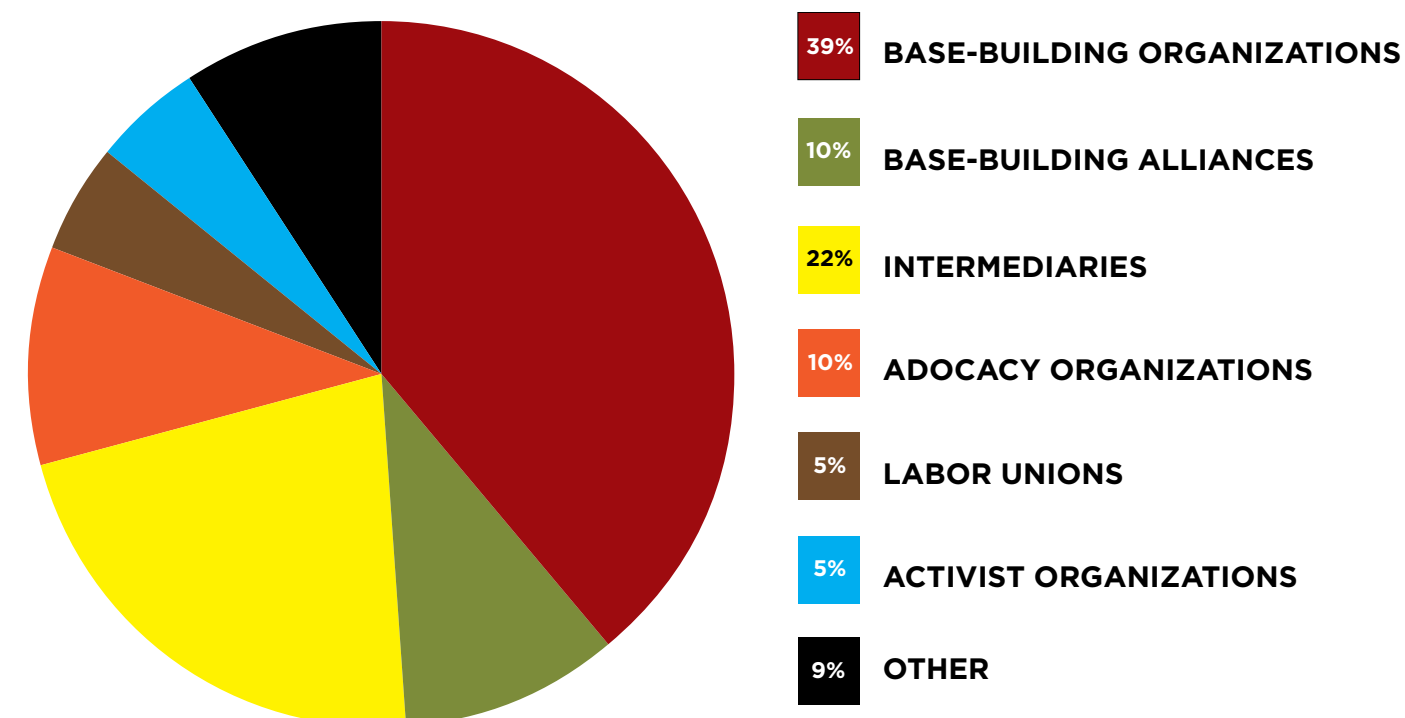
**ROLES IN THE MOVEMENT:** More than sixty-percent of participants work in the social justice movement as organizers (paid and unpaid), or as senior leaders of grassroots base-building groups. There were also union organizers, alliance directors, member-leaders, policy advocates, electoral strategists, online organizers, communication staff, intellectuals, healers and trainers.

**90'S RENAISSANCE ORGANIZATIONS:** A little more than half of the participants are active in organizations and groupings that did not exist twenty years ago.

**YOUNG & OLD ALIKE:** 75% of participants came of age politically after the 1960s. Instead of experiencing progressive mass movements, many have been influenced by the forty-year ascendancy of neoliberal and right-wing forces. One quarter of participants came of age during the movements of the 1960s and early 1970s.

**GRASSROOTS, GRASSTOPS & IN-BETWEEN:** Participants were active in more than ten different organizational types. 39% were from base-building organizations and 10% were from alliances of base-building organizations. Another 22% were from movement support centers/intermediaries; 10% from advocacy organizations; 5% from labor unions, and 5% were from volunteer activist organizations. We also interviewed leaders working in electoral/(c)(4) formations, foundations, revolutionary organizations, college campus activist groups, as well as several cultural workers.

## ORGANIZATIONAL TYPES





**ARE YOU NOW.. :** 65% of participants identified their politics by using a wide range of words that marked them as anti-capitalist. While we did not expect that, we were more surprised by how challenging it was for so many participants to answer the question of political identification at all. Most hesitated, qualified their words— saying, “Well, it depends on where I am,” or “I consider myself a socialist, but I don’t know what that term means to people anymore, so I say I’m a progressive.” Even veteran activists who once had a clear and specific political identity, no longer know how to identify in this moment.

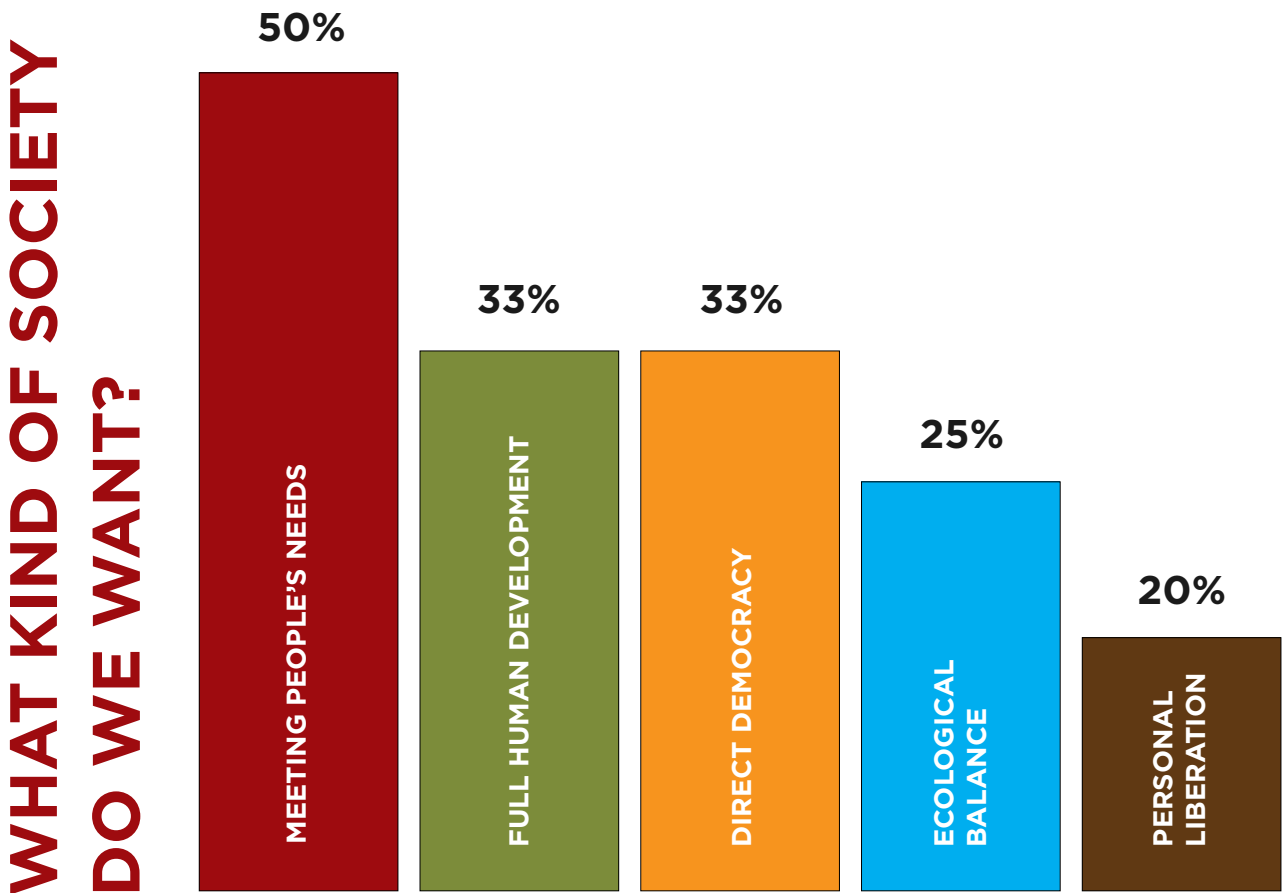
Many participants expressed that “it’s so complicated to know what labels to use these days.” Participants talked about how “loaded” or “messy” political labels can be; some simply stated “I don’t like labels, so I don’t use them to describe my politics.”

A sampling of the political labels that participants used included: radical, anti-racist, socialist, leftist, non-sectarian left, communist, anti-imperialist, anarchist, progressive, Black feminist, Marxist, revolutionary, rebel, racial justice progressive, revolutionary nationalist, organizer, and activist for human rights.



**VISION OF WINNING:** Five core ideas dominated participants’ responses to the question: What kind of society do we want? Across demographic categories, participants said they wanted a society in which all people have:

- Economic justice and democracy, so everyone’s basic needs are met (50% of participants);
- The freedom to fully develop and express oneself (33% of participants);
- Full democratic participation and voice in economic, social and political life (33% of participants);
- A balanced relationship with nature (25% of participants); and
- Personal liberation beyond the narrowly ‘economic’ or material, where people also have access to practices and avenues that heal internal trauma and suffering.



While these five components were most common, the list implies a clarity that was not present in most responses. Most participants struggled to answer this question. Most participants listed core principles or values but were frustrated by their own inability to express a holistic and systematic vision of their better world. Some participants suggested that “a better world” seemed so far off that they thought it was better to think about “winning” as building a strong movement, and a few said that “it’s so far away it seems almost silly to talk about it.” ★

# What We Heard:

## CORE ASSESSMENTS

We asked all of the movement activists that we interviewed the same twenty-five, open-ended questions focused on three areas:

- 1. Their assessment of this moment;
- 2. Their assessment of the state of our movement; and
- 3. Their thoughts about what needs to be done to strengthen the movement.

This section summarizes participants’ responses to the first two areas of questions; the next section summaries participants’ ideas about what our movement needs to do.

## ASSESSMENT OF THIS MOMENT

### A UNIQUE HISTORICAL MOMENT, APPROACHING A TIPPING POINT

When asked, “Do you think there is anything historically unique about this moment or is it just a continuation of all the forces and trends that have been at play for decades and centuries?” nearly 95% of participants said “both.” While almost universally acknowledging that current conditions stem from the past, participants named three aspects of the current period which make this moment unique: 1) the nature of the economic crisis (65%); 2) the scale of recent popular uprisings (33%); and 3) the threat of the ecological crisis (30%).

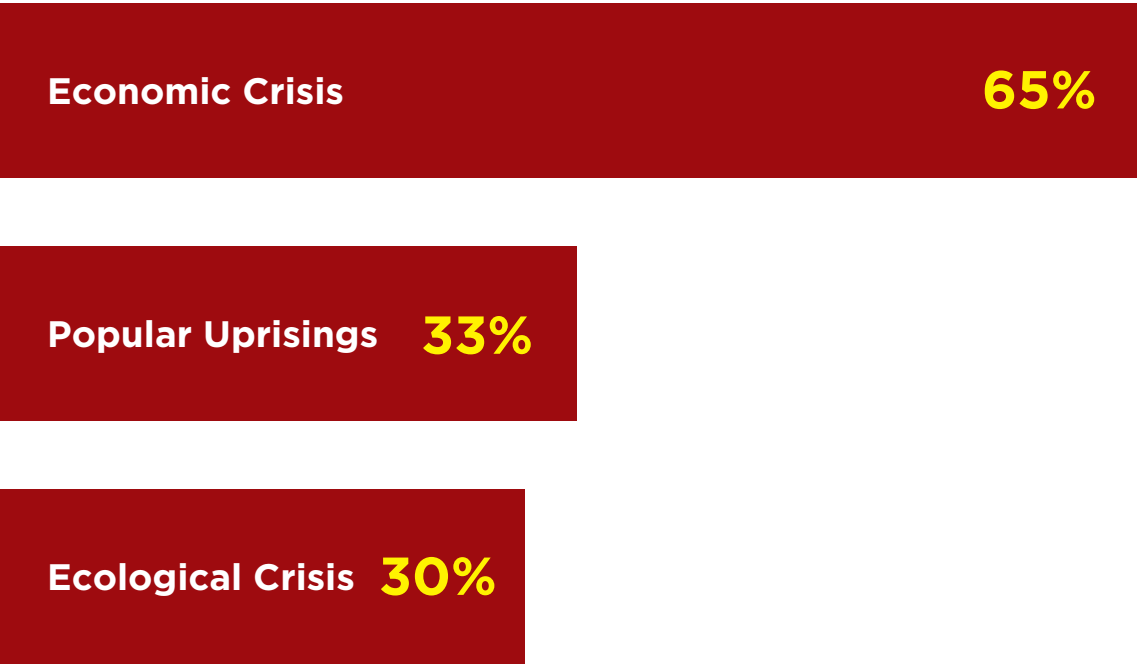
Even more pointedly, many offered that not only was this moment unique, but that together, these multiple crises have brought society to “a tipping point,” a moment when forces once in slow motion reach a point of accelerated change where that situation is potentially transformed. One veteran organizer laughingly reflected, “I’ve been saying ‘this is a historic moment’ as part of organizing raps for twenty years! But this time, it is actually true.” With a powerful sense of uncertainty and hope, many participants argued that how our movements choose to respond to these crises in the coming years— both globally and domestically—will shape whether the coming transition means “hope or disaster.”

### FROM ARAB SPRING TO ANTI-AUSTERITY AUTUMN

We heard activists from across the country say that the events of 2011 “were the most exciting political events of my lifetime.” The events most commonly mentioned were the popular uprisings known as the “Arab Spring” (55% of participants) and “Occupy Wall Street/We are the 99%” (65%). Participants were most inspired by the mass scale and boldness of these uprisings, as well as the national and global impact of both of these upsurges.

Participants— some of whom participated in the Occupy Wall Street movement and some of whom did not— credited the Occupy movement with shifting the national discourse to the left, for clipping the wings of the once-ascendant Tea Party, and for helping to defeat the Republicans in the 2012 presidential election. Many participants also appreciated the way that encampments across the country broke from what some called the “institutional progressive-left” and prevailing organizational forms, tactics and culture. Several participants

WHAT MAKES THIS MOMENT UNIQUE?





also mentioned the Occupy movement brought new focus on the role of the white working class in building a truly mass movement in this country.

Among the other events that movement activists viewed as important in the last period, most were other large uprisings or mobilizations, such as the Wisconsin labor protests; the undocumented “Dreamer” student direct actions and victories (mentioned most frequently by participants in the South and Southwest); and the mobilizations responding to the vigilante murder of Trayvon Martin and the state execution of Troy Davis (mentioned most frequently by participants in the South).

Answering why these mobilizations and actions were seen as significant, participants cited these factors:

- Mobilized massive numbers of people for longer than a single day (33%)
- Shifted public discourse to the left (30%)
- Used militant and creative forms of direct action (20%)
- Directly critiqued the ruling elite and/or the capitalist system (18%)
- Emboldened others to take action, created a new sense of what is possible (17%)
- Engaged sectors beyond ‘usual suspects’, like the white working class (15%)

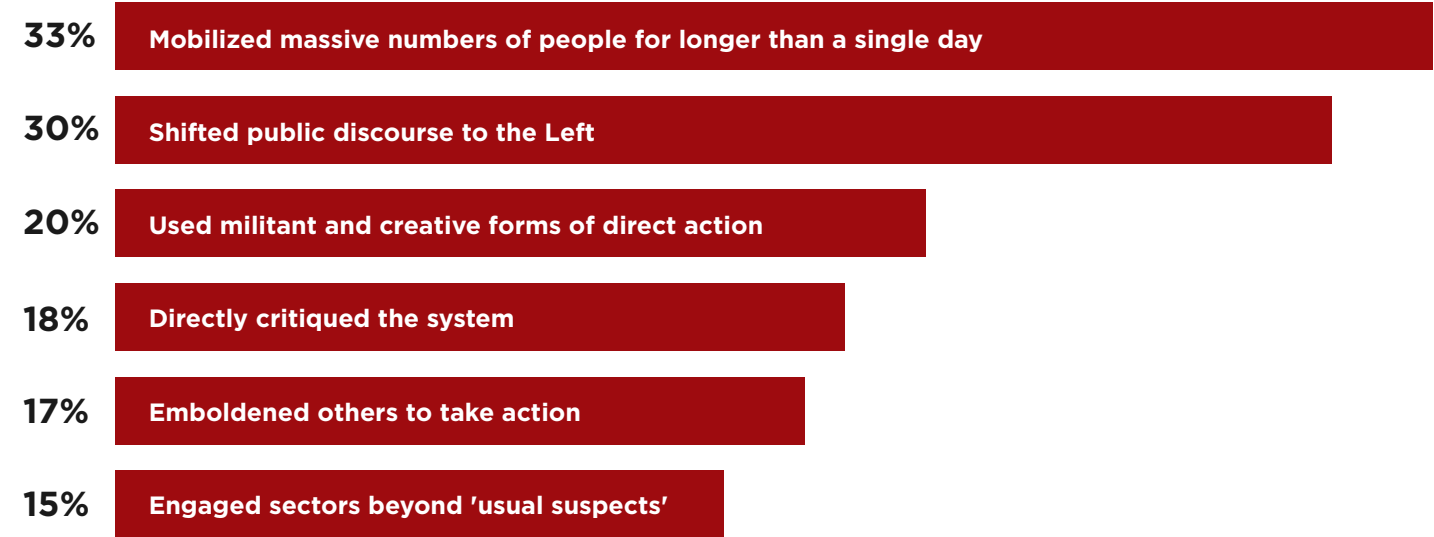
Particularly for the post-Civil Rights generation activists we interviewed, the uprisings of 2011 helped people envision “a grassroots people’s revolution,” qualitatively shifting their perspective on movement building, systematic demands and militant actions, because “new things feel possible now.”

ASSESSMENT OF THE STATE OF THE MOVEMENT  
THE BALANCE OF FORCES

Across demographic categories, regional differences and issue sectors, there was a near-consensus about the basic balance of forces in the United States today: the Right remains ideologically dominant and politically powerful; the capitalist class continues to exert power manipulating the economic crisis to benefit their own interests rather than the interests of the 99%; and the Left is small, fragmented and weak by comparison. Participants shared several examples of how the Right continues to shape the political environment, including the behavior of Democratic Party elected officials and insiders.

On the other hand, a significant number of participants pointed out conflicts among factions within the Right; the tension between the libertarian tendencies within the Tea Party and the interests of the capitalist section of the ruling class; the decline of the Right’s social base; and the

WHY WERE THESE MOBILIZATIONS AND ACTIONS SIGNIFICANT?



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## AMISHA PATEL, CHICAGO

I didn't grow up understanding what racism, classism, or sexism were— although of course they impacted me. I just felt like something was wrong with me and my family. I just internalized oppression, struggled with mental health issues. There was no counter-message. But then I got politicized in college, and I began to understand my life. I found activists and organizers. I spent spring break with an indigenous resistance movement, and I came alive for the first time. So many things burst open in me. It gave meaning to studying, to being on the planet. I was able to channel my rage in a targeted, strategic way, to move through it, and move past it with a sense of energy and purpose.

increasing vigilante violence of the racist Right, noting that “they will continue to get more dangerous as they become more marginal.”

A large number of participants did say they weren't “informed enough” to make clear assessments about the state of the Right or the 1% that could inform movement strategy. They had questions about who the members and factions of the 1% are, and wanted to understand the strategies of the elite to maintain and expand coalitional blocs which would continue their reign.

## THE MOVEMENT'S CORE STRENGTHS

Many participants talked about the courage and resilience of the people in our movement, and shared moving stories describing how they have been deeply inspired and transformed through the work. Two core themes stood out in participants' assessment of the strengths of the U.S. social justice movement:

**1. 50% of participants noted that thousands of local, grassroots organizations and trade unions are organizing key constituencies of working class and communities of color.** This level of organization did not exist fifteen years ago. These organizations identify and develop tens of thousands of grassroots

community and worker leaders, training hundreds of movement organizers every year. Together, they wage campaigns and build power providing the organizational basis for communities across the country to resist attacks from the right, corporations and neoliberal forces.

**2. 33% of participants shared the view that alliances of local organizations have begun to mature and are beginning to build bridges in promising ways.** While some cautioned about the need to continue to focus on building local organizations, there was a widely shared optimism about the movement-building potential of grassroots networks and alliances like Grassroots Global Justice; National Domestic Worker Alliance;

the Right to the City Alliance; Jobs with Justice; National Day Laborers Organizing Network; Alliance for a Just Society; and others. Unlike traditional national ‘grasstops’ groups, these alliances harness the collective power of local organizations and establish important vehicles where these constituencies can exert power at a national and international level. Participants also pointed to exciting developments where these networks are building ongoing partnerships with long-standing networks like National People's Action, the PICO National Network and the AFL-CIO.

**3. 30% of participants pointed to the great promise and potential of popular upsurges “popping off everywhere.”** Participants pointed to the fact that significant mobilizations seem to be coming together at a more rapid rate than what we've seen in the previous period. This was especially true for participants active in the trade union movement who frequently cited the 2011 protests in Wisconsin against the governor's attacks on workers' rights, the 2012 strike of the Chicago teacher's union and the strikes by fast food workers as evidence that new kinds of worker organizing were both possible and necessary in this period. Although spontaneous mobilizations are not enough, participants see them as proof that new things are possible.

## THE MOVEMENT'S WEAKNESSES AND CHALLENGES

While participants were largely optimistic about the potential for movement building in the coming years, all participants shared a sense of urgency about the need to overcome key weaknesses and challenges in order to get there:

- 4. 60% said that our current organizational forms are insufficient.** Trade unionists and community organizers all spoke to the limitations of existing organizational forms to address the structural nature of the current crisis alone.
- 5. 50% said the movement is fragmented.** Across every demographic category, participants expressed frustration that our organizations and activists are so deeply isolated by geography, issue sector, identity or type of work. Many expressed confusion as to why attempts to forge national unity and coordination have been unsuccessful.
- 6. 33% said that our movement and organizations are not “at scale.”** Here is an instance

**“Down here in the South, there's a sense of urgency about this tipping point moment, a sense of anxiety about whether we're prepared, whether we've done the work we were supposed to do over the last 10 years to prepare for this kind of moment.”**



where potential difference was masked by the use of the same word: “scale.” Some participants spoke specifically about the need for base-building organizations to ‘get to scale’ with their existing membership base; others argued for reaching out to other sectors of society. While these were not necessarily oppositional views, participants who raised this point tended to focus on one aspect or the other. A number of participants posed the question: “What is meant by ‘getting to scale?’” A number of participants mentioned that responding to this question will help the movement define its larger strategy.

7. **33% said we lack a clear, inspiring vision of the world we are fighting for.** We have a strong critique of the problems and long lists of policy ideas, but more than one-third of participants said we need clarity about our vision of the world we want to live in. Many decades of playing defense against the Right have hampered our ability to take the offensive in the battle of ideas. Our many sectors and movements each have compelling and even visionary ideas, but they have not cohered into a systematic vision that can unite our forces and build a “movement of movements.”

8. **32% said that our grassroots organizing and activism lacks a shared long-term strategy.** Participants expressed a yearning for clarity about how our reform campaigns, grassroots leadership development and activist mobilizations can ‘add up’ to some-

thing bigger and more transformative. Given the urgency of the moment, participants also discussed the need for shared long-term strategy to better allocate limited resources, to identify the most strategic fights or initiatives, and to gain the greatest impact from the day-to-day labor of thousands of individual activists and organizations.

**“Our response tells you how weak we are. We’re seeing the biggest crisis of capitalism since 1929, and people don’t know what to do.”**

9. **30% of participants said that the culture of the social justice movement is too negative, and reproduces destructive practices we’ve learned from the broader society.** Participants were particularly passionate about this subject, sharing frustrations with aspects of movement culture that “sometimes make us our own worst enemies,” including: “ego-driven” work not in the movement’s best interests; organizational competitiveness and divisiveness; harshly judgmental and disrespectful interpersonal behavior; overwork, martyrdom and self-marginalization; and a culture that often communicates more anger than hope. Examples of this went from very specific to more general; some included the open letter polemics that devolve into vicious and unproductive name-calling to general suspicion or rejection of new ideas.

10. **25% of participants said that the disproportionate power of foundations and donors**

**in the 501(c)(3) system is harmful to movement building efforts.** While “not enough resources” was the most commonly mentioned organizational challenge, there was a widely shared critique that movement work is too dependent on nonprofit structures that rely heavily on foundations. Concerns included the fact that foundations are not structurally accountable to our communities, yet have tremendous influence over our collective future by dictating which organizations, issues and / or strategies will be funded. Participants also pointed out that the funding system within the 501(c)(3) “nonprofit industrial complex” promotes competitiveness, short-term outcomes over long-term movement strategy, and a reliance on social change ‘professionals’ over an ethic of volunteer-driven movement building. A need for a more strategic and accountable approach to financing movement work was widely viewed as obvious and critical.

11. **15% of participants said there is a lack of investment in grassroots organizing in key communities and sectors—namely in the South, in African American communities and in rural areas.** Many participants pointed out that because funding is not allocated strategically, efforts to organize and build capacity amongst certain communities and sectors have gone critically under-resourced. This is especially important to broader movement building efforts because many of these communities and sectors are positioned in such a way and have interests that could lead those constituencies to play a leading role in building a movement of movements. ★



## JOSHUA KAHN RUSSELL, OAKLAND

I grew up as one of a very few Jews in suburban Connecticut. I was pretty intensely gay-bashed and felt profoundly alienated from the community I was in. I found punk rock, embraced a marginal, oppositional identity and became an activist. At one point in high school, we heard that a white supremacist leader was going to speak at a local public library and we went to protest. There was a line of riot police when we got there; they let the Nazi’s in and kept us out. But half of the cops were Black, and they didn’t want to be there. It hit me that I had more in common with those Black cops than I did with other white people in my own town. My beef was the institution of policing not with the individual police officers. I began distinguishing between alienation and oppression, began a shift from activist to organizer, starting learning about community organizations, and my own whiteness.

# What We Heard:

## KEY THEMES

We originally planned to map out various ‘camps’ to show the central debates within participants’ responses; however, distinct camps did not emerge. Instead there was a high level of consensus. This was a surprise to us. This is not to say there are not differences, but the differences arose in degrees of emphasis rather than outright disagreement. For example, some participants suggested that the weakness of the movement grows out of a weakness of the Left; other participants did not speak about the Left. These differences of emphasis might have obscured the difference that does exist on certain topics, but these interviews did reveal some important areas of consensus that could offer important starting points for future movement building efforts.

Four themes emerged as core points of unity in the participants’ collective assessment of the ‘state of the moment’ and ‘the movement’:

1. Our issues intersect
2. Trial by fire burns more than it builds
3. Movement culture makes hard work harder
4. There is no substitute to base-building

## ‘OUR ISSUES INTERSECT’

An overwhelming number of the participants offered a sharp intersectional analysis of the issues that they are working on. Teachers are grappling with climate change; domestic workers are taking on immigration reform; unemployed people are confronting banks; transit riders are talking about the need for healthy and sustainable food choices; and the organizers in each of those sectors are struggling to connect the dots.

It was remarkable that so many organizers and activists rooted in one particular issue or sector are paying close attention to work that is happening in other parts of the movement and even in other parts of the globe. Determining whether the prevalence of this intersectional analysis is a new development was beyond the scope of our investigation, but it did seem new for a lot of the participants. Many spoke to the difficulty of trying to sharpen this analysis and understanding how it might inform their day-to-day work. Those who were more familiar with this perspective credited women of color feminists for lifting up the ways that multiple oppressions and issues intersect, influencing the development of each other.

**“We need more of a culture where we can put the particular project or campaign we’re involved in, in service of a broader political project. That’s what’s needed.”**

## ‘TRIAL BY FIRE BURNS MORE THAN IT BUILDS’

Any successful movement must constantly develop leadership capacities among an ever-expanding core of organizers and activists. Most participants reported having no ongoing mechanism to guide and support their development as movement activists. The overwhelming impression is that being a movement activist is a “trial by fire” experience. A few participants mentioned the increased sense of confidence that can come from finding one’s own way, but no one believed that “trial by fire” will be sufficient to developing the number and caliber of leaders, organizers and activists that a successful movement will require.

Without a more systematic approach to leadership development, younger participants fear that they are unprepared to assume greater leadership in their organizations and in the larger movement. Many referenced a fear of burning out and not having a balanced life. Compounding this fear, many participants lamented feeling isolated as movement activists, as meaningful exchanges with other movement activists were sporadic and rarely moved beyond the demands of a particular issue or campaign.

Those participants who are employed within nonprofit agencies, organizations and institutions said that even though they might have access to professional development opportunities within their organizations, too often that development seemed without a clear purpose. Participants— both paid and unpaid— wanted development opportunities to help them become more complete fighters for justice and modelers of the new society. This was especially true for participants under 40. What those participants— and the others— want is to be thoughtfully developed as movement activists. Coincidentally, most of the participants over 50 expressed an eagerness to serve as a resource to younger organizers and activists.

### ‘MOVEMENT CULTURE MAKES HARD WORK HARDER’

When responding to the question “What should the movement feel like?” nearly every participant lit up. Virtually everyone fantasized about a movement that is inspiring and feels like ‘a true community’; many went so far as to say that it should be fun. Sadly, most said that their experience in movement work rarely reflects that vision. Participants acknowledged that the work of achieving social justice will be hard work, but not one participant said that the movement’s overall culture sustains them. Many participants said that they remain active despite the movement’s culture rather than because of it, or because of their particular organization’s efforts to challenge movement norms. The culture of our movement, while situated within the larger context of U.S. society, should aspire to do better than making hard work harder.

Participants’ comments highlighted four dynamics that act as obstacles to a more fulfilling and productive movement culture:

- One dynamic that many participants mentioned is that we often fall into thinking small. Some described this as **self-marginalization**; and others as **localism**. While many participants pointed to the importance of rooting the struggle in communities, a number of participants also said that this could go too far. Instead of emphasizing how the same systemic forces exploit different communities in different ways, activists are often locked in a debate about who has been exploited the worst, thereby limiting our ability to work collaboratively.

- Many participants pointed to **racist and patriarchal practices within the movement**. Like all of the other challenges, this dynamic is obviously connected to the broader cultural context in which we all operate. Participants shared that far too many organizations and individuals exhibit problematic attitudes and practices towards women, people of color and gender non-conforming people; but participants particularly highlighted larger organizations and institutions, especially those based in white communities, for ignoring, taking undue credit for and/or in other ways not re-directing attention towards the work of base-building organizations and those organizations made up of and led by communities of color and women.
- **The movement does not act like we plan to win lasting and fundamental change in our communities, workplaces or the world.** As a result, we either obsess exclusively on our immediate campaign— willing to make long-term sacrifices for short-term gains— or we simply plod along content to “put up a good fight.” Participants argued that as long as this cynical pessimism persists, the movement will not be ready to take the challenging and unpredictable risks that lasting liberation requires. We must shift our orientation if we hope to build a movement that will attract the millions of people who are hungry to stand up and take action to improve conditions in the world around them.
- **We have an inability to have healthy dialogue, debate and disagreement.** It’s clear that all of the issues that we work on are extremely important, but too often, political difference plays out as personal and organizational attacks and backstabbing which do nothing to move the work forward. As one participant said, “I am always troubled by the fact that it seems like we save our harshest criticism for people in the movement, rather than the people running the systems that are keeping us down.” Virtually all participants spoke to the desire to recognize and make space for diversity of views and approaches but underscored the need to develop better skills and mechanisms for accountability and communication to ensure that debate and discussion helps to move the work forward.



### PAULINA HELM-HERNANDEZ, ATLANTA

“I was really angry for a long time. I was lucky that as a teenager, I was mentored by people who recognized my anger and channeled it...They started sending me to all these trainings, very pre-organizing, but it flipped the script for me. I had to take responsibility, I’m either going to die from this rage or transform it...Honestly, I feel like organizing saved my life.”

**“We need to have the hard conversations about our strengths and challenges. We all think we have the right way of organizing, then we move away from a space of learning. We are dismissive of each other. But building space for multiple approaches and strategies is the way to win.”**



While participants mentioned the work of some institutions to address these challenges, those participants also noted the need for these types of efforts to become movement-wide projects. This is important because all of dynamics listed above act in concert to smother any possibility of a movement culture rooted in purpose, solidarity and honesty. Competition for foundation resources often exacerbates these volatile dynamics.

### ‘THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE TO BASE-BUILDING’

Participants throughout the interviews pointed to how the terms of debate in national politics are problematic, and that there is a need to shift political discourse to the Left. Building on the examples of the Occupy and Arab Spring movements, participants—especially those who have worked with base-building organizations—were virtually unanimous that there is no substitute for base building if we are serious about changing the debate. Trade union movement participants expressed this point with urgency. Since the strength of any movement grows out of its organized base, participants said emphatically that the slow work of base building must be supported in every way.



### KHALIDA SMALLS, BOSTON

“A major barrier to our movement is our own imagination. We need to Believe that there doesn’t need to be a Prison Industrial Complex, that we can have something different. We have to take ourselves out of the boxes we are trained to be in and that the harshness of our experiences have locked us into. And then...We need to be real, honest, transparent and accountable in a meaningful way to each other. Right now we just aren’t able to give real feedback, reflect, deal with the tensions and BS that come up amongst groups and individuals, stuff that’s happened in the past that we haven’t quite gotten over, or differences between struggles or campaigns. Egos get too big. But at some point, this [movement] is about something that goes beyond you and if you can’t do that, you are in the way.”

Despite this consensus, many noted how underappreciated organizing is in the movement. Most philanthropic foundations, especially those that make larger grants, seem uninterested in supporting and sustaining base-building efforts. But the problem does not rest only with foundations. “Grasstops” institutions and policy advocates, especially those operating within the national policy arena in Washington, DC, rarely engage the grassroots bases of base-building organizations, and when they do, it’s often done on a transactional basis of mobilizing people without soliciting their feedback and perspective from the beginning of the process. Many participants emphasized the importance of aligning different aspects of our movements’ work— including policy advocacy, resource allocation and media messaging— to the struggles of community and labor organizations. As one participant noted “We’ll never have a real movement without locally rooted, organized bases of people.”

Still, those organizers that we interviewed noted some important ways that base building can be improved. Some of these ideas included: partnerships with think tanks and resource institutions to support more regional and statewide campaigns; expansion of training centers which develop new and more experienced organizers; supporting the development of spaces like People’s Movement Assemblies that allow thousands of people to take on new levels of engagement and leadership in movement strategy and in local governance; and engaging in more sustained collective action that explicitly targets the 1%.

Without sacrificing work with core constituencies— communities of color, working class people, women, lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender and gender-nonconforming people and youth— participants see opportunities to organize amongst sectors of U.S. society that we have not engaged in recent years, most notably the increasingly precarious— newly unemployed workers, foreclosed homeowners, indebted students, forced part-time workers, etc. Where that organizing is already happening, participants wanted to have more connection to those efforts.

Finally, the problems of persistent unemployment, extreme climate, corporate autocracy and shoot-first policing demonstrate that the old solutions have been ineffective. In these tumultuous times, participants see opportunities to advance demands now that might previously have been seen as too radical. To do that well, participants pointed to the need for expanded political education for staff and members. Few participants specified what that political education would look like. ★

**“I keep calling for strategy; now I feel like I have to make a contribution. I need to develop my own capacity to do that, as I let go of the idea that someone is going to come along and do it for me.”**



## What We Heard:

### THOUGHTS ON THE WAY FORWARD

We heard deep self-reflection about ways in which our work is not enough to meet the unique challenges of our times, and the need to overcome deeply embedded ways of thinking and behaving. Yet we also heard a readiness to experiment with new ways of working, and a sincere level of courage to challenge old ways, give up that which is not working, and adopt a new level of personal and organizational risk.

When we asked participants to name “three central tasks” for the movement as well as three priority “activities” that could better position the movement to take advantage of the opportunities of this moment, participants were full of creative ideas. We compiled more than seventy-five unique ideas for strengthening our collective work (See Appendix for the list). Below are the most widely mentioned recommendations across differences of race, region and sector:

1. Develop a shared vision of a healthy, just and sustainable society.
2. Deepen the political development of all movement activists and leaders.
3. Craft a multi sectoral strategy for lasting social change.
4. Create new organizational forms in order to break out of issue and sector silos.
5. Integrate personal and social transformation into all aspects of movement work.

6. Advance audacious and strategic campaigns.
7. Expand ‘resiliency’ projects and the alternative ways that people are already meeting community needs for jobs, food, housing, energy-production, banking, public safety, and more.
8. Build united fronts and strategic multi-class alliances.
9. Join or build ‘political homes’— spaces in which people come together based on ideological unity with one another.
10. Better utilize new communications technology to build broad support for left ideas.

Participants suggested changes in both the content and in the structuring of our work. In terms of the content of our work, a number of participants pointed to the need to develop ‘resilience’ projects that allow us to collectively meet the immediate needs of our constituencies – from urban farming coops to feed one another to community-controlled processes that maintain peace on our streets. These projects would enable us to organize, increase our ability to survive and resist crises, expand leadership opportunities and demonstrate the viability of alternatives. Participants, especially those involved with community organizations and trade unions, also spoke to the need to rely more on the labor of members: “We are simply too afraid to ask more from our members.” For some this was about lowering the cost of maintaining an organization, but most said this was important in an effort to prepare rank-and-file members to assert practical, tactical and strategic leadership in organizations and in the larger movements.

As for structural changes, most participants em-



### WILLIE BAPTIST, PHILADELPHIA

I’ve been poor all my life. One of the most important events of my life for me, politically, was the Watts Uprising (in 1965). I was 17, right there in the midst of it. Everything was turned upside down; it really woke me up. To have tanks going down your street, here in America. I began to see our problems as social, not individual. There were more than 300 uprisings in urban cities then; they deeply shaped who I am. Now, I’m a student of that period, and one of the lessons is that you have to develop leaders and organizers, and unite if you’re going to move forward. After Watts, the forces who were most organized — from the Black Muslims to Ronald Reagan’s Right — were able to take advantage of that whole situation. In the final analysis, it’s a question of power, and power comes from organization and unity.

Our movement is in its embryonic stages. But we have this remote control mentality, we want everything fast, we want the roof before we have the building, the foundation. Every movement needs a foundation and that foundation is committed cadre, committed to theory and practice. It’s easy to be a sunshine soldier but when the rain comes you need some ideology that will help you understand, to help you stick and stay. Not a superman or woman, but an organizer, rooted in community.

**“The more our communities are pitted against each other, the more we have to be in it together. We need new kinds of national structures. Nonprofits and labor unions like ours have been at it for many years, so now it’s a matter of developing unifying structure and principles.”**

phasized the need to deal with the fragmentation of the movement. Several identified the need for all social justice institutions— community organizations, trade unions, think tanks, resource centers and philanthropic foundations— to hold cross-sectoral strategy conferences. This would require unprecedented levels of transparency and a willingness to abandon “empire-building” approaches to the work. Participants also mentioned the importance of establishing spaces that allow organizers and activists from different issues and sectors to come together as individuals, outside of the constraints of their organizational affiliations to develop themselves and to coordinate

joint actions in moments of crisis and upsurge. Lastly, and maybe most surprisingly, a large number of participants whispered, “I think that many of existing our organizations need to merge.”

Since we conducted these interviews, several initiatives have been launched to allow movement activists to have these types of discussions about what is needed to address many of these themes. Some of these initiatives are regional; others are rooted in particular sectors. All of them are bravely leaning into the uncertainty of the current moment. We are very hopeful that these processes— individually and collectively— will help prepare the movement to rise to meet the opportunities before us. ★

## Recommendations:

### LAY THE FOUNDATION FOR VICTORY

Participants shared a treasure trove of exciting ideas about important initiatives that the movement might undertake, given the potential that this moment holds. All of the ideas, especially those about strategic campaigns, spoke to a deep hunger for the movement to take a leap into an unprecedented level of boldness. Participants aspired to bring hundreds of thousands into coordinated and decentralized activities to challenge some aspect of the 1%'s domination.

Listening to these ideas, we were, and continue to be, excited and would love to roll up our sleeves to get them off the ground. However, as we reflected on what it would take to get initiatives of this scale into motion, one challenge must be addressed— the movement's current lack of cohesiveness.

Any large-scale campaign or initiative will likely require that some organizations and activists reduce some of the work that they are already doing. This will obviously be no small decision. We all know the deep problems that our existing work attempts to address. Many of the national and regional alliances that have tried to take on shared work have stumbled as they've attempted to overcome this challenge. This becomes even more daunting if we hope to bring organizations and activists together from various movements, sectors and constituencies.

We believe that there is a genuine desire to take on work that will allow our movement to soar. The potential is there. The conditions are dire. Communities and workplaces are rising up, and movement activists are open to change, but we believe that a movement of movements must build a strong foundation so that we can take this great leap to powerful momentum.

**“I want our movement to have some swag. I want to feel like we're on the move, we're winning. I want our shit to feel contagious.”**

We are not offering a tactical master plan. Instead, we propose some strategic first steps that could provide a firm foundation for a new stage of movement building. As conditions have changed around us in the last few decades, the foundation for our movement has been cracking and disintegrating. So many years of fighting defensive campaigns has atrophied our revolutionary imagination, our collective capacity to imagine an alternative better than capitalism. It's time to rebuild. As transformative construction workers and architects, we are proposing a three-point plan to lay the foundation for a movement of movements:

1. Renew our Political Culture
2. Craft New Answers to the Key Questions
3. Build a “Movement of Movements”

### 1. RENEW OUR POLITICAL CULTURE

Our work is more profound than simply battling those who defend and benefit from exploitation and oppression. Since the systems of oppression and exploitation permeate all aspects of our lives, we must also transform the culture in which we operate. This cannot simply be a task that we take on after we win.

If we don't renew a vibrant and respectful political culture, those around us— the people that we want to join us in the struggle for justice and liberation— will simply look at us with curiosity. Why should they join us if we act out all of the negative aspects of the consumerist greed, authoritarianism and disrespect? And even if we did win with our current cultural norms, how do we know that we would not simply recreate exploitation and oppression in a new society?

We agree with many movement activists who have argued that how we struggle deeply informs the society we create. For that reason, we need to develop movement-wide attention to the relationship between the transformation of self and of society. We heard so much in our interviews about the ways our internal movement culture must shift in order to build



## GARY DELGADO, OAKLAND

I'm much more comfortable calling myself a leftist now than I was 15 years ago, mostly because then I was more concerned that the left didn't have a race analysis. And that's still true, but today somebody has to be the left. Somebody has to stand up for a real left – basic principles around equity, redistribution, anti-imperialism, anti-militarism -- but we seem to be afraid to do that."

a movement that will have transformative power. There are deep historical roots to the negative aspects of movement culture—including how many thousands of activists were traumatized by the violent repression of people's movements in the 1960s and 1970s, much of which remains invisible. As one movement veteran observed, "Among today's activists, so many people are fragile, people are frustrated, mad at themselves, mad at others. All these things come with being in the really tough situation we've been in for decades." But knowing there are historical, structural roots doesn't mean we get to avoid taking responsibility for our individual roles in perpetuating unhealthy or even harmful ways of being and relating to one another.

We must learn new skills and develop new practices that cultivate and promote solidarity, democracy and accountability. Several movement institutions such as Social Justice Leadership, Forward Together and the Rockwood Leadership Institute have already made important headway in this area. These efforts must be expanded, and many more activists must take leadership in this arena.

Although we do not pretend to know exactly what a vibrant and liberated culture will look like, we do know is that this renewed culture must nurture rigorous and respectful debate and dialogue between activists, sectors and trends within the movement. We must develop the skills to engage in productive, respectful and curious discussion and debate, and where debates do fall into condemnations and name-calling, other movement activists must play an active role in de-escalating those situations. One current listerv, the GameChangerSalon, has used clear ground-rules and active moderation to establish and maintain an example of such a practice.

While the movement has a long way to go to achieve this, focusing our intention in this direction is an important first step. Movement work can, should and needs to be magnetic—such that people who come into contact with it feel inspired to stay engaged. Transforming

the world is a unique opportunity to discover our best selves. We need a culture of compassion that encourages us to be our best and that supports us when we fall short. Only with this approach can we build the kind of inspirational movement of movements that will win over millions.

## 2. CRAFT NEW ANSWERS TO THE KEY QUESTIONS

We agree with the assessment of many of the participants that not only are the conditions we face grave; they also put humanity and the planet at an unprecedented tipping point. These conditions grow out of centuries-old dynamics, yet three intersecting crises are interacting and overlapping to create conditions that are unique and extremely volatile. These three crises are:

- The economic crisis of modern capitalism,
- The ecological crisis facing the planet, and
- The crisis of empire in which the hegemony of U.S. imperialism is falling internationally and in which the racial composition is tilting towards a non-White majority in a country founded on white supremacy.

As a result, the analysis and strategies of past periods offer useful insights, but a 21st century movement of movements needs new answers that grow from these new conditions. We need to update our responses to some of the hard questions:

- **Vision:** What is our vision of an alternative, more just, healthy and sustainable society? How does this vision promote global justice?
- **Conditions:** What is our assessment of conditions nationally and internationally? How are those conditions likely to shift?
- **Balance of forces:** What are the social, economic and political interests of different social groups in the United States and internationally? What is the base, interests and programs of different organizational forces throughout the United States and internationally?
- **Strategy:** Who is our core constituency? With what groups do we want to unite? What is our strategy for building the power necessary to realize our vision?
- **Key Fights:** What fights can we take on now that will advance that strategy?

Developing thoughtful responses to these questions is like pouring the foundation's cement. With answers to these questions in hand, we will position our movements to be enticing, sexy, and capable of winning over the hearts and minds of millions of people. With a sense of where we're going and what it will take to get there, we will be able to overcome pessimism and will be able to inspire all sorts of people to take action they would never have thought possible. If we ever hope



to move from naysayers to makers of our own destiny, our movement must be better able to offer responses to questions like these.

We are under no illusion that all corners of our movement will come to the same answers or that any of these answers will be final or perfect. That is not the point. We believe that different groupings of movement activists and everyday people coming together to explore and develop their own answers to these questions will create the opportunity for productive discussion, debate and evaluation. It will also allow us to see how one approach might be successful in one place or in one set of conditions, and insufficient in another. This, of course, requires a renewed political culture, but with these responses and healthy discussion and debate, growing social movements will be strengthened. In turn, through the movement's practice and evaluation, these answers will be sharpened and improved. This will put our movement in a comparably stronger position to experiment with different approaches that can lead to shared lessons and a more impactful practice. Because social transformation is a collective process, we need new vehicles that allow people to come together to develop answers to these questions. We've learned from the 20th century experience of social movements and revolutionary change that we cannot rely on any small group of thinkers or leaders to determine 'the truth' and simply pass it down to the people. Through vehicles like study groups, political collectives, and Left formations, we can develop broad participation in the development of new ideas. And to develop solutions to the complex set of challenges facing humanity at this point in history, the movement needs healthy, respectful and nonsectarian discussion and debate.

We are encouraged by the emergence of several initiatives that seem to be bringing activists together on an ongoing basis to sharpen their individual and collective responses to these critical questions. Projects such as the Organization for a Free Society, Freedom Road Socialist Organization's 'Ask a Socialist' and the many activist study groups that have been popping up across the country make us optimistic that we could soon be developing bold, multi-sectoral strategies that grow out of a deliberate assessment of our current conditions.

### 3. BUILD A "MOVEMENT OF MOVEMENTS"

Many participants spoke to the need for social justice activists to break through the silos that currently fragment our movement. This is important because increased interaction between movements will strengthen each movement's work through the exchange of lessons and models. Breaking through silos is also important because none of the problems we confront exist in isolation. A movement for genuine and lasting liberation must be capable of simultaneously addressing the many facets of the system.

As the interviews show, we know that we need to mend together the disparate pieces of our movement of movements, but still we are challenged to carry this project out. This must be the central preoccupation for movement activists in the United States. Once we've developed a

"movement of movements" identity and infrastructure, we believe that we will be able to mobilize thousands of activists into transformed, common campaigns that speak to the varied interests of our constituencies. We see the creation of strategy vehicles as only one part of a larger effort to develop this "movement of movements" identity.

In the coming months, there are several pieces of this common project that could cultivate our "movement of movements" identity.

- Shared language is an essential part of developing the shared practice of a movement of movements. Over the course of the interviews, we observed that many movement activists use the same word to describe different dynamics. For example, some use 'strategy' to describe a plan to achieve certain objectives over a period of time while others use it to describe concrete activities. Our language is littered with these words— 'member', 'progressive', 'leadership', 'accountability', 'vision', 'ideology.' The list goes on. The lack of shared language is a barrier to joining different forces in shared work. How we define these words is not the most critical issue since all of the dynamics are important to name. What is important is developing a shared understanding and usage of core terminology because we believe that this will make movement debates more clear and productive. It will also make it possible for us to expand and improve the quality of our shared work over time.
- We also see the need for Strategy Greenhouses— open gatherings for activists, organizations and alliances to come together to evaluate work and to formulate multi-sectoral strategy. Time and again, participants spoke to the need for experimentation, but as one organizer said, "I'm all for letting a thousand flowers bloom."

**"I've learned that basically, people don't want to feel alone or isolated. Its just a basic, fundamental, human need to be seen and heard, to matter to others. It's as simple and as complicated as that. So, what power begins to feel like is you knowing yourself, to have dignity and self-respect. As a worker or around gender justice or as a young person. And then, if our movements can truly allow hundreds of thousands of people to develop that power, in the process of collective struggle, then we can build the kind of society we all fundamentally want."**

Our problem is that we have no forums where we can evaluate and learn from all of our experiments. Right now, we're all planting flowers in a boundless valley. We have no way to know what's working and what's not, so we just keep experimenting. We need to move our experiments into the greenhouse." These Strategy Greenhouse gatherings must be driven by the questions identified by movement activists, not driven by funders' priorities.

**"As an 'elder' shaped by my time in the Black freedom struggle, I have to say... we need to deal with the lack of clarity and analysis around the role of capitalism. It's so often the big elephant in the room. People are organizing around labor, immigration and all kinds of stuff but they are not talking about capitalism enough. It shows up in the limits of what we come up with and what people can imagine. It's like driving with a GPS but not knowing where you are driving to. People are driving in circles – around strategy, resources, etc.—because they are not clear about their destination. And because they are afraid; it is the legacy of McCarthyism."**

- In between these Strategy Greenhouse gatherings, we see the need to develop a movement media center whose purpose would be to communicate the plans, experiences and lessons of activists, organizations and sectors across the country. With the proliferation of micro-blogging and internet-based publications, there are hundreds of places activists can go to get news and analysis. The challenge of not having one source that most people refer to is that the different sections of our movement are not able to speak to one another. We do not even know what questions and challenges other movements are grappling with. Such a movement media center could play this role. A number of veteran activists mentioned that the Guardian newspaper played that role for movements in the 1960s and 1970s.

Like the small fish chasing down the larger fish in the iconic ORGANIZE poster, our movements must take steps to learn to move in coordination with one another. Establishing practices and infrastructure that allow us to see ourselves in a shared struggle against a system that manifests differently over time, place, and conditions will build solidarity. It will lessen our current habit

position to carry out larger and larger initiatives.

Together, we can commit to this shared project— building a movement of movements that will have the power necessary to win a more just, liberatory and sustainable world. This movement of movements will balance the need for social movements to have their own character and independence with the need to develop solidarity through shared struggle towards a common vision of a new society. It will be participatory, empowering, and with this renewed political culture, it should feel "like community formed in the intimacy of struggle" sharing both heartbreak and joy, like a family in which "you don't always have to like each other, but you always have each other's back."

**"I want to know— what would it feel like to be on fire with the possibility of winning?"**

With a solid foundation, we will have swagger. We can't become bigger, bolder, and more united without it. To be clear, we are not suggesting that all other work should be dropped and that this foundational work should be the only work during this period of upheaval. By and large, the work we are all doing now needs to continue, but alone this work is insufficient; our ultimate success depends on bringing together many strong movements into one common struggle that confronts and transforms various systems of oppression and exploitation. We believe that attending to these three objectives will lay a strong foundation for a movement of movements that can take the bold leap into the powerful and audacious transformation that so many of us want." ★

of emphasizing how our community, our constituency is number one in some aspect of oppression. If we take the steps to establish a movement of movements, we will be in a

# *A Final Note*

## **BUILD AN ENGAGED AND ENGAGING LEFT**

It was an unimaginable joy to work on this project. We learned so much, and were inspired by the wisdom and work of so many people across this country.

We were also challenged. So many people said that this project filled what they saw as an important void in our movement. Each of those comments raised the stakes for us, and we hope that the product is useful as we all try to figure out the way forward for our movement.

One lesson that we take away from this project is the importance of resourcing cross-sectoral movement work. It was chance that we both left our positions at the same time and decided to collaborate on this project. At every stage, the work was more extensive than we had planned. It required dedicated attention to make sure that this phase of the project was completed. But building the movement of movements is too important to leave to chance. We are convinced that the work of laying a solid foundation must be advanced. It needs to be attended to and supported by all individuals, organizations and sectors in the movement.

As this phase of the Ear to the Ground comes to a close, we have decided to prioritize one particular area of the work— to create a vehicle for leftists engaged in social movements to come together, to answer the hard questions of the day, while building community with one

another. We're calling this project LeftRoots, and with comrades in the Bay Area and across the country, we hope to contribute to something that we think is absolutely critical— reigniting an engaged and engaging Left.

Throughout hundreds of years, the Left has played critical roles in the development of social movements in the United States and around the world. From the labor movement to the civil rights movement to the peace and anti-war movement, strong social movements have been strengthened by organized groupings of Leftists. For many reasons, including state repression and shifting world conditions, the Left in the United States has been unable, over the last few decades, to make the important contributions that are so essential to popular struggles against greed, corruption, environmental degradation, poverty, war and violations of human rights.

We believe that one of the most central challenges facing social movements is the absence of a strong Left, and we think that the conditions exist for a re-emergence of an engaged and engaging one. We believe that we can help to build a new kind of Left for our times, rooted in on-the-ground social movements; a Left that is compelling, relevant, rigorous, and visionary. This is partially true because so many of the participants we interviewed identified their politics as Left, but so many also mentioned feeling lost about how they might develop as a Leftist. So many of us are deeply rooted in the communities and sectors that have a vested interest in building a powerful movement of movements. For too long, we've been isolated. And yet, we keep plugging away, building the capacity of ordinary people to take control of our own destiny.

Together, we want to answer the hard questions, anchor our day-to-day organizing in a coherent set of ideas, and sharpen our collective capacity to do what it will really take in this country to win a better life for all of us. While we take the initial steps towards forming LeftRoots, we also hope that other such efforts take root.

We've all been practicing in our backyards, and it's now time to form a team. The last year demonstrates to us that this new team of Leftists engaged in social movement struggles is both necessary and possible given the large number of us out there.

Whether or not you're building the Left, we assume that you are reading this report because you are committed to building a world of peace, global justice, ecological sustainability and liberatory democracy. In whatever capacity you decide to invest your important insights and efforts, we look forward to working with you to build the movement of movements that all of humanity and the planet so desperately need and deserve. ★



## APPENDIX 1: 75 EXCITING IDEAS

### NEW ORIENTATION TO THE WORK

1. We need to really push our demands and analysis. There's a lot of space to push now.
2. We have to break out of defensive fights. We need to pick our issues, set the stage and follow it all the way through. Let's take our movement potential and power seriously. Not that we should put all our eggs in policy fights, but we have to go there... We need to get out of a reactionary practice and into power-building strategy. I'm a vet, I know there's gonna be another war. We know our police forces will keep getting militarized, our rights will keep getting removed. So let's make a plan.
3. We need to build greater concentrations of power that are based on a worldview and ideology, not just policies, that get us out of silos and in position to put out a broader set of proposals.
4. As leftists we have to step pretty far back, think more creatively and put aside some assumptions about how movements work, not assuming that things are going to happen like they have in past movements... and also some of the critiques and condescension... Everyone is so quick to criticize other people's attempts.
5. Our movement organizations need to be able to take risks or move out of the way. Sometimes you just have to jump on the moving train. It's not perfect. The organization is not perfect. We have to be willing to move and act.
6. We need to agree that we want to govern. We want to get our folks elected and learning how to govern this country with our values. We need a movement on the ground, building activists and soldiers on the ground; and a lot of that could be magnified if there were folks who also took power in government. We need to have that discussion on the left. If it's important; and then, how do we do it?
7. We need a collective strategy to take on the Right. And we need self-defense in an organized way against right-wing forces.
8. We need to know the vision we want for this world, we need to build the institutions we need— we need to prepare that now. To help people think about alternative ways of 'governing', how to begin building the practice space.
9. We need to prepare for ongoing waves of the crisis (both economic and ecological), attacks and assaults.
10. We should lift up conversations about race in everything we do.

### BUILDING MOVEMENT COHERENCE

11. We need to develop our vision of a better alternative to the systems we've inherited.

12. We need to answer the question: What's our vision of the U.S., the planet, in 2020? 2040 or 2042? 2050?
13. We need a coming together of our real leaders, our smartest, principled, thinkers and organizers, to figure out how to move our people. We have incredible people, we have relationships and strategy. And we have humility. I think we have enough to lead together, we don't need to wait for that exactly right historical moment.
14. What kind of society, what kind of economy are we for? If we're talking about the big banks, what does that really mean we are for? State banks? State socialism that stabilizes the economy for people on the bottom? Something else? That's a real question. People are fearful of losing their credibility but we need to address these questions... Of necessity, we need to develop a vision for a new economy that is compelling and resonates with people, and has a name. That people can talk about and debate.
15. We need to develop a shared, core narrative and set of ideas we can move across the country... A shared narrative – this is the hearts and mind work. How to tell the story about who we are as a country and where we need to go, and why – that's compelling, where people feel like their aspirations are held.
16. We need spaces for organizers to develop relationships of trust and solidarity across organizations, issues, campaigns, so we can learn from each other's experiences.
17. We need to learn how to build united fronts. 99% spring was like an experiment, practice.
18. We need some cross-pollenization. People should go on driving tours of the country, really understand what's happening in rural and urban areas, how the South is different, the Southwest, there is a lot that is happening that is different but is connected. Maybe not a literal driving tour, but some way of really gathering stories and learning from each other.
19. The community-based organizing groups, labor, and the green organizations are the trifecta who need to come together in urban spaces to build united fronts and real power. Together we can move reform fights and begin talking about what's not enough any more and what alternatives look like. To make it happen, we need to train a core leadership of young people and people of color who are ready to move without being dependent on foundation resources.
20. We need a new, nonsectarian Left, that includes folks from all the trends in the past that don't matter now. Learning from the 1970s— we have to be very careful about declaring people enemies. There's a difference between death and divorce. And we need to know what we should agree on:
  - Understanding of and opposition to the capitalist state;
  - How race, gender and class have operated in the U.S.;
  - Key elements of our vision, including our view on the state and the role of pop-



ular democracy;

- The critical importance of ecology and what it means for what we're trying to build, in terms of science, technology etc.; and
- International solidarity.
- Through democratic debate and discussion, we need a basic statement of what we oppose, and what we really stand for.

## MOVEMENT CULTURE

21. We gotta stop being so fucking cranky... That cranky, self-doubt, second-guessing. All the international social movements say what's so important is to be able to dream. And I'm convinced that that's why artists are so important, why they are the midwives of revolution. And why the youth are so critical. Art, culture, and the youth.
22. We need to focus on internal transformation; we can't just do the externally political. Oppression, capitalism – we are in those systems, and they are in us. So the work is at the individual, and social/structural levels.
23. To support internal transformation, we need to develop, train, and support movement healers, and develop lots of different, culturally rooted spaces for people to develop a transformative practice.
24. I've started doing organizational healing, because our organizations are acting out of internal trauma, too.
25. We need a pause. Slow down, the pace we have is unsustainable. We need to get clear and focused and you can't do that if you're just always tired and used up. We're asking a lot of each other constantly, and our relationships are lost in that. The porch conversations. Potlucks. Going to church together. In the South you have to connect with people— and so you have to go to church.
26. We need to push against our left purifying tendencies and against obsession with process.
27. How do we cross train— to be prepared to shift gears and sprint when necessary? I think we move too slow.... partly it's because we're overworked, and it's because of democratic process, but we need to be much more flexible. I remember someone using the analogy that we're all used to being in a marathon; I mean community organizations work really, really hard; but now the conditions seem to require us to be in a sprint.
28. We men, and the movement, need to reclaim and re-center feminism. The movement for economic and racial justice stopped thinking about feminism in terms of its internal culture. Macho stuff hurts comradeship and solidarity. We need feminist social relations.

## NEW POLITICAL FORMATIONS

29. We need new kinds of political forms, and we need to shed our sentimentality and identification with form. Our movement isn't organizations, we are a web of people. We will create vehicles as necessary but we should also destroy vehicles as necessary. Institution-building can destroy the heart and spirit that led to the creation of an organizational form, with bureaucracy, policies and procedures, staff, IRS tax forms, foundation proposals... This sucks the energy out of what we should be doing, which is building relationships with each other and taking action based on the conclusions of our conversations.
30. There should be, roughly speaking, a truly mass third party, but not one specifically focused on elections, led by working class people of color... We need a structured, strategic, organized break with the Democratic Party as the central gathering point of progressive politics in the U.S.
31. We need a new labor federation that includes community-based worker center organizations on an equal basis to traditional labor unions.
32. We need a new Left party. A united party for socialism. Not primarily an electoral vehicle. Should be explicitly anti-capitalist, a bridge between generations, training activists. An eye on the fight for people's power. Without a hard left you have a weak middle. I don't mean dogmatic, but it's clear that capitalism does not have the answer to the world's problems and we need a socialist alternative.
33. What would it take to federate all the groups in our national community networks? How do we become a more visible force?
34. Folks are trying to revive volunteer organizations; we need to do that because there's our non-profits and then there's— what? How do we figure out how to develop ourselves politically and not limit it to that? It's not easy, this economy makes it very hard. We're working more hours than we ever have been and we're making a lot less money.
35. We need a 30 hour work week— both as a mass demand for everyone, and for our sector, so people can have time to do movement work outside their paid jobs, and have some time to build the kind of strong families and communities we need. With more time, we can create the community relationships and structures we need to take care of each other, each other's children etc. This is not the 60s and 70s, when wages were higher and there was less unemployment, so we need a new approach.

## DEEPER ANALYSIS, POLITICAL EDUCATION

36. The idea work needs to get done now, the sharp analysis, so our demands can be big enough to match the scale of the crisis. Otherwise the next upsurge could be around really small demands.
37. To win millions, masses of people to our side— it's not enough to wage solid strategic organizing campaigns. We all got here because our consciousness was shifted

that committed us to this work for the long haul. So that has to happen at a much broader level, in different sectors. We need to stop neglecting people's political consciousness and we can't approach this in a half-assed, superficial way. It's a minimal requirement for ever winning.

38. There's no way around having a full and deep assessment of the current situation, what we're facing in the U.S. political economy, and doing a class analysis of this society: what are the different groups in the 1% and the different groups in the 99%, and what's the balance of forces, between the folks fighting for us and the forces fighting for them? Who's working on that?
39. In the Black community, we need a big push on international awareness, with exchanges to Palestine, etc. Historically, our international outlook has been much at a much higher level- the War in Vietnam, national liberation/anti-colonial struggles, etc. Right now we're in a bad place. At best its just 'bring 'em home' now, but the broader movement will not be a righteous and powerful one without progressive Black organized forces with an international, anti-imperialist perspective.
40. We have to be better at talking about war and militarism, and deal with why the leadership of the anti-war movement is so out of touch with working class people of color communities. They are not inspiring. We need to figure out what real solidarity looks like.
41. We need a working group on what did we learn from 9.11 and Katrina? What do we need to have in place to respond better since more of those crises are coming? How can we prepare for a response system that creates new possibilities, that builds power out of the crises?

## BASE-BUILDING

42. We need to invest in Black organizing. I know there is a move away from race or identity-based organizing, but I think we need that back. I don't think there is anything wrong with organizing Black folks, having strong Black organizations who can then be real partners with strong Asian and Latino organizations...So don't be afraid of organizing around racial identity, but make sure there is enough consciousness raising that there isn't so much pro-Black that people are anti-everyone else.
43. Let the organizers be out in the field. I see a lot of organizers who spend a lot of their time developing a political program, or going to all these meetings, and have less time to be out in the field, hearing where folks are really at. The nonprofits are often just too constraining.
44. A crucial task is to break down the antagonism between 'activists' and 'organizers', between pre-figurative and strategic. We need to look at them dialectically-- instead of this way or that way, we need to look at what should be the relationship between those two? What's the most important question that would build that relationship?
45. So let's look at what's innovative about online organizing. How or where can it ad-

vance the work, and respond to people's new ways of thinking and relating to each other? I think the community organizing model has not grappled with the question of the modern psyche. It is still based on an old enlightenment type of framework where people will transform if you show them the truth. Some of the success of on-line organizing has to do with structural shifts in people's consciousness, related to all the dramatic shifts in technology, media, speed of visual culture.

46. I feel like the arts & culture part, specifically, is where we're going to beef up some of our communication strategy. How are we going to take hold of our stories? Cause our stories are our existence, you know? We just don't have a whole lot of capacity right now. There's been a lot of intentional attacks on the infrastructure that has existed historically... But we have to be able to express ourselves, how we feel and what are we fighting for.
47. Progressives need a nationally aligned political, electoral program, with some teeth behind the idea, some money, and shared principles. Rooted in grassroots, base-building work at the local level.
48. Municipal united fronts - we need to build them out so that they are deeper than loosely held coalitions. Coming to the table in a deliberate way, labeling the issues that make it difficult to work together, pushing the race issue on the table. Locally, state, nationally.
49. We need organizing infrastructure here in the South. After so much movement down here, around immigration, Troy Davis, etc., now is the time to build up our bases, build more unity, capacity and flexibility in our organizations, coalitions and alliances.
50. We need to organize strategic sectors of the white working class and middle classes, not at the expense of the more fundamental, strategic work of organizing working class communities of color. The Right is organizing them around a racist set of ideas, there are millions of working people who are struggling, who are increasingly 'precarious' and insecure, who can be won over to our side.
51. We need to expand the movement's attention to organizing in places where there are demographic shifts - to the south, southwest and southeast. Then combined with our centers of progressive work on the coasts, plus Chicago, we will have the basis for a new bloc.

## CAMPAIGNS

52. We need to focus on strategic, structural reforms, like:
  - Climate jobs; jobs related to environmental preservation; public transportation as green jobs, etc..
  - Healthcare/Medicare for all.
  - Progressive tax policies.

- Reparations for African Americans and others especially oppressed.

53. Climate justice is a unifying rallying call for people around the world. There's an opportunity to link up our local struggles and organizing with a global struggle to fight back and put forward a new vision. The social movements in the Global South have reached a level of maturity where they are saying now WE have to provide a blueprint for humanity and the planet because the elites, the capitalists won't and can't.
54. It's a very simple common analysis, we need to fight the right level of power: corporate power, not government, and we need to play offense, and we need to connect our work but making our way up the money and power tree to who's in charge. It could unite us, and not submerge what we do. So, for example: Wal-Mart— not asking everyone to drop what they do to focus on Wal-Mart but realizing that Wal-Mart has more folks in its supply chain, so more people could be part of the Wal-Mart campaign and still be doing the work they want to do.
55. The Tar Sands pipeline is a key fight, pointing a way to build large cross sector alliances willing to engage in direct action. Even those of us who are not in that sector per se, need to put our heads together to put everything we got into stopping these projects, and put out an alternative vision of the future.
56. We need to develop some tactics and actions that are an on-ramp for anyone to be involved, even if they are not the center of activity. Right now it's too hard to be involved if you're not already in it full-time. One of the reasons strikes are so powerful, there is something for everyone to do, everyday for a long time. You can picket. You can write leaflets, you can lead demonstrations, you can feed people. We need things that three people can do or three hundred.
57. Smart, coordinated, young activists in the migrant justice community are challenging the Right wing's power to dehumanize people of color in this country. Is this an opportunity to connect the work to a broader racial justice struggle? Can we link it to Islamophobia, and attacks on Black people? Can we imagine a kind of immigrant-rights racial justice that puts an end to the racist wedge between Asian-American or Latino supposedly 'good' immigrants and African American people?
58. I do think our base-building groups need to expand our tactics, beyond run of the mill, show up at city council, do a petition. Occupy was inspiring here. And a lot of different people had real excitement about house takeovers.
59. We need a TON more people ready to do direct action and nonviolent civil disobedience. We need less negotiating with the system. Healthcare debate was an example. We didn't confront the Tea Party so they grew; we didn't make frontal challenge. We need to be more politically confrontational with the state, which is connected to our need to be more politically independent. Posing one alternative to another, framing things in a more stark way.
60. We can all do a better job of holding elected officials accountable. We don't call them out enough. From holding Obama accountable for drones to bombing Libya or

local politicians.

61. Citizens United is a critical fight. If we don't stop corporate money from dominating our democracy, there's so little space to move things politically to the left. How can we win?

## INFRASTRUCTURE

62. We need to identify ways not just to get foundations to better resource our work, but we need to more fundamentally identify ways to have democratic control of capital to finance our movements.
63. We need to address the mismatch between the functions we need in our movement, and the organizational forms we have. There are some resources but they are not in the right places. There are good organizations, but they aren't facilitating the functions that we need. There are leaders but they are in the wrong roles. We need to maximize the talent we have. We need to sharpen the functions. A strategy with a basic division of labor would help us use our talent, all of our resources, more effectively.
64. We need to build new leadership to take over our institutions. We need to strengthen how we're developing second-tier leadership.
65. We need to be more nimble and flexible. Things move fast, we have to move fast too— at least sometimes. You have to practice moving fast. Getting accustomed to commenting on things that relate to your issue, having a quick internal discussion and pumping out a statement or a video or even just a tweet about it. We think of the fight as a long-term fight, but then we lack urgency. Sometimes, things take us by surprise and we just have to be able to move quickly, to pull an all-nighter when necessary, to be relevant, have impact, for now and the long-term.
66. We need to be more creative about resourcing our work outside of the foundation world. This is key. It's not going to get us to the scale that we see on the right, from the elites— but movements are built all over the world with a 1/16th of what our organizations have.
67. We need a movement-wide Pledge to give "1% to the Left", like movement tithing. It should become standard that at least 1% of our personal and organizational resources – our money, time, whatever -- should go to collective political work that advances cross-sectoral movement-building and Left activities – especially work that takes strategic risks, would never be funded by foundations, and/or is simply too boldly Left in analysis and vision.
68. We need to dramatically scale up our new media and communications capacity— for sectors, specific movements, not just for individual organizations. We need a pipeline of people of color especially getting trained in the technical pieces. People have been very slow to get it together on the communications front. I don't mean just short-term campaign communications. I mean long-term reframing. It takes a gener-



ation to do that really, really well. Our evidence is that it's a good idea—that you can make progress if you have a robust reframing and media story strategy. A lot of parts of our movement just can't put together a compelling story, not just tell facts. I don't think media and communications should replace organizing campaigns but the reality is that as things move forward if you can't do that work you will be left behind.

69. We need to identify a set of people who are our best communicators, and their role should be to hold down movement ideas, in a smart way, in public debates, online, on CNN, etc. Not just in 'alternative' or progressive media. They can't be afraid to be ridiculed, they need to be able to go toe to toe with liberals and the Right. We need to take a lesson of the Right on this one, who had ideas that were laughed out of the room in the 70's and are now dominant positions of Democrats and Republicans.
70. Our movements need a national press, a national organizers magazine, where we can communicate our ideas, reflections, analysis, to each other.
71. New technology has made messaging and reaching people cheaper...Young people of color are more likely to be texting and doing a bunch of different stuff. And because image and music are more accessible, we need to figure out how to make the most of it. Before they figure out how to close down the wide open thing called the internet. What is our vision to take up more political space, to move message in a way that is counter-propaganda.
72. Need more funny people turning our political ideas into widely distributed to large numbers of people. Political humor, satire, that can go viral and make a mass impact.
73. We need to pursue acquisition of land, land trusts.
74. Can we somehow change the tax code around philanthropy, to deal with the power of concentrated wealth in our work?
75. Bolster our academic discipline & build purposeful relationships with universities -- a deeper partnership with universities to help us grapple with our big questions about how build the society we want. We need to shift from asking about how fix a particular problem, about how to improve wages in one sector, for example, to bigger questions, like what kind of economic sector should be built in this region to improve work and living standards for all?

## APPENDIX 2: OUR METHODOLOGY

The Ear to the Ground project was the first experience that either of us had ever had taking on a research project of this magnitude. We learned an incredible amount throughout the process. Throughout, we were mindful to avoid allowing our own perspectives taint the participants' responses. With the assistance of many generous people, we were able to construct a process that we believe has with a high level of integrity that and which allowed us to extract information from the interviews in the most objective way possible.

Our original plan was to hold 10 – 15 large group listening sessions across the country each one with fifteen to twenty people. To test the questions, we conducted a handful of interviews on a one-on-one basis. Those first interviews convinced us that individual interviews would be the best way to capture the richness of participants' thinking. It took more work, but we believe that it was worth it.

The criteria that we used to select who to interview included that she needed to see herself as a part of the social justice movement; she needed to be involved in some type of organization or movement institution; and she needed to have thoughts on long-term strategy that she was willing to share with us. We developed an initial list of people to approach based on people that we had relationships with and people whose work we were aware of. We added to this list by asking those people that we interviewed whether there were additional people that they would recommend that we interview. In the end, we interviewed 158 people. Seeing how much good work is going on, we wish that we could have interviewed many more people.

All of the interviews were conducted from March to December 2012 by one of three interviewers who asked each participant the same set of twenty-five questions which covered three main areas.

- The interviewee's assessment of the current moment;
- The relative strengths and weaknesses of the movement; and
- Recommendations for what the movement should do in the coming period.

Some of the interviews were done face-to-face and others over the phone. They ranged from thirty-five minutes to two and a half hours. We recorded audio for all of the interviews and recorded video for those interviews where it was possible, but we agreed to keep the content confidential, and to release recordings only with participant's permission.

Once the interviews were completed, we coded the interview recordings using qualitative analysis software which allowed us to evaluate the objective and subjective data. This data became the basis for this report.

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Race:
4. Nationality/Immigration Status as it relates to the U.S.:
5. Where do you live:
6. Where do you work:
7. What’s your role:
8. What movements/sectors have been important in your worldview:
9. How do you identify politically:
10. Why did you become, and why have you stayed, an organizer, activist?
11. How would you describe the change that you are working towards for? What does winning look like?
12. What’s your read of this moment? Is there anything that makes this moment unique or is it just a continuation of dynamics that have been at play for generations and centuries?
13. What, in your opinion, were the three most important events or series of events since the beginning of 2011? Why?
14. What’s your assessment of the state of the right? Of the ruling class?
15. What’s your assessment of the movement?
16. What do you see as the three central tasks at this moment for the Left? for the movement?
17. What, in your opinion, would be the optimal relationship between left organizers and activists & mass work, organizing projects?
18. What are three things that the movement can do to be better positioned to take advantage of the opportunities that emerge from this period?
19. Assuming that we are able to do those things and that the movement hits its stride, how do you want it to feel?
20. What are the three biggest obstacles to getting there?
21. What three challenges stand in the way of your organization from achieving it’s mission?
22. What role do you want to play in the movement? What are the three areas that you want to develop to play that role?
23. What people, organizations, institutions, websites, etc. do you look to for your own development?
24. Are there other questions that you’ve been asking yourself?
25. Is there anything else that you’d like to add?

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*“Rare in its breadth, candor, and independence, More Than We Imagined provides us with an important opportunity to reflect more deeply on where our movements are headed in the 21st century.” —Gihan Perera*

# MORE THAN WE IMAGINED

***More Than We Imagined*** is the final report of a year-long project called Ear to the Ground, co-directed by Steve Williams and NTanya Lee. Over nine months, more than 150 social justice organizers in 30 communities across the country were asked to reflect on the nature of this moment of history, their assessment of social justice forces, and what ‘the movement’ should do to respond to the unique challenges and opportunities of this period.



**EAR** TO THE **GROUND**  
PROJECT

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