

# **Organize!** **(why, who,** **whom, how,** **for what)**

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Dear reader,

Early each Tuesday I send an emailed Strategy Note to selected activists, organizers, leaders, and others. This pamphlet collects 49 of those Strategy Notes on organizing. Some of the Strategy Notes in this pamphlet have had small changes from their original email versions.

To see additional Strategy Notes or to subscribe to receive them by email, please go to my website <<https://organizenorthcarolina.org>> and click on the Subscribe button. There you'll find a Mailchimp form for subscribing and a link to see previous Strategy Notes.

Please give me your thoughts on these Strategy Notes. You'll find my contact info below.

Please share this pamphlet with a friend.

Toward the world we all deserve,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Russell", written in a cursive style.

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# Organize! (Why. Who. Whom. How. For what.)

This Strategy Note begins a series on organizing. The series will consider questions such as:

- **Why** organize? What does “organizing” mean?
- **Who** should organize? What makes a good organizer? How do people learn to organize?
- **Whom** should we organize? In what sequence should we organize different portions of society?
- **How** do organizers organize?
- **For what** should we organize?

I base these Strategy Notes on more than 50 years of organizing in North Carolina. With others I have organized identity groups (for example, workers at my job), issue groups (environmental, anti-conscription, peace, anti-rape, etc.), and infrastructure groups (media, list enhancement, training). I have helped start, maintain, and disband coalitions of organizations. I have watched many other organizers and coached organizers in their efforts.

My experience in these contexts affects my thinking. Your context may differ in important ways from mine. I also think about organizing a bit differently than some people do. Please consider these ideas, but trust your own thinking.

Please let me know which ideas you agree with, which you disagree with, your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing, and any questions you have. Discussing your feedback may help us both understand organizing better.

# What does “organizing” mean?

Organizing simply means bringing people together and helping them cooperate to accomplish some shared goal. It can include building an ongoing organization in which people work together.

Organizing does not happen automatically or by magic. People learn how to do it. People organize by persistently practicing a small set of learnable skills.

Organizing (sometimes also called “leading”) happens whenever people cooperate toward a shared goal. Somebody thinks about the people involved, their goal, and how to make progress toward their goal. It mostly happens informally. Most organizers/leaders don’t have a title or formal recognition for what they do. With thoughtful practice, most people can get good at it.

Most organizations would benefit from helping everybody in the organization learn these skills. Hardly any organizations do so.

Some organizations hire people whom they call “organizers.” They train these people poorly, if at all, and often don’t let them do real organizing. Instead those “organizers” merely mobilize people to show up for events or to implore elected officials to do or not do something. Sometimes such mobilizing makes sense, but it doesn’t qualify as organizing.

# Why organize?

Social power comes from cooperation. People can work together willingly or unwillingly but if they don't cooperate nothing happens on a large scale among humans.

Individuals matter to human societies, but they only influence society to the extent that others cooperate with them or with their ideas.

Cooperation —especially cooperation of more than a few people sustained longer than a few minutes— requires organization.

Social power, therefore, requires organizing. To accomplish anything on a large scale, somebody must organize people to cooperate in doing it.

Organizing means helping people work together to:

- Discover their shared interests.
- Decide on shared goals.
- Cooperate to accomplish those shared goals.

Organizing multiplies strength and effectiveness. People working together can accomplish much more than the same people working singly. Organizing makes that cooperation possible.

# What does it take to organize?

Organizers need to do several simple, normal, human tasks:

- Make friends. Treat everybody respectfully.
- Ask questions, especially about what people want or need.
- Listen. Think about what people tell you. Learn from it.
- Thank people when they do something useful, no matter how small.
- Propose shared goals.
- Propose a way to work toward shared goals.
- Ask for help.
- Stay honest, don't pretend.
- Learn from successes and mistakes, especially your own successes and mistakes.
- Persist.
- Model (at least generally) the desired behavior.
- Offer hope and the big picture.
- Stay focused. Say no frequently. Every yes requires the support of a thousand nos.
- Model living healthily and cheerfully while doing the work.

Almost everybody does some of these things, at least some of the time. Good organizers simply do most of these things most of the time.

Any human who can communicate both ways with another human has an opportunity to organize. Humans cooperate best when they all organize -- when they all think about their shared goals, think about the people involved, and help each other work together for their shared goals.

# Whom should we organize?

Short answer: Organize everybody.

Slightly longer answer: Organize everybody. Start with the most powerful people — workers who directly produce or transport essential goods and services.

A second answer: Organize everybody. Start with the people most discriminated against. In the United States today that means people of color (especially Black people), people of low wealth, immigrants without official permission, people with noticeable disabilities, women, young people, old people, LGBTQ people, non-christians (especially muslims and jews), and rural people.

A third answer: Organize everybody. Start with the people closest to you.

Best answer: Organize everybody. Start with the intersection of the three previous answers. Start with the direct production workers most discriminated against and closest to you.

Most people with wealth (including many people who consider themselves “middle class”) don’t know direct production workers. If you have little connection with these most powerful people and don’t want to join them, start organizing wherever you meet people. Without direct production workers, you can’t develop major power but you can still get some things done.

# Why first organize direct production workers?

The people who directly produce or transport essential goods and services have the most power in any society, including in the United States today.

All societies depend on direct production workers. Individually these workers have only small amounts of power. When these workers (or any substantial portion of them) decide to combine their individual power, they collectively can redirect society however they wish. Exploitative economies systematically conceal this fact and weaken the confidence of direct production workers. If they didn't, they wouldn't last long.

The capitalist portion of our present economy has so weakened the confidence of direct production workers and weakened workers' organizations —especially unions— that they currently have much more potential power than actual power. We have the task of building the confidence and organizational structures to turn that potential power into actual power.

We should organize workers before organizing non-workers in order to build organizations that working people will find welcoming. Organizations that start with other segments of society will generally have cultures that suit those segments better than they suit the most powerful people — direct production workers.



# Why first organize the most oppressed?

Strategy Note 70 recommended giving priority to organizing the people most discriminated against by society. Why?

Consider these reasons:

- The people whom the existing system treats the worst may have the least allegiance to it. They may have more openness to replacing the old system.
- The people whom the old system treats most harshly may more readily understand their mistreatment as a systemic problem instead as an individual difficulty.
- The people who first join an organization tend to set its culture. To build an organization welcoming to people targeted by social discrimination, start with those people.
- Oppressed people tend to survive by building organizations (often highly informal) of mutual support. Their experience as organizers brings great strength.

Organizing any segment of society happens best when done by people who belong to that segment. The second best organizers come from a segment of society that does not serve as their most visible oppressors. The most-discriminated-against people generally do not function as agents of society's oppression against many other segments. They can often serve as organizers for other segments. Organizing the most-discriminated-against people first produces the most widely effective organizers.

# Why first organize the people closest to you?

Strategy Note 70 recommended giving priority to organizing the people closest to you. “Closest” here means geographically closest and/or most intimately related.

Why should we first organize our friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, co-worshippers, and other close associates?

- Presumably we know these people best and therefore can think best about them.
- Starting close to home with people with whom we have continuing relationships may reduce the amount of pretending we do.
- We and our close associates might want some power locally.
- Our daily lives will go better if the people around us function well. Good organizing/leadership helps that happen.
- If we just organize people distant from us, a missionary attitude can develop in our thinking. In the missionary frame of mind we think of ourselves as bringing knowledge and understanding to the ignorant. That attitude hinders good organizing, primarily because it misleads us. It also tends to annoy people, but that tendency does less harm to the organizing than does the way the missionary attitude hinders us from recognizing reality. Organizing at home can help reduce that tendency, even when we also organize where we have less close connections.

# Look for existing organizers

Wherever you start your organizing, you will get the quickest growth if you organize the organizers and lead the leaders. Any group of people already has informal (but highly respected) organizers and leaders within it. Find them. Organize them. Then they will organize the people they already lead.

These existing organizers/leaders usually do not have titles and usually will not put themselves forward as “leaders.” They don’t talk loudest, first, or most often. It takes listening and observing to find them. You want to find the people whom other people like and whose judgment they trust. We have such skewed images of leadership that people will generally not name these existing leaders first if you ask about leaders.

Likability and trustworthiness alone don’t make a leader. Look for people who initiate cooperative actions that other people participate in. Remember the characteristics of good organizers listed in Strategy Note 69? Look for people who do such things, even on the smallest scale.

Everybody has the potential to lead and organize. But some people already do. We focus first on those people in order to build an organizing structure that later can help everybody do it.

# Test your assessment of organizers

You will often have hunches about who functions as an existing organizer/leader. Value those hunches, but test them.

How do you test such a hunch? Ask the person to get other people to do something where you can see whether people did it. Usually pick something low-risk and easy, especially when you first test your hunch. In some contexts, getting signatures on a petition might work. If people do it because she or he asked them, then you guessed correctly. If not, then you guessed wrong or you chose a poor test.

Leadership and organizing ability fluctuate over time. Fairly frequently you must test your beliefs about who organizes and leads in order to keep your assessments current.

# Strengthen existing organizers

When you think you have found an existing leader, help them strengthen their leadership/organizing ability.

Give them high priority for your time. Respond promptly to their calls, texts, and emails. Chat with them frequently. Get to know them and let them get to know you.

In one-to-one chats, ask each leader to help by doing a specific task. In one-to-one chats, debrief with them about how those tasks went. Ask what worked well. Ask what ideas they have for helping things go even better next time. Ask what felt difficult. Ask what they enjoyed. Listen and learn from their answers.

Point out specific things they did well. Praise at least two such specific things. If you can't think of two things they did well, you didn't listen carefully enough to their answers. Wake up and attend to what they say!

If you agree with their ideas for improving their work, ask how they will make those improvements. Listen attentively. Speak less than they do.

On rare occasions, offer a specific suggestion for improvement. Keep it brief. After they have acknowledged hearing the suggestion, praise a third specific thing they did well. Listen some more.

# Organize organizers; make yourself unnecessary

Strategy Note 75 recommended testing your identification of existing leaders. When your hunch about an existing leader/organizer tests as correct, bring that person into an ongoing group of such people.

Make sure they see that group as useful! If you have done your job of asking questions and listening, you should know what matters to them. Use that knowledge as you design this group's first gatherings. Do not waste these people's time.

Design this group (and as soon as possible engage them in designing the group) to help strengthen their organizing ability and to help them develop their understanding of increasingly larger contexts of that organizing.

This team of organizers should (gradually at first, but as rapidly as possible) take over from you in guiding the organizing effort in their context. If you do a good job as an organizer, you rapidly become unnecessary.

When you become unnecessary and move on to organize elsewhere, maintain communication links with them. They will occasionally want to chat with you to think through a problem. You may want to ask them to help with something. You will find these informal organizer-to-organizer relationships extremely valuable. Keep them strong.

# Avoid charismatic leaders

As last week's Strategy Note explained, good organizers and good leaders seek to make themselves unnecessary.

In contrast, charismatic leaders weaken our movement. Their big performances cause many people to feel "I can't do that, so I can't lead." Their model undermines full participation and real democracy.

The ability to give a rousing speech can sometimes make a valuable contribution, but good speakers do not earn the right to make decisions for the organization.

Charismatic leaders who learned their leadership practices as clergy in religious organizations tend toward highly centralized, even autocratic decision-making practices. When they think of their movement work as a divine calling or as a moral requirement, they often think it necessary to make the organization's decisions themselves.

Centering decision-making in one person exposes an organization to serious risk of corruption and confusion of various kinds. Even without corruption, such organizations will not develop a widespread leadership capacity, will have difficulty surviving beyond the one person, and reinforce habits of submission among their members. That model can sometimes accomplish useful things in the short term. It does not, however, offer a path toward full liberation.

# Organizing can feel difficult

Sometimes organizers feel ashamed or embarrassed about a problem they've encountered in organizing.

Recognizing a problem which you have not yet solved does not deserve shame. It deserves praise.

Working on an organizing problem without success does not make you a bad organizer. If no unsolved problems existed about how to organize a society good for everybody, we would have already done it. If you encounter such problems, good for you! If you never have problems, you've probably chosen goals too small or have ignored important facts.

I've claimed (for example, in Strategy Note 69) that organizing only requires normal human abilities and that anyone who can communicate can do it. I haven't claimed that it will always *feel* easy. Organizing sometimes feels difficult, even to skilled organizers.

Sometimes it helps to remember that our feelings do not reliably represent reality. Frequently and objectively evaluating our progress can help. Sometimes asking an experienced organizer for an outside view of our progress helps. Sometimes making time for a good cry or a loud rant with a trusted listener helps clear our mind. Sometimes we don't find anything that helps with the feelings and we have to just keep organizing anyway.



# Consider the emotional dynamics

From time to time, events shock people at many places on the political spectrum. For example: Trump's 2016 election, the current pandemic, blatant racist murders by police. Such shocks can loosen old mental habits, at least for a moment. Emotional unsettledness generally does not last long. People will tend to settle into new mental habits, but may retain for some time a more-or-less-conscious awareness of the changeableness of society.

At the level of emotions, our opponents' messages depend on a foundation of fear, especially fear of difference (race, religion, worldview, class, nationality, sexuality, etc.). At the level of emotions, capitalism itself depends on fear, especially fear of scarcity. Any arousal of fear will tend to reinforce the inhumane tendencies of capitalism and other forms of oppression. Therefore, we must avoid appealing to people's fears, including fear of oppressive forces. Anger rests on a foundation of fear. Stoking anger stokes fear.

At the level of emotions, our politics rests on a foundation of love. Or at least can and at its best does. Love need not mean vague do-goodism. Love can motivate a fierce determination for fairness. Love can mean a determined insistence on respect for everybody.

# Nine strategic questions

Organizing consists of helping people work together to accomplish some shared goal. An example: “Hey, I’m going for a 20-minute walk at the start of our lunch break. Wanna come?” “Sure.” You’ve just organized two people to accomplish a shared goal.

Larger goals—for example, building a society good for everybody— may need larger organizations that last longer. The principle, however, remains the same. If you can invite people to do something, you can organize. If you can notice what helps, notice what hinders, adjust your methods accordingly, and keep trying things, you can get good at it.

For those larger goals, nine questions can help:

- What do you want?
- Who else might want that?
- What can you do now to help y’all work together to get it?
- Does anybody oppose y’all getting it?
- If anybody does, who?
- Why do they oppose you?
- Where does your power come from?
- Where does your opponents’ power come from?
- What can you do now with the resources you have now, to shift the future power balance in your direction?

Get your group to talk about these questions.

# How should we think about goals?

Organizing works best as a goal-directed activity. Clarity about goals helps guide the work.

It often helps to have goals on a range of spatial scales (local, continental, global, universal) and time scales (short-term, intermediate, long-term). It especially helps to sequence these goals so the earlier ones help accomplish the later ones.

Never choose a goal that you think impossible. Difficult yes, long-term yes, impossible no.

Use methods compatible with your goals. For example, if you want a feminist society, you must not denounce opponents because of their womanhood.

Whenever possible, define your goals in terms of what you want, rather than in terms of what you reject.

It often makes sense to work with people who share some goals with us but do not currently share other of our goals. We don't have to agree on all goals in order to work together on the goals about which we do agree.

People who work with us on short-term goals may gradually come to agree with us on longer-term goals.

Can we win short-term, issue-based campaigns now? Some yes, some no. We discover which issues belong in which category by trying to win, just like always.

# Questions about charismatic leaders

Strategy Note 78 on avoiding charismatic leaders prompted questions. In this and next week's Strategy Notes I'll reply to them.

**How do I define a charismatic leader?** Charismatic leaders center their leadership on their personality. They exhort people to join in achieving goals they specify rather than helping people discover collective goals. They seek publicity and use it to gather supporters. All leadership rests somewhat on personality, leaders often propose goals, and groups often recruit through publicity, so this definition becomes a matter of emphasis.

For example, contrast the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ella Baker. Baker avoided publicity while building NAACP branches across the South, staffing SCLC, fostering the creation of SNCC, and mentoring younger organizers. Most of her groups continued well after her leadership. King skillfully used publicity while building SCLC and his prominence. SCLC dwindled after his death.

The media with their simplistic understanding of organizations partly create charismatic leaders. Sexism selects men for such roles more often than women. Other forms of prejudice select people with formal education, wealth (or the ability to mobilize wealth from others), an urban location, tallness, and conventional good looks.

# More questions about charismatic leaders

This Strategy Note continues last week's in responding to questions prompted by Strategy Note 78 on avoiding charismatic leaders.

**Do I consider William J. Barber II a charismatic leader?** During his Moral Mondays time, he definitely fit that model. But anybody who sees Barber as a static figure (or as an imitator of King) seriously underestimates him. He continues to learn and grow. In his current leadership of the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) he has a co-leader. PPC has also built local leadership teams that appear to have some decision-making ability.

**Do I recommend leaderlessness?** No. It doesn't exist. So-called "leaderless" groups (for example, Occupy) merely conceal or ignore the role of leaders, which hinders real democracy.

**What do I recommend instead?** Everybody can lead and should. Make leadership roles explicit, train many people for those roles, have people take turns serving in those roles, and collectively evaluate leaders to strengthen their skills.

# For what goals should we organize?

Strategy Note 82 recommended having multiple goals at multiple scales of time and space.

At the largest scale, I suggest we organize for a universe good for everyone, in which all sentient entities cooperate freely.

Most organizations and sectors of our movement will have smaller, nearer-term goals. Good! We must accomplish many intermediate goals before the big one.

Whatever your group's goals, make them compatible with these tasks:

- **Strengthen our freedom to organize** and protect everyone's ability to participate equally in making decisions.
- **Build solidarity**. Build solidarity within identity groups (race, gender, workplace, neighborhood, class, etc.). Build solidarity across identity lines. Defeat sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, ageism, xenophobia, nationalism, ableism, lookism, religious prejudice, regionalism, language prejudice, urbanism and all other unfair divisions among people.
- **Reduce harms**, especially pollution, militarism, authoritarianism, and economic inequality. Give high priority to reducing the dangers of nuclear weapons and climate change.
- **Improve people's lives** and their collective power over their lives.
- **Base cooperation on voluntary agreement**, not on violence or punishment.
- **Replace exchange with sharing**. Until we make this foundational transformation in our economy, exchange will threaten to destroy us.

# Why must we replace exchange?

Last week's Strategy Note listed "Replace exchange with sharing" as a task our other goals must support. Why?

Exchange happens when an economic entity (person, business, country, etc.) "owns" something and trades ownership of it for ownership of something offered by some other entity. When a society bases its economy on exchange, it creates a pressure on economic entities to accumulate wealth so they will have things to exchange for what they need.

As entities accumulate wealth, they must defend it. This need to defend wealth creates nations and other forms of state power, including violent manifestations such as police, militaries, and covert enforcers.

Exchange requires violence. Violence hinders voluntary cooperation and democracy.

The pressure to accumulate creates a need for profit. The need for profit creates pressure to exploit workers, to cheat buyers, to unsustainably extract wealth from ecosystems and the planet, and to pollute by dumping wastes as cheaply as possible.

In a democracy, people could use laws to prevent the worst harms of exchange. That would hinder profits, so wealthy entities use some of their wealth to prevent democracy.

If we want democracy, a livable planet, or freedom from violence, we must eliminate exchange.

# Can we eliminate exchange?

Last week's Strategy Note defined exchange as trading ownership and showed why we need to eliminate it. Does that look possible?

If we define an economy as a set of relationships and practices through which we produce and distribute goods and services, then we currently have two economies operating simultaneously. In the officially recognized exchange economy, economic actors buy, sell, trade, rent, hire, barter, etc. In our less-recognized exchange-free economy, economic actors produce goods and services and share them.

Our exchange-free economy forms the foundations of our lives. The loving relations on which we depend happen within it. Parents raise children. Children care for their elders. Neighbors help each other and share garden produce. Volunteer firefighters and open-source programmers do valuable work. Friends gather (in non-pandemic times) for meals, parties, and playing basketball. Much recreation, art, worship, food preparation, housekeeping, healthcare, and learning happens through our unpaid work.

The work (disproportionately done by women) that enables people to show up for jobs in the exchange economy mostly happens within our sharing economy. To a significant extent, the exchange economy depends parasitically on our sharing economy.

Parasites need hosts but hosts don't need parasites. Yes, we can eliminate exchange.



# Two economies compete for our allegiance

Capitalists would put meters on our noses and charge us for breathing if they could. They constantly seek to replace normal sharing relations with paid exchange relations. They have moved much food preparation from exchange-free relations within households to exchange relationships via restaurants and prepared food in stores. Much childcare has moved from unpaid work by parents, siblings, and grandparents to paid work in businesses.

(The current pandemic has partly reversed these examples. A lesson about what to rely on.)

We have a contest between two economies for our allegiances. Driven by exchange's requirement for profit and accumulation, many exchange-oriented economic actors seek to take more production and distribution roles from our exchange-free economy.

This competition has existed only recently among humans, perhaps several thousand years. With the development of capitalism a few centuries ago, the exchange side accelerated its expansion. In recent decades, exchange globalized, financialized, and drastically increased its portion our relationships.

Because economic actors in our exchange-free economy lack constant pressure to expand, we have not generally sought to enlarge the sharing economy. We who value exchange-free relationships now must become intentional about waging our side of this contest. Otherwise exchange threatens us with extinction.

# How does exchange attack sharing?

As part of thinking about what we organize for, last week's Strategy Note explained that exchange seeks to replace more and more of our healthy normal sharing relationships.

In those attacks, exchange generally uses a small set of methods, adapting them only slightly to fit conditions:

- Deprive people of the ability to provide for themselves. Drive them off the land.
- Enclose the commons. Turn it into private property.
- Concentrate people in cities.
- Denigrate and destroy traditional skills of production.
- Reduce freedom of movement. Impose borders. Militarize borders.
- Divide people and pit them against each other. Patriotism, racism, and religion work especially well for this.
- Promote addictions, especially addictions that hinder clear thought.
- Monopolize communication channels. Portray exchange as natural and necessary.
- Promote feelings of powerlessness, discouragement, and depression.
- Promote consumption and access to consumption through debt.
- Make payment of debts a high moral value.
- Prevent democracy. Monopolize the making of laws. Strengthen law enforcement.
- When other methods fail, kill.

In our organizing, we need to develop the power to overcome these methods and steadily shift the balance from exchange toward sharing.

# Strengthen sharing and weaken exchange

Strategy Note 88 explained that the exchange economy and our sharing economy compete for people's allegiance. Last week's Strategy Note listed ways the exchange economy wages that competition.

To help our exchange-free sharing economy in that struggle:

- Share more, own less.
- Make use value, not exchange value.
- Talk about the contest between sharing and exchange.
- Celebrate examples of exchange-free relations.
- Use open-source software when suitable.
- Men start doing our full share of housework, childcare, and eldercare.
- Free ourselves of addictions.
- Reduce unhealthy consumption.
- Build healthy, equal relationships.
- Build solidarity, defeat oppression.
- Strengthen labor unions.
- Build people-to-people relations across national borders.
- Learn and practice productive skills, such as growing food. Share the results.
- Build tool-sharing coops, childcare coops, food coops (that explicitly use exchange only as a temporary phase).
- Promote Food Not Bombs, Really Really Free Markets, Little Free Libraries.
- Organize clothes swaps, skillshares, potlatches.
- Support long-term work with gifts.
- Build relationships, not savings accounts.
- Make investments and other forms of wealth-holding rare and unneighborly, something decent people don't do.

# Relationships, adaptability, clarity

Strategy Note 82 said organizing works best as a goal-directed activity. Yes, and while we need to keep our eyes on the prize as the old song puts it, we also need flexibility in our strategy.

Loan Tran recently wrote\* “Strategy is 10% work plans and writing things; the rest is about relationships, adapting to change, and political clarity.” I might put the written parts of strategy at 2%, but otherwise that seems about right.

It seems right if “political clarity” means knowing what you want (at least in general terms), who else might also want that, and having principles that guide how y’all work together to get what you want. In other words, having goals and a theory of change for accomplishing them, or having a way to at least tentatively answer the nine strategic questions of Strategy Note 81.

This kind of political clarity in a group requires persistently devoting time to many conversations (one-to-one and in groups). Those conversations also help build the necessary trust. Trusting relationships help organizations have the flexibility to adapt to change.

Relationships, adaptability, and political clarity should work together. Conversations —many, many conversations— make it possible.

\*<https://southernvision.org/reflection-on-leadership-and-organizations/>

# How might an exchange-free economy run?

After we eliminate exchange, how will our economy operate?

The details of that better world will result from choices of people living then. Now we merely speculate and plan. Nevertheless, a few aspects of the new world seem likely:

- It will keep changing. All human societies constantly change.
- It won't offer perfection. Nothing humans do offers that.
- We will live longer and healthier on average without deaths from poverty, racism, and militarism.
- For the near term (perhaps a century or two), we will devote substantial work to repairing harm done by the old system. We must reverse climate change and heal the multi-generational harms caused by oppression.
- When we share the world's resources sustainably, most people will benefit from a materially improved standard of living. Starvation and the diseases of impure drinking water will become rare. Fewer infants will die.
- We won't waste our world's resources providing a few people with extreme excess.
- Most of us will spend more work time on coordinating production and distribution than we do now. This results from democratizing decisions that currently the wealthy and their managers make.

# How might an exchange-free economy work?

Last week's Strategy Note began listing what we can foresee about the future exchange-free society. That list continues:

- When we don't waste effort enforcing property and administering exchange, vast industries will vanish. They include insurance, banking, most advertising, and most sales jobs. Big portions of law enforcement, lawyering, courts, and prisons will disappear.
- With these enormous savings of time, we can work less on average.
- We will each do the work we want to do.
- We will contribute the fruits of our work to the general supply. We will take what we want from the general supply.
- We will offer each other feedback about the quality of our work.
- We will decide together what work needs done.
- For tasks that don't have enough people wanting to do them and that we agree need doing, we will take turns.
- Taking infrequent turns at unpopular tasks means unpracticed people will do them. I prefer the resulting inefficiency over coercing a few people to do them full time.
- Workplace deaths and injuries will largely disappear. (In the United States in 2019 a worker died every 99 minutes <<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cfoi.pdf>> from a work-related injury.)

# How should we think about efficiency?

Advocates of exchange (and especially of capitalism) frequently claim it offers greater efficiency than other systems. When you encounter such claims, ask a few questions:

- Efficient for whom? By what measure?
- Everything has a tradeoff. In our finite universe, maximizing one value will reduce at least one other, usually several. Where does the alleged efficiency reduce values?
- Over what time scale does the alleged efficiency appear? Do any other time scales seem relevant?
- Over what geographic area does the claimed efficiency appear? Might any relevant areas have gotten omitted?
- Does the allegedly more efficient system have any unacknowledged inputs or outputs? For example, does it ignore household work of women or pollution of streams? Exchange-focused economists often ignore things their employers don't have to pay for.
- What assumptions does the argument make? Do they seem reasonable? (For example, does it make sense to count producing \$1000 worth of organic apples as contributing as much value to a society as producing \$1000 worth of cigarettes? Fruit production and cigarette production count as equivalent positives in calculating Gross Domestic Product.)

# What causes apathy?

Apathy does not fall from the sky like rain. It does not arise from within us. Certain kinds of social relations create, teach, and reinforce apathy. So if your organization has a problem that looks like apathy, ask what you do that creates or reinforces that problem.

In addition, many of the social relations that create apathy exist outside your organization. Undemocratic systems of power require and constantly reinforce apathy.

Apathy has a single cause: oppression. (Oppression takes many forms.) Apathy has a single solution: democracy. (Democracy takes many forms.)

When people understand that they collectively have actual power over something that matters to them, apathy doesn't exist. The more actual power people have, the more they will actively participate.

However, to overcome generations of oppression requires learning new ways. Organizers help people heal from oppression, understand their experiences, consider new possibilities, and learn new ways. It usually takes constant listening and slow, steady, gradual transformative work. Organizers need radical patience and persistence.



# Developing leaders can reduce apathy

A few ideas that may help people in your organization take more active roles:

- Explicitly identify key functions and roles in your organization. For example, a planning meeting might have a facilitator, notetaker, timekeeper, someone who summarizes the big picture, people who propose ideas, people who welcome newcomers, people who provide refreshments, etc.
- Train multiple people for each role.
- Take turns in those roles. Explicitly designate who has that responsibility now and when it will shift to the next person. Have the next person accompany and assist (“shadow”) a more experienced person before their turn begins.
- Afterward debrief! Ask the new person what worked well, what they enjoyed, what they might like to try differently next time.
- Taking turns can also reduce the status difference between roles. If everybody takes a turn cleaning up the refreshments and a turn summarizing the big picture that helps equalize the status of those roles.

# A tradeoff that affects apathy

Organizations face a tradeoff between doing their work correctly and consistently versus letting less experienced people do things so they can learn how. Most groups want both sides of this tradeoff, but efforts to strengthen either side weakens the other side.

Many organizations prioritize correctness and consistency. They seek to minimize risks and to avoid internal conflicts. But avoiding risks creates its own risks. And avoiding open conflict doesn't prevent conflict. It just causes people to wage conflicts invisibly — which means undemocratically. This gives advantages to those whose preferences preserve (often unintentionally) dominant mainstream relations.

But organizations also need consistency and correctness in their work.

Finding the balance between consistency and leadership development that serves your organization well takes trial and error. Different organizations benefit from balancing this tradeoff in different ways. Organizations often benefit from different balance points at different times.

It often helps to discuss this tradeoff openly in the group and decide together what to try. That can also help develop new leaders.

# Organize to prevent burnout

Our movement repeatedly loses people to feelings of discouragement, fatigue, hopelessness, illness, and inability to sustain the work. When this happens, we often say the person “burned out” as we might say of a failed lightbulb.

Unlike lightbulbs, humans have an inherent ability to heal and to completely recover from most difficulties, given the necessary time and resources.

To build the world we all deserve and then to function well in that new world, organizers, organizations, and individuals must sustain our work all our lives. We must, therefore, organize in ways that promote healing and avoid burnout.

Burnout results from organizational errors and from individual errors. The next few Strategy Notes outline how to avoid such errors.

External factors (random happenings, our opponents’ propaganda and attacks, social oppression) also contribute to burnout. Our errors do not cause those factors. But to work in ways that do not account for those expected external factors constitutes an error. We should expect those factors as long as the old society continues. We must work in ways that overcome them.

# Nobody (including you) ever deserves blame

I hesitated to write in last week's Strategy Note that burnout results from our errors. But we need an accurate diagnosis in order to find a cure.

It may help to remember that no one ever deserves blame (from themselves or from others) for any error. Blame never helps; it just creates more confusion and hurt. Blame doesn't even deter future error. It prompts concealment, denial, and defensiveness. Blame hinders learning and tends to turn errors into habits. Don't ever blame anybody — including yourself.

We can benefit from clarity about the causes of errors. Accurately tracing errors to their causes can help us avoid repeating them. The causes may include some person's actions. Stating a person's action contributed to an error does not *by itself* constitute blame. Blame results when we direct any punishment, disrespect, humiliation, or lessening of regard to them.

When a person repeatedly makes errors in a particular area of work, they may need help with it, they may benefit from a time away from that work, or the organization may benefit from re-assigning that work to someone else. Nobody will benefit from giving or receiving any blame.

# How organizations can reduce burnout

To avoid burning out their people, organizations will find it helpful (and generally necessary) to:

- Have clear goals and an effective strategy to accomplish them.
- Notice and celebrate progress.
- Stick to reality. Don't lie, mislead, or exaggerate.
- Have a clear, stated method for making decisions, preferably a democratic method. Use the stated method.
- Work at a sustainable pace.
- Welcome the full humanity of their people; don't require people to hide parts of their lives.
- Encourage people to work in ways that suit them well.
- Avoid addictive substances (including caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine) and practices (gambling, pornography). This includes not using raffles in fundraising.
- Completely avoid blame.
- Gather enough support (people, money, etc.) to sustainably accomplish the work. Adjust the timing and scope of work to match the support available.
- If they have paid staff, pay them enough to live on.
- Recognize and rely on the good thinking and wisdom of your people.
- If staff choose to unionize or otherwise have a collective voice, recognize that choice and negotiate with them about whatever issues they raise.
- Avoid unnecessary record-keeping and other wastes of people's time.

# How individuals avoid burnout

To avoid burnout, it helps individuals to:

- Exercise, eat healthily, sleep healthily, and avoid addictions (including caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine).
- Choose organizations carefully. Evaluate them with last week's Strategy Note.
- Devote time to good relationships with your significant others.
- Reject impossible goals. Difficult yes, impossible no.
- Devote time to friends and enjoyable activities unrelated to your movement work.
- Live within your means. Avoid debt.
- Social media businesses (and some news media) design their products to addict you and inflame your emotions. *If* you use them, give yourself frequent breaks from them.
- Maintain a strike fund or a “walk away” fund — enough money to survive for a year. If you don't have such a fund, take the change from your wallet and start it. Add to it until you have enough. Consider doing this collectively.
- Avoid expenses that do not actually improve your life.
- Frequently evaluate your work. Recognize accomplishments and errors. Celebrate accomplishments. Correct errors, if possible.
- Reject blame, especially self-blame. Perfection does not exist; do not seek it.
- Try things. Learn what ways of living and working help you and what don't. Choose accordingly.

# Emphasize sustainability and resilience

Emphasize sustainability and resilience:

- In planning our work, design for resiliency.
- Build your individual capacity. Learn new skills. Become healthier. Increase physical stamina. Shed unhealthy habits. Develop healthy practices. Clarify and strengthen primary relationships.
- We each have responsibility for good self-care practices. We also have collective responsibility for each other in this regard.
- Sometimes we may find a sprinting pace of work useful for a short period. By “sprinting” I mean working longer hours or more intensely than we could sustain indefinitely.
- Sprint only for work that actually builds our capacity. Sprint rarely, if at all. Do not sprint for long. Rest after sprinting.
- When you discover yourself doing something you don't enjoy, consider that a sign that something should change. Perhaps something in the work needs change; perhaps some relationship around the work needs change; perhaps something in your attitude needs change. Find what needs to change and start changing it.
- Choosing the path of nonviolent revolution should improve your life, not burden it. If it feels like a burden, find a better way to do it.

# Think of organizations as tools

Think of organizations as tools. Design them to accomplish some purpose.

If you wanted a tool for sweeping your floor, you'd likely design some kind of broom. You wouldn't attach an anvil to it just because you had an anvil handy.

Likewise, in designing your organization, focus on its purpose. Don't add parts that don't help it accomplish its goals. Don't keep parts that no longer help.

For example, organizations that depend on grants sometimes get tempted toward projects likely to find favor with funders. Unless the new effort actually contributes to the organization's goals (and not just to its bank account), this practice can mislead the organization.

Sometimes organizations get attracted to the latest issue that the media cover. Seeking a way to look relevant to such topics can also lead an organization off course.

This also applies to people. Don't add people to an organization unless they look likely to help accomplish its goal. Don't keep people in an organization unless they currently help or likely will help. People have many aspects and therefore can benefit or hinder an organization in many ways. So think comprehensively about a person in evaluating their benefit to your organization.



# What should we learn?

What should we learn to prepare for an exchange-free world?

- Honesty. Under oppression, deceit can *feel* necessary. But falsehoods support oppression. They hinder the trust for each other that helps our exchange-free economy develop.
- Waging nonviolent people-power campaigns.
- Multiple languages. Our exchange-free economy needs widespread communication.
- Facilitating and participating in democratic discussion and decision-making.
- Listening.
- Productive skills such as growing food, sewing, making useful things, repairing things, etc.
- Men should learn and practice the skills of housekeeping, childcare, noticing their feelings and the sources of them, how to cry and grieve, and how to accept emotional support from other men (so we don't rely exclusively on women).
- Freeing ourselves from unhealthy desires (which often feel like needs) induced by consumerism.
- Unlearn helplessness, discouragement, fear, and the ways we have internalized oppressions.
- Many of us must unlearn racism, sexism, homophobia, and other oppressions.
- Healing from the harms of the old system. Grieving the losses and harms we have suffered and contributed to.

We do not need perfection. We just need to shift the balance of our population in these directions. Even tiny progress helps.

# Find your style of organizing

Try various ways of organizing to see what works well for you.

At least two different styles exist:

- “Up front” organizers tend to speak loudly. They do well at attracting media attention and rousing a crowd to action. They often inspire donors to contribute. Their organizations generally have centralized decision-making. They rarely develop many other effective leaders.
- “Quiet” organizers tend to speak softly, deflect attention to others, have conversations, ask questions, and listen. They often do well at developing other leaders, fostering strong group bonds, and encouraging discussion that develops everybody’s thinking. They rarely attract media attention.

Both styles *can* succeed, in the sense that they *can* help people cooperate to achieve shared goals. The “up front” style tends to have its successes in working for short-term goals for which a large constituency already exists. “Quiet” organizers often do better at helping people adopt large goals and build cohesive organizations for long-term work.

Organizers rarely do both styles well. Perhaps a team of organizers could include people good at each style. If such a team valued both styles and decided together when to use each, they could have a powerful tool.

# Engage people and help them learn

Engage people and help them learn:

- Help people develop strong foundations for their movement work.
- Offer them useful things to do. Help them to see the usefulness. Thank and praise them.
- Trainings! Many places, many times, many topics. Train trainers to expand training capacity.
- Increase our creativity about events by involving new people in planning them.
- Sign people up, keep in frequent contact, plug them into ongoing work.
- Build one-to-one relationships.
- Build ongoing affinity groups (small groups of stable membership who get to know each other well and work together closely on an ongoing basis). Affinity groups with a shared class background often work especially well.
- Do popular education on the big picture at most gatherings and events. Get people discussing what it all means.
- Create ongoing discussion groups and study groups around any topics that attract people. Discussion and study groups that also commit to taking action together can result in deeper learning, but just talking together can help learning happen.

# Help people discuss the big picture

Organizers need to help people understand the overall context in which they live and work. Asking good questions, listening, and facilitating healthy discussion help people develop their understanding better than lecturing does.

What does our current context mean? Many things. Different people will focus on different aspects, depending on what makes sense to them.

Encourage people to listen respectfully to each other and take a turn to offer their own thoughts. Neither listening nor respect implies agreement.

Model listening and speaking respectfully. Listening to people helps them learn. Listening to people helps them then take a turn to listen.

When a group discusses the big picture, people sometimes ask organizers what they think. Prepare your answer in advance so you can say it briefly and quickly return to your role of listening and facilitating discussion.

# How I describe our context

When I take a turn to describe our current context, I say something like the following as briefly as possible and then switch back to listening:

- Exchange-based economies (especially capitalism) increase inequality within countries and between countries.
- Increasing inequality makes an economy increasingly difficult to maintain.
- Dramatic inequality between the United States and other countries makes US domination increasingly difficult to maintain.
- When systems of domination become difficult to maintain, those in dominant positions often resort to enforcement in place of more subtle methods. In the US, some people advocate for blatant enforcement. Others advocate enforcement abroad and more subtle methods at home. Both seek to maintain the same unworkable system.
- Powerholders (especially in the US) have divisions within their ranks (such as the division between blatant and subtle methods). This hinders their effectiveness. Their increasingly fragile dominance may make them erratic and somewhat unpredictable.
- All this makes the balance of social power more dynamic. It can vary dramatically from issue to issue and from moment to moment. This instability creates dangers *and opportunities* for our organizing.
- We now have an excellent opportunity for organizing and waging people-power campaigns.

# Maintain friendships with opponents

We each should maintain at least a few friendly relationships with people who currently oppose us. Such relationships help us in at least three ways:

1. Understanding the thinking of at least some opponents helps us plan our actions. We should not attempt to convert committed opponents. We should focus primarily on allies and the undecided. But understanding our current opponents helps us predict their responses to our actions.
2. Knowing a few current opponents and hearing about their lives helps us avoid seeing them as all the same. It also helps us remember their humanity (even when some of them act inhumanely).
3. Those relationships can allow “back-channel” (non-public) communication when the time comes for them to negotiate their surrender. Whether we will want to negotiate their surrender in a non-public way or not, letting them have a way to inquire about that possibility gives us useful information and a *possibly* useful option. For example, non-public negotiation may have helped end apartheid in South Africa. However, it may also have contributed to the current pro-capitalist policies of Black-led South Africa.

# Organizers make mistakes

You will make mistakes.

Effective organizers make many mistakes.

As organizers, our mistakes can have serious consequences. Because of our mistakes, people may suffer embarrassment, lose their income, go to prison, or die. Our mistakes can destroy organizations. Worse, people may lose hope because of our mistakes. Our mistakes can delay liberation.

Don't let your mistakes stop you.

Effective organizers spend a good bit of our time grieving. Because we love the people we work with, we grieve over their sufferings. We also grieve about the harm and hindrances to the work our mistakes cause.

We mustn't wallow in our grief, but we must take the necessary time to feel those feelings and release them so they don't hinder our judgment. To ignore our feelings or pretend they don't exist prevents a correct understanding of reality. Effective organizers need an accurate understanding of ourselves, of the people with whom we work, and of our context.

So get good at grieving and handling your mistakes. If your mistake hurt (or even merely inconvenienced) anyone, apologize. Correct your mistakes if possible.

Learn from your mistakes. Talk about them with colleagues. Make new mistakes.

You will make mistakes. Keep on organizing.

# What organizers do

The main tasks of an organizer:

- Start and strengthen respectful relationships. Make friends.
- Ask people what goals they have. Propose goals. Help individuals and groups think about and refine their goals.
- Bring together people who have similar goals (or would benefit from adopting some goal).
- Ask people to help accomplish a shared goal by doing some specific task. (Take action.)
- Ask people to help by taking responsibility to accomplish some intermediate goal by an agreed time. (Take responsibility.)
- Ask people to help by leading a short-term or ongoing team/group/chapter. (Take leadership.)
- Ask people to help by becoming an organizer.
- Thank people for anything useful they do. Praise them, ask what they need, ask their ideas for improvement, help them get what they need, help make sensible improvements.
- Encourage people to work sustainably.
- Offer frequent summaries of bigger contexts for the work. Propose larger goals and show their connection to the current goal.



# Remember our big goal

Exchange will threaten everything until we build a new society free of it.

In your organizing, help everyone understand:

- Exchange creates a need to accumulate wealth (to have something to trade for needs or wants).
- The need to accumulate creates a pressure to reduce costs.
- Businesses reduce costs easiest by externalizing costs (shifting costs onto others).
- They externalize costs by exploiting workers, cheating consumers, and polluting.
- Accumulation and exploitation cause inequality.
- Inequality causes polarization.
- Polarization can make society more fluid and changeable.
- Powerholders describe this as “instability” and treat it as bad because it endangers their dominance.
- But everything they do to maintain “stability” (their dominant position) just maintains or increases inequality.
- Eventually such a system will get replaced (usually through some combination of negotiation, gradual modification, collapse, or open conflict).
- The new system will have similar problems unless it has much more equality.
- For equality, those who have too little power and resources must take them from those who have too much.
- If this redistribution leaves in place social relations that create inequality, then the process starts anew.
- Exchange creates inequality.
- So we must organize not just against inequality (for redistribution) but also for replacing exchange with solidarity.

# To learn more about organizing

You learn most about organizing by doing it. You learn fastest if you organize as part of a team that talks about what y'all do, why you do it, and what results you observe. Next best progress after that comes from having an experienced and successful organizer coach you (assuming she or he coaches in ways that work well for you).

However, for those who like to learn by reading, I recommend:

- The excellent monthly *Labor Notes* <[labornotes.org](http://labornotes.org)> covers the union movement (primarily in the United States) and frequently offers articles on organizing.
- The book *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* <<https://labornotes.org/secrets>> by staff of *Labor Notes* offers an excellent, accessible explanation. Available in English and Spanish versions.
- For those who still want more of my thoughts on organizing, you can find *Suggestions for Organizing Well in North Carolina* <<https://organizenorthcarolina.org/suggestions.php>> on my website. Last updated over a decade ago, it still mostly seems correct.

Please do not just read about organizing instead of actually organizing!

# What to do with these ideas?

Most people find it easier to read (and write) suggestions like these than to actually do them consistently. Fortunately, we don't need perfection.

If any of these ideas on organizing seem correct to you, what should you do? Use them. Test them in your context.

If any of these ideas work well for you, make them your own. Offer them to others as your own ideas.

Why offer them as your ideas (instead of as mine)?

- When you think about them, evaluate them, and decide you like them, they become your ideas. Especially when you use them, they become yours.
- When you offer them to somebody as your ideas they will likely give them better consideration than if you offer them as ideas you read somewhere.
- I learned many of these ideas from other organizers. Socially produced ideas like these shouldn't get attached exclusively to whomever has the opportunity to write them up.

What should you do about any of these ideas with which you disagree? Easiest option: ignore them. More helpful option: let me know your reasons for disagreeing with them. Talking about them might help us both learn.