

Organizing in this surge after Trump's election

draft 7 January 2017

The election of Donald Trump and the turmoil in North Carolina's state government have stimulated dramatically increased interest in our movement. As of late December, we still saw big turnouts of people at public events. With good work on our part and no effective measures from our rulers to counter it, this surge could continue well into 2017.

To get full benefit from our organizing work during this surge of interest, consider the following suggestions.

Design our work for maximum welcoming!

- Easy entry into our groups and into the movement.
- Many entry points.
- Build our numbers. Bring many more people into our organizations.
- Frequent (monthly? weekly?) attractive, low-risk, mass-accessible public events. Potlucks, picnics (when the weather begins to permit), concerts, sing-alongs, information table fairs, lots of kinds of gatherings, not just droning rallies and marches to nowhere.
- Frequent (monthly? weekly?) opportunities for people with high rebel energy to take vigorous confrontational action in effective ways. Design these actions so the mainstream will see them as supporting widely shared values! Use some imagination. Not just the same old sit-ins in somebody's office or blocking some random street.
- Think carefully about our public events and actions. A tension can exist between actions or language that our base finds welcoming and actions and language that appeal to people that agree with us on some issue but do not (yet) support our full agenda.
- Reach out to people just a little bit to the right of you on the political spectrum and invite them to go with you to a more radical event than they usually attend. You will both learn from the experience.

Engage people and help them learn.

- Start new people (and people returning) on solid foundations.
- Give them useful things to do. Help them to see the usefulness. Thank and praise them.
- Trainings! Many places, many times, many topics.
- Increase our creativity about events by involving new people in planning them.
- Sign folks 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 every gathering and event. 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 helps a lot of learning happen.

Emphasize sustainability and resilience in our work.

- In planning our work, design for resiliency.
- Build our individual capacity. Learn new skills. Become healthier. Increase our physical stamina. Shed unhealthy habits. Develop healthy practices. Clarify and strengthen our primary relationships.
- We each have an individual responsibility to maintain good self-care practices. We also have a collective responsibility for each other in this regard.
- Build our organizational capacity. Eliminate any oppression or exploitation within our organizations. Clarify the methods by which we make organizational decisions.
- This surge offers opportunities for fundraising (as a form of organizing, as a way to involve people, and as a way to increase our capacity). Collect contributions at (almost all) events. Train and deploy grassroots fundraising teams.
- Build administrative resilience. Get recordkeeping in good order and keep it up to date. As soon as possible, make sure each key person has a backup person prepared to carry out their role if they become unavailable. Do not leave necessary information and tools (for example, passwords, records, keys, access to financial accounts) in the custody of a single person. Of course, don't spread them unwisely either.
- During the early part of this surge, our current stalwarts may find a sprinting pace of work has become useful for a short period. By "sprinting" I mean working longer hours or more intensely than we could sustain healthily and happily for the remainder of our lives.
- Sprint *only* for work that actually builds our capacity. Sprint rarely, if at all. Do not sprint for long. Rest after sprinting.
- Frequently ask yourself if you enjoy the movement work you do, whether you do it as paid work or as volunteer work. Whenever you discover yourself doing something you don't enjoy, consider that a sign that something should change. Find what needs to change and start changing it.
- Charismatic leaders weaken us. Their big performances cause most people to feel "I can't do that, so I can't lead." That model undermines full participation and real democracy. Especially now with a president-elect riding a cult of personality, we must not build our organizations on such a model.
- The ability to give a rousing speech can sometimes make a valuable contribution, but the organization should decide the message of the speech democratically and the speaker does not earn the right to make decisions for the organization.

Consider the emotional dynamics.

- The election of Trump shocked many people at many places on the political spectrum. Lots of old mental habits have shaken a bit loose, at least for the moment. Emotional unsettledness like this probably will not last long. People will tend to settle into new habits, but will retain for some time a more-or-less-conscious awareness of the changeableness of society.
- At the level of emotions, Trump's 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 these inhumane tendencies. Therefore, we must avoid appealing to people's fears, including fear of Trump. 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 some namby-pamby do-goodism. Love can mean a fierce determination for fairness. Love can mean a determined insistence on respect for everybody.

Respect for everybody includes respect for those who currently oppose us. Respect does not imply obedience or acquiescence.

- In planning our messages and actions, keep in mind these dynamics of the emotional level.

Help people discuss the big picture.

- What does it all mean? Many things. Different people will focus on different aspects of the current situation, depending on what makes sense to them. Encourage people to listen respectfully to each other and 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.
- What does it all mean? When I take a turn to answer that question, I say something like the following as briefly as possible and then switch back to listening: The global system of capitalism becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. The domination of that system by the United States becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. When systems of domination become difficult to maintain, some of those who hold dominant positions tend to resort to enforcement in place of more subtle methods. Mr. Trump advocates for the blatant enforcement tendency. Ms. Clinton advocated enforcement abroad and more subtle methods at home. Both sought to maintain the same unworkable system. We need to work together to replace it with a humane and sustainable system, which we'll figure out together.
- The current powerholders (especially at the federal level but also at the state level) have serious divisions within their ranks. This makes their coalitions fragile. Their attempts to maintain their cohesion may make them erratic and somewhat unpredictable.
- The balance of social power has become a bit more dynamic. It can vary dramatically from issue to issue and from moment to moment.

A few miscellaneous points

- For organizations with new leaders ready to step up, this surge period may provide an excellent opportunity for a generational shift in leadership. In organizations making such a shift, elders should not drop out; elders shift to assisting our new leaders; elders become the reserve forces.
- When feasible (and not when not feasible), work in multi-organization (and multi-issue) alliances for public events.
- Can we win issue-based campaigns now? Some yes, some no. We discover which issues belong in which category by trying to win, just like always.
- We each should maintain a few relationships with people who currently oppose us. Such relationships help us in at least three ways:
 1. Understanding their thinking helps us plan our actions. (We should not plan our actions primarily to reach opponents. We should focus primarily on allies and the undecided. But understanding our opponents helps us predict their responses to our actions.)
 2. Knowing a few of them 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.
- Protests generally do not build power. They demonstrate how many people we can mobilize for that event in that moment. They can even waste power. However, it sometimes makes sense to do protest events because they can (with skill and luck) earn media attention for our issue and attract people to our organizations.

- Organizing (bringing people together to identify shared goals and cooperate in achieving them) builds our power. Generally, when you need to choose between protesting and organizing, choose organizing.
- Most of us find it easier to write and read suggestions like these than to actually do them consistently. Fortunately, we don't need perfection.

How did these tips for organizing happen?

In late November 2016, a colleague asked me what I thought organizers should keep in mind in this moment. I typed up a few ideas (about a third the length of this draft) and sent them with a request for feedback to 23 people whose thinking I value. Nine of those busy folks responded. I incorporated most of their suggestions and added some more of my own thoughts.

Now you get a turn.

What do you think? Anything useful here? Any errors to correct? Anything you would add? Any ideas you want to use and spread in your work?

Might you like to help fund work like this? Gifts from people like you make my movement-building work possible. Please contribute from my website <organizenorthcarolina.org> or mail a check to Russell Herman, P.O. Box 10233, Raleigh, NC 27605-0233. Thanks!