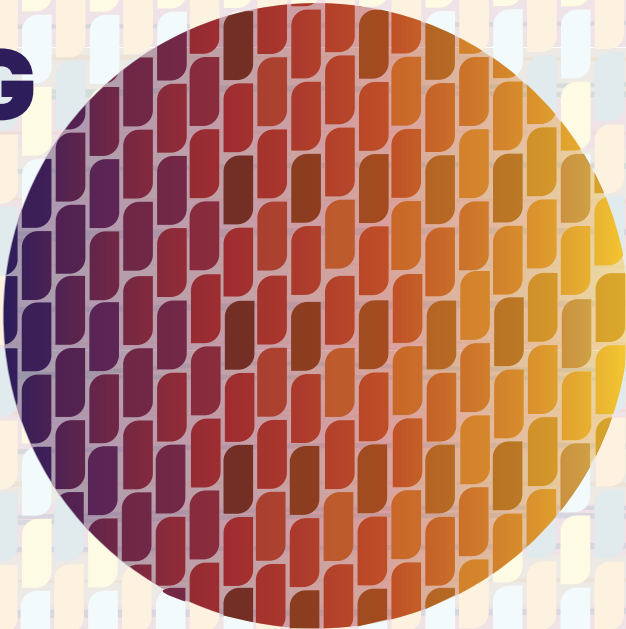


# CO-GOVERNING TOWARD MULTIRACIAL DEMOCRACY



PARTNERS FOR  
DIGNITY & RIGHTS



# Acknowledgments

## Writers

Kesi Foster  
Vina Kay  
Leah Obias  
Ben Palmquist  
Philippa Rizopoulos

## Contributors

Brittany Scott  
Tracy Babler

## Graphic Designers

Erin Zipper  
Cristine Esguerra

## Reviewers

Cathy Albisa  
Julie Nelson

## People's Assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi

Rukia Lumumba and Natt Offiah from the *People's Advocacy Institute*, Terun Moore from the *People's Advocacy Institute* and *Strong Arms of Jackson Credible Messengers Program*, Halima Olufemi from *People's Advocacy Institute* and *Malcolm X Grassroots Movement*, Brooke Floyd and Gus Washington from *Jackson People's Assembly*, Makani Themba from *Higher Ground Change Strategies*, and Stephanie Guilloud from *Project South*.

## Restorative Practice in Paterson, New Jersey

Rosie Grant, Linda Reid and Doris Salgado from the *Paterson Education Fund* and the *Parent Education Organizing Council*, school district staff Eileen Shafer, Rocio Fernandez, Michael Hill, Edgard Nieves, Vanessa Serrano, Sarah Sterling, and Claudia Walker, and *Panther Academy* students Amina Pleasant and Ja'nyi Hopkins.

## Worker Powered Co-Enforcement in the Bay Area - Chinese Progressive Association

Shaw San Liu and Michelle Zhao from the *Chinese Progressive Association* and Alex Tom from the *Center for Empowered Politics*.

## Co-Governance and Participatory Democracy in Action Across the Country

Lisa Abbott, *Kentuckians for the Commonwealth*  
Gretchen Beesing and Ahmed Mori, *Catalyst Miami*  
Ivy Brashear, *Mountain Association*  
Angelica Chazaro, *Decriminalize Seattle* and *University of Washington*  
Prince Corbett, *Ramsey County, Minnesota*  
Jessica Cordova, *Center for Policy Initiatives*  
Fransha Dace, *Yale School of the Environment*  
Antonio Diaz and Christine Selig, *PODER-SF*

Erin Barksdale, David Greenson and Rob Thomas, *Asheville Racial Justice Coalition*  
Joshua Harmon, Francis Lightburn, Carol Lautier, and Lebaron Sims, *DEMOS*  
Veronica Mendez, *Centro De Trabajadores Unidos En La Lucha (CTUL)*  
Tammy Shapiro and Rachel Isreeli, *New York City Network of Worker Cooperatives*  
Dwaigh Tyndal and Sofia Owen, *Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE)*  
Jesse Villalobos and Nora Liu, *Race Forward*

## Acknowledgments

Andrea Armeni and Curt Lyon, *Transform Finance*  
Raúl Carrillo, *Law and Political Economy Project*  
George Cheung and Heather Villanueva, *More Equitable Democracy*  
Donald Cohen, *In the Public Interest*  
David Ferris, *Highlander Center*  
Faduma Fido, *People's Economy Lab*  
Dr. Archon Fung, *Harvard Kennedy School*  
Marissa Guananja and Kyle Strickland, *Roosevelt Institute*  
Megan Gaydos and Will Dominie, *Human Impact Partners*  
Dr. Martin Gilens, *UCLA*  
Dr. Hollie Russon Gilman, *New America Foundation*  
Ingrid Haftel, Rahel Teka, and Elizabeth Crews, *Participatory Budgeting Project*  
Dr. Angela P. Harris, *University of California, Davis*  
Jennifer Ito, *Equity Research Institute*  
Dahnes Medora, *United Way of the Columbia-Willamette*  
Marc Philpart, *California Black Freedom Fund*  
Dr. K. Sabeel Rahman, *Brooklyn Law School (currently Senior Counselor in the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the Biden Administration)*  
Solana Rice, *Liberation in a Generation*  
Dr. Jocelyn Simonson, *Brooklyn Law School*  
Lyndsay Tarus, *Alliance for Appalachia*  
Brian Walsh, *Minneapolis Labor Standards Enforcement Division, Department of Civil Rights*  
Amrita Wassan, *Center for Economic Democracy*  
Adam Wells, Emily Pontiek, and Emma Kelly, *Appalachian Voices*  
Sondra Youdelman and Marta Popadiak, *People's Action*

Special thanks to our colleagues at *Partners for Dignity & Rights* and *Race Forward*: Natalie Chap, Helen Chin, Kenyon Farrow, James Haslam, Richard Healey, Ruth Idakula, Tanvi Singh, and Liz Sullivan-Yuknis.

Published 2023

## Table of Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	5	Organizing for Stronger Enforcement...	42
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	6	Diversifying Strategies to “End Wage Theft” .....	45
<b>Introduction: The Path Toward a Multiracial Democracy</b> .....	9	Scaling the Model with State Government.....	47
Co-Governance and Multiracial Democracy.....	12	Conclusion.....	51
Co-governance: An Inside/Outside Model for Multiracial Democracy.....	13		
<b>The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Ongoing Struggle for Power</b> .....	15	<b>Co-Governance and Participatory Democracy in Action Across the Country</b> .....	55
<b>People’s Assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi: Welcome, What Do You Have to Say?</b> .....	18	Climate and Environmental Justice - Just Transition .....	56
Introduction.....	18	Education .....	58
History .....	19	Finance .....	59
The People’s Assembly Experience.....	21	Health and Healthcare.....	60
People’s Assembly as Action .....	22	Housing and Equitable Development....	61
Impact and Sustainability .....	26	Infrastructure.....	62
Conclusion.....	28	Multi-Issue.....	62
<b>Restorative Practice in Paterson, New Jersey: Gentle Pressure Applied Relentlessly</b> .....	30	Participatory Budgeting.....	63
Introduction.....	30	Reparations .....	63
History .....	31	Solidarity Economy Ecosystems .....	64
“Solutions Not Suspensions”.....	33	Workers’ Rights .....	66
Conclusion.....	37	<b>In Conclusion: Strategies for Co-Governance</b> .....	67
<b>Worker Powered Co-Enforcement in the Bay Area: Pulling People into the Fight</b> .....	39	Piloting Co-Governance and Bringing it to Scale .....	68
Introduction.....	39	Lessons from the Case Studies .....	69
History .....	40	Balancing Participation with Focuses on Equitable Power and Just Outcomes.....	73
Groundwork for Co-Enforcement .....	41	The Road Ahead .....	75
		<b>Endnotes</b> .....	76



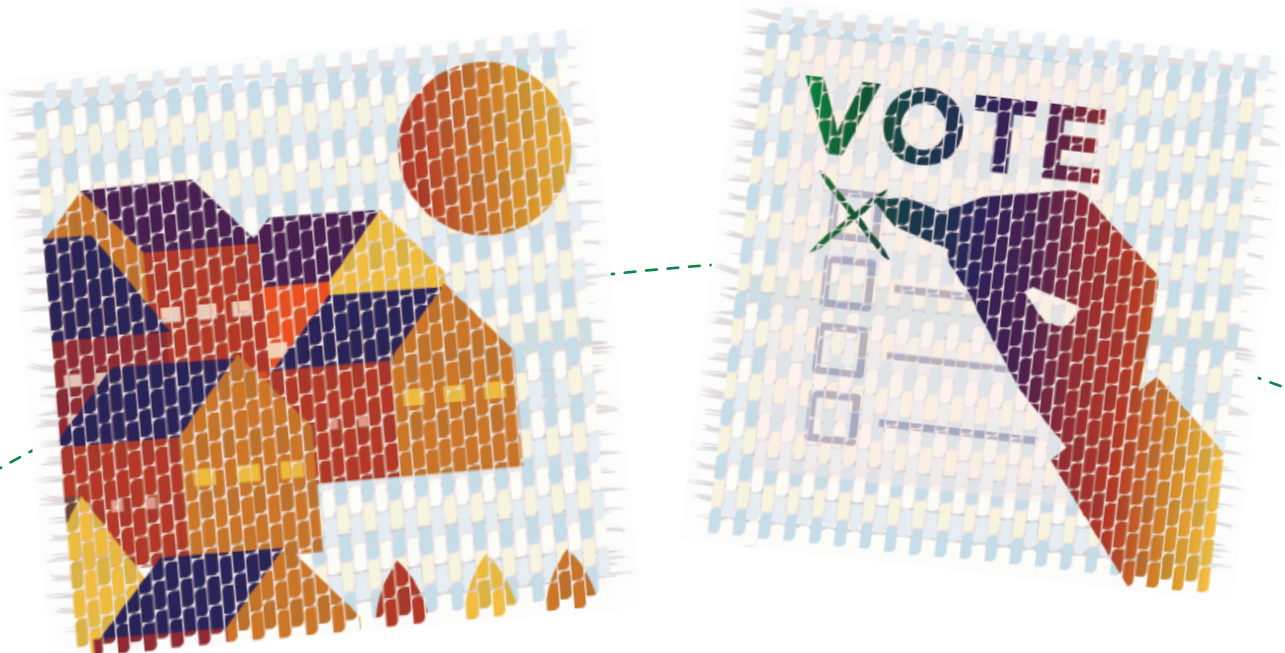
# Foreword

**IN 2018, THE NATIONAL ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS INITIATIVE (NESRI)** launched the first *New Social Contract*. It focused on collective solutions by and for communities and invited a conversation to ignite our political imagination around the possibility of systemic change. Six organizations took up the call and published the next report the following year: *A New Social Contract for Workers*, which expressed the kind of hope and determination making change requires.

These reports reflect the ongoing conversation about our next social contract, which is being held across the nation in meeting spaces, churches, conferences, schools, and at kitchen tables. They reflect the need to weave together our most innovative efforts and ideas and to deepen dialogue across government and community efforts.

In 2018, we had long known our social contract was irreparably broken. Race Forward was one of the first organizations to endorse the New Social Contract project, and in this report joins Partners for Dignity & Rights (formerly NESRI) to continue the conversation with a focus on reimagining the relationship between government and communities.

Both Race Forward and Partners for Dignity & Rights are committed to building an accountable, authentic, inclusive multiracial democracy that guarantees both political rights like voting and economic rights like housing and livable incomes for all. We believe that to do so, government must belong to the communities they represent and serve.



# Executive Summary

## Building Multiracial Democracy through Co-Governance

**AFTER GENERATIONS OF STRUGGLE AND SACRIFICE**, multiracial democracy in the United States remains a beautiful yet unfulfilled dream. Following the history and ongoing leadership of our movement allies, we envision a multiracial democracy that centers on the understanding that every human being is valuable and worthy, and that is built on the pillars of universal and equitable public goods, shared democratic control, and racial, gender, and all forms of justice.

The Suffragist and Civil Rights Movements pushed us toward universal voting rights, yet today we find ourselves struggling to protect voting rights and elections from authoritarian, racist threats. But even beyond elections, we are struggling with a profound democracy gap. The constrained, prevailing view of citizenship is a passive, individualistic, consumer model of voting and citizenship in which public opinion is measured and treated as a neutral, natural result of rational deliberation between individuals, and in which citizens are simply supposed to vote once every two years and then sit back to let elected leaders run the show. But people are feeling increasingly precarious in their lives, lacking real choices about where and how they live, work, and send their children to school. Following years of political promises that haven't materialized, many people do not believe that government is willing or able to work for them.

Strengthening democracy will take many strategies, including protecting voting rights and political institutions, repairing racial harms, resisting all forms of oppression, reining in corporate power, and building cooperatives and other community- and worker-controlled economic institutions. But to build people's faith in government and the potential for collective action to meet shared needs and improve real outcomes in people's lives, we also need to go deeper, building modes of participatory democracy from the ground up.

In this report, we focus on the critical nexus between community and worker organizing with local government, documenting ways in which member-led organizations representing poor and working-class people of color—those who have been excluded from full political and economic citizenship—are working with local government staff and officials to build out co-governance models like people's assemblies, restorative justice in schools, and worker-centered enforcement of labor rights. The models we lift up are powerful because they are giving people who are directly impacted by injustices a direct role in developing and implementing solutions.

## Learning from History, In-Depth Case Studies and the Landscape

**THE REPORT BEGINS BY REFLECTING ON LESSONS** from the political and economic organizing of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, Fannie Lou Hamer, and other Black

community leaders in Mississippi, tracing the deeply American tradition of struggles for a truly democratic and racially just government and society. We then highlight three in-depth case studies of co-governance models:

- In **Jackson, Mississippi**, the **People's Advocacy Institute** continues a long tradition in Black communities of organizing community-wide and large-scale People's Assemblies to create space for residents to voice their concerns about and propose solutions to key issues like infrastructure and community safety.
- In **Paterson, New Jersey**, local community organizations the **Paterson Education Fund** and the **Parent Education Organizing Council** have worked closely with the school district to shift the culture around school discipline toward restorative justice and to disrupt the school-to-prison-pipeline.
- In **San Francisco**, the **Chinese Progressive Association** has fought for—and won—strong **worker-centered enforcement** laws, legal processes, and working relationships with the city and the state, which enable low-wage immigrant workers to enforce their own labor rights in restaurants, garment factories, and other industries across California.

We also include short highlights of a range of additional economic democracy and co-governance models from across the country, in which community and worker organizations are working with government to build collaborative models with specific attention toward achieving racially equitable inclusion and outcomes. These include participatory budgeting in Seattle's public safety budget, a community needs assessment conducted by the Texas Organizing Project, and Buffalo's Green Development Zone for participatory, equitable land-use planning and development. We hope that the breadth of examples provided demonstrate the diversity of ways in which community organizations and local governments are collaborating to democratize governance and advance racial equity, and inspire many more people to experiment with building and implementing new and better models of co-governance.

## Lessons for Organizers and Local Governments

**SEVERAL LESSONS EMERGE** from our in-depth case studies and landscape scan:

1

### CULTIVATE COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Established organizations and coalitions led by community members and workers outside of government are essential to effectively engage people's knowledge, participation, and leadership.

2

### BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Strong relationships between the staff and leaders of community organizations, their members, their broader communities, and city staff and leaders are foundational. Building strong relationships takes time and commitment.



3

**PURSUE INSIDE/OUTSIDE STRATEGIES**

Co-governance draws on the strengths that both public agencies and community organizations bring to the table, including governments' legal powers and resources, as well as community organizations' community trust, knowledge, and their ability to mobilize political support. It can take work from both sides to move beyond antagonistic relationships while still maintaining community groups' political independence from government.



4

**MAKE CO-GOVERNANCE ENFORCEABLE**

Policy change is not a win if it's not enforced, so policies should identify clear, measurable goals and outcomes; include sanctions; empower workers and others most affected by violations to enforce laws; be tailored to sectoral and local context; and transform norms and cultures of enforcement.



5

**TRANSFORM THE CULTURE OF GOVERNANCE**

Effective co-governance requires real commitment and institutional change. Public agencies need political backing, funding, and training for co-governance to succeed.



6

**SCALE UP AND SCALE OUT**

Co-governance holds tremendous potential to be scaled up across local, state, and federal governments, as well as extended into the private and nonprofit sectors. To get to scale and learn from one another as we go, we must seed new organizations, create coalitions, and build solidarity with other movements.

The future of governance and democracy in the U.S. remains uncertain, and a multiracial democracy is in no way guaranteed unless we fight for it in all sectors of society and the economy. But moving boldly towards a vision of a transformed economy and politics—with universal and equitable public goods, shared democratic control, and racial and all forms of justice at the center—is an absolute necessity.

# Introduction: The Path Toward a Multiracial Democracy

**IN THIS MOMENT OF BOTH PERIL AND OPPORTUNITY**, the question is not whether we need a new social contract, but rather what kind it will be. We need a truly just social contract based on democratic values such as collectivity, care, and equity that is woven into our economic, social, and political systems. We must recenter our politics and economy on the understanding that every human being is valuable and worthy—and we must fulfill that commitment through universal and equitable public goods<sup>1</sup>, shared democratic control, and a transformative movement for racial justice.

Our country remains deeply politically polarized, reflecting the breakdown of any remaining faith in the existing economic and political models that fueled the global crisis of inequity. Racialized wealth and income inequality, unchecked privatization, and the fraying of public systems due to disinvestment, among others, have all reached a crisis point. Millions of people are struggling to make rent<sup>2</sup> and pay medical bills<sup>3</sup> while billionaires' and corporations' wealth grows<sup>4</sup>, our tech-fueled media landscape fails to ground us in context or objective facts, and people feel increasingly precarious and alienated from the political system and from one another.

Since 2020, conditions have only worsened. A global pandemic roared through our already fragile landscape, deepening existing inequities. Just months later, the largest multiracial racial justice uprising in U.S. history followed, accompanied by the continuing rise of a white nationalist movement that brazenly attacks U.S. democracy itself, to the point of attempting an insurrection at our nation's capitol.

Building an accountable, authentic, inclusive multiracial democracy requires that both political rights, such as voting, and economic rights, such as housing and livable incomes, are guaranteed for all. In this new social contract, we must prioritize human needs over productivity and profits. Government must belong to the communities it represents and serves. That means protecting electoral integrity and voting rights while also going beyond traditional representative government to build democratic spaces and processes that give communities and workers direct ways to participate in decisions. Communities and workers must have a say in decisions made by legislatures, regulatory agencies, employers, and institutions like hospitals whose decisions have important public impacts. We must establish ways for communities to hold powerful public and private actors accountable to human rights and to democratic decisions. And, because we are starting from such an uneven place, we must design democratic models that explicitly and enforceably build racial, economic, gender, and other forms of equity into both democratic processes and real-world outcomes.

This report explores collaborative and co-governance efforts that deepen democratic practice in place and move us towards that vision. We present a spectrum of economic democracy and co-governance models and explore what scaling them would require. In Jackson, Mississippi, the People's Advocacy Institute continues a long tradition in Black communities of organizing community-wide and large-scale People's Assemblies to create space for residents to voice their concerns and propose solutions to key issues like infrastructure and community safety. The People's Assemblies model is building toward the kind of co-governance that recognizes the power of communities to see the problem, identify the solution, and organize toward its reality. In this way, the People's Assemblies have become a crucial first step in giving community members meaningful authority over the decisions that affect their lives.

In Paterson, New Jersey, the school district has worked closely with local community organizations Paterson Education Fund and Parent Education Organizing Council to transform the culture around school discipline. This powerful partnership elevates trusted members of the community on important task forces and hiring committees, working in tandem with the community to transform policy and culture around discipline to disrupt the school-to-prison-pipeline and help kids learn how to take responsibility for their mistakes without fear of punishment.

In the Bay Area, the Chinese Progressive Association has fought for—and won—a worker-powered co-governance model, in which the organization and the various campaigns and coalitions they have created pushed local and state agencies to provide crucial funding. Alongside city and state offices, CPA has advanced worker justice with increasingly strong policies and laws that government agencies are willing to back up with enforcement to improve working conditions for thousands of garment, restaurant, and other low-wage workers across the state of California.

“The value of this type of co-enforcement partnership is about making the law work for workers and making what we’re fighting for be real. You can’t just organize and advocate for better working conditions if we don’t actually ensure that they can be enforced. Raise the floor and enforce the floor.”

—Shaw San Liu, Chinese Progressive Association

All three case studies are powerful examples of what can be accomplished when local organizations, rooted in their communities, leverage their years of relationship-building and organizing to engage with government entities in order to influence both policy and culture. While they were born in different communities both geographically and culturally, and engage around totally different issues, each one is an example of the kind of change that is possible when a community and government recognize their power and share democratic control.



We understand these efforts are taking place in the context of dangerous political trends toward authoritarianism and white nationalism that seek not only to challenge but to eradicate the notion of multiracial democracy. Similarly, we know that the less vitriolic but still racialized and dangerous vision of neoliberalism that shrinks government and abandons public responsibility to private profits offers little sustenance for the needed changes in material conditions for communities that would allow multiracial democracy to flourish.

A democratic economy ensures that material needs like food, water, and housing—those fundamental elements that everyone needs to live a good life—are guaranteed as public goods. Beyond voting and elections, and even beyond politics, democratic practice includes the ability to participate in making the decisions that affect our lives in our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, hospitals, and other key public and private institutions.

To take up this profound work of democracy, we must acknowledge that many, if not most, of our democratic deficits are shaped by our history of racial injustice. This nation has a painful history of those in power forcibly and brutally extracting labor and land from Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. The Suffragist and Civil Rights Movements won critical voting rights, but translating those achievements from formal legal commitments into real life benefits for our communities has proved painfully elusive. Only by continuing the legacy and work of the Civil Rights Movement to dismantle the structural and systemic racism that permeates our society and our government can we construct a meaningful democracy.

We face strong headwinds, not least of which include the toxic narrative that personal and individual failure drive negative outcomes, rather than a massive and systemic imbalance of power. These “fix people not systems” narratives are as abhorrent as they are pervasive, labeling primarily Black and brown people—along with immigrants from the Global South—as undeserving. They also serve to justify the economic and resource poverty that strip communities of color of democratic control over their lives and neighborhoods.

Dismantling structural and systemic racism and building the vibrant multiracial democracy we need is our ultimate challenge. We must build popular power and a political majority behind a shared vision. It will take courageous, tireless transformative organizing<sup>5</sup> in every community, every economic sector, every institution, and every level of government.

*And it will start with solutions that work.*

All over the country, communities, workers, and local governments are developing transformative and equitable solutions that shift decision-making power to neighborhood residents, students and teachers, workers and working-class communities. These are not examples of the outsourcing of essential public functions or the use of public funds to generate private profits through so-called “public-private partnerships.” Rather, these models are realigning relationships between institutions and the people they are intended to serve by centering accountability, transparency, and collaboration. In this report, we present an initial set of models that can help us reimagine the institutions that shape our lives. We are honored

to share these case studies, and the opportunities to replicate, scale and institutionalize them. We believe they move us towards a world where equity and human rights are the defining feature of our social fabric.

“It is important to understand economic social rights. There is a false dichotomy between political and civil rights. There is not one without the other, they are the same in a way. That is why we have to say economic democracy, but you shouldn’t even have to say that. It’s not a democracy without the ecosocial.”

—Makani Themba, Chief Strategist  
at Higher Ground Strategies

## Co-Governance and Multiracial Democracy

**CO-GOVERNANCE IS A COLLECTION OF PARTICIPATORY MODELS** and practices in which government and communities work together through formal and informal structures to make collective policy decisions, co-create programs to meet community needs, and ensure those policies and programs are implemented effectively.

A prerequisite for co-governance is the existence of community-based organizations, whether civic associations, worker centers, tenant organizations, or local food hubs, that are member-driven and -led. Vibrant and representative community organizations are the hallmark of a healthy democracy.

A multiracial democracy depends on strengthening public goods, democratic practice, and racial justice. Engagement between community-based groups and government entities is a key strategy to achieving those goals. We can strengthen public goods by having the communities that most need them working directly with the agencies responsible for them; we can deepen democratic control by rejecting a consumerist and individualistic approach to citizenry in favor of collectively engaging with government; we can fight for racial justice by using co-governance as a strategy to build power in communities of color.

Community governance exists in various forms around the world, and has deep roots in Indigenous, Black, and immigrant traditions. It has been noted that the Iroquois Nation is the oldest democracy on earth. From rebellions against slavery to food and land cooperatives today, Black communities have always cultivated deep traditions of collective action and mutual aid. Immigrants from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere have brought countless traditions including religious practices, town meetings, community lending circles, and life-long intergenerational support. While community-



based democratic governance models exist throughout the U.S., a key challenge of the current political moment is how to expand and scale local democratic practices, bringing institutionalized forms of governance (i.e. local elected officials and agencies tasked with managing our public goods) into greater alignment with community-defined priorities and protecting these institutions from private interests.

## Co-governance: An Inside/Outside Model for Multiracial Democracy

**CO-GOVERNANCE MUST BE DESIGNED** not just around equitable processes, but also in service of equitable outcomes that correct disparities among racial, economic, gender, and other groups. To do this effectively, it must utilize an organizing strategy that harnesses both collaboration and external pressure from civil society.

When power and relationships are properly aligned, stakeholders can come together to develop and implement solutions in a range of contexts with community representatives at the table. But more entrenched policy, political, and structural challenges often require external pressure to complement collaborative relationships, and savvy racial equity practitioners in government are skilled at leveraging that external pressure towards internal goals. This is particularly true when private actors pursuing private interests are either a barrier or the source of the injustice, as is far too often in cases like private sector polluters, prisons, healthcare systems, developers, and more. When private interests have too much power, community pressure can offer an important counterbalance to enable government to tackle injustice.

But which organizations are legitimate community representatives? And are all groups to be treated equally? Member-led groups should hold prominence because they have built-in community accountability and often adopt democratic practices like elections and consensus decision-making. Furthermore, communities and organizations that are oriented toward upholding human rights and public goods above profits, and toward equalizing power, and toward gaining positive outcomes in people's real lives should be centered. The three Case Studies in this report are based on organizations that have built such standing and trust within their communities through years of organizing and relationship building.

Most attempts to deepen democracy focus on protecting and reforming elections and government, but to truly deepen democracy, it is imperative that we recognize and work across the blurred lines between the public and private<sup>6</sup>, and the political, social and economic realms<sup>7</sup>. In other words, for democracy to thrive, we must build democratic practice across every element of our society.

In the first section of this report, we provide some historic context on the long struggle for multiracial democracy by looking back to the legacy of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. In the Case Studies, we highlight powerful models from Jackson, Mississippi, Paterson, New Jersey, and San Francisco, demonstrating how communities and workers are partnering

with the public sector to democratize local governance and help co-create racially and economically just schools, communities, and working conditions. In the Co-Governance and Participatory Democracy in Action section, we summarize a range of co-governance initiatives led by community-based organizations across the country that involve at least some role for government, whether as a convener, an active participant, or a more passive supporter. Overall, the report illustrates that it is possible to build power and give community members a real say over the decisions in their lives when organizations are able to engage with government entities to change policy, establish a culture of justice, and center community participation. We look forward to engaging with community organizations, people in government, and everyone committed to building more just, democratic modes of decision-making throughout government and our economy.

# The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Ongoing Struggle for Power

-----  
 The struggle to build a truly democratic and racially just government and society is a deep American tradition.  
 -----

**ON AUGUST 22, 1964, A BLACK WOMAN FROM THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA** sat in front of the Credentials Committee at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. The woman was Fannie Lou Hamer, a delegate of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and now a well known civil rights leader.



*Fannie Lou Hamer, at the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 1964, Warren K. Leffler, U.S. News & World Report Magazine; Restored by Adam Cuerden, United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division under the digital ID [ds.07134](#)*

The MFDP was founded by Black people from the Deep South and young multiracial organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as a vehicle to challenge the exclusively white Southern Democrats by fostering democratic participation for those who were still denied their right to vote. During what became known as the Summer of Freedom, hundreds of volunteers worked with Fannie Lou Hamer and other local organizers including E.W. Steptoe, Victoria Gray, Annie Devine, Hartman Turnbow and Hazel Palmer to recruit Black Mississippians to join the MFDP<sup>8</sup>. Community meetings were held in churches, Masonic temples, cafes, pool halls, juke joints, and anywhere else Black people congregated<sup>9</sup>. Using ideas developed during local, county, and regional meetings, the membership crafted a political platform. The MFDP had created a structure for Black people in the South to participate in the democratic political process for the first time since Reconstruction.

Some 87 years after the end of Reconstruction, Mrs. Hamer and the other organizers of the MFDP had survived a new reign of state and vigilante terror aimed at upholding white

supremacy. Organizers understood there would be no future for the disenfranchised without the power to shape and control the laws, policies, and distribution of resources that kept them trapped at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Yet before Mrs. Hamer's testimony could be broadcast on television screens across the country, the live feed of the convention was abruptly cut off. President Lyndon B. Johnson had hastily called a press conference to silence Mrs. Hamer and the MFDP.

She gave her speech nevertheless. If Johnson hadn't successfully blocked Mrs. Hamer's message from reaching the public, they would have heard her describe the beatings and torture Black people faced struggling to forge a path for a multiracial economic democracy. Mrs. Hamer closed her testimony calling out the hypocrisy of American democracy.

"All of this is on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"

—Fannie Lou Hamer

President Johnson was more concerned with maintaining a harmonious Democratic rule than supporting the integration of the Southern Democratic Party. He had built a coalition of allies, including labor, northern Democrats, and liberal leaders that worked to undermine the MFDP and tried to force their delegation of 68 people to accept only two seats at the convention. The MFDP rejected their proposal.

The MFDP built a political vehicle that could harness the power of the grassroots to shift the political system in Mississippi and throughout the South<sup>10</sup>. They may have been turned away and denied recognition by the Democratic Party on that historic night, but they were by no means unsuccessful.

Black people organizing throughout the American South were at the heart of the Second Reconstruction. Their political organizing forced the democratic system to expand by enshrining the protection of civil rights into law and enfranchising millions of Black people through the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Fannie Lou Hamer, the National Council of Negro Women, and others also led economic organizing, establishing projects like the Freedom Farm Cooperative and the Pig Project to support Black livelihoods and economic sovereignty. Taken together, their political and economic organizing

looked beyond simply winning power within the traditional, exclusionary elections and representative government.<sup>11</sup> Their work is part of a broader legacy in Black and other communities to build both political and economic democracy.

“We didn’t come all this way for no two seats since all of us is tired.”

- Fannie Lou Hamer

We now know, of course, that in the 1970s, a fierce counter-reaction would follow. Popular racial resentments, law-and-order politics, economic shocks, and devastating attacks on progressive forces including unions, Black Power organizations, and feminist Equal Rights Amendment activists would roll back progress toward true multiracial political and economic democracy. Today, the gains of the Civil Rights Movement are being systematically stripped away and democracy in the U.S. is once again constricting instead of expanding.

So what does this mean for today? Reverend William Barber II of the Poor People’s Campaign and many other civil rights leaders, organizers, and historians have suggested that we may be in the midst of a Third Reconstruction. Just like the Second Reconstruction, Black organizers in the American South are at the heart of this struggle. While we continue to fight to build political power capable of staving off white minority rule, we should be heartened by the scope of Black-led, Indigenous-led, Latina/o/x-led<sup>12</sup>, Asian-led, and multiracial organizations across the country waging campaigns to shift decision making power over policies, practices, and distribution of resources through co-governance. Leaning on the leadership and lessons from the Black Liberation Struggle, the following case studies demonstrate community organizations working with local governments to create the structures necessary for effective co-governance. From Paterson, New Jersey, to San Francisco, to Jackson, Mississippi, they are part of the ongoing struggle to construct a multiracial economic democracy that meets the needs of all people.

# People's Assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi: Welcome, What Do You Have to Say?



In a city marked by centuries of exclusionary politics, Black organizers have built People's Assemblies to bring local residents into direct democracy as they grow their leadership, shape priorities, and build community power.

## Introduction

**JACKSON, A MAJORITY BLACK CITY**—at over 80 percent—and the capital of Mississippi, sits at the intersection of resistance to oppressive systems and the building of a new vision for community governance. In Jackson, Black people have long resisted slavery, segregation, and oppression, including the 1963 sit-in at the segregated Woolworth's lunch counter, during which protestors were violently attacked. At the same time, Black leadership has been core to reimagining power from the first labor union in Mississippi organized by Black Jackson washerwomen in 1866 to the democratic worker ownership of the cooperative movement. Even today, Black leaders continue to lead struggles for safe drinking water and other basic rights.



*Jackson People's Assembly's Youth Assembly.*

The Jackson People's Assemblies build on this history by offering the spaces for community members to come together, name the challenges they are facing in their communities, and together imagine solutions. In this way, the People's Assemblies are more than just community gatherings or a form of community engagement. People's Assemblies are not one-time or rare occurrences, but a consistent practice that builds community muscle for both organizing and governance. The practice is part of a broader movement, including efforts in the

Southern United States through the Southern Movement Assembly and in the global South including in Puerto Rico. They bring together a critical mass of community members who are building power in the act of identifying issues and developing actionable solutions.

That power co-exists with local government systems, sometimes in opposition to how government is functioning, whether at the local or state levels. Other times, there is collaboration, as with Jackson's late Mayor Chokwe Lumumba, who used the People's Assemblies as the space to inform his priorities when running for office in 2013. His son, the current Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba, also supports the practice as one that brings community solutions to the surface. In either case—opposition or collaboration—the consistent co-existence is critical because it deepens the roots of community power.

Rukia Lumumba is the daughter of the late mayor and sister to the current one. She leads the People's Advocacy Institute, a community organization in Jackson that now holds the coordination of Jackson People's Assemblies.

“Assemblies are not based on political party or leaning or the ability to vote. You can be any age, have a criminal history, citizenship doesn't matter. But you must believe in this place and work for the common good. Decisions of a People's Assembly must not harm anyone.”

– Rukia Lumumba

People's Assemblies in Jackson persist as an integral part of building toward a co-governance that recognizes the power of communities to see the problem, identify the solution, and organize toward its reality—and where government recognizes that power. As Makani Themba, one of the early supporters of the People's Assembly in Jackson, shared, the People's Assemblies aspire toward “co-governance where folks have meaningful authority over the decisions that affect their lives.”

## History

**THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY PROCESS** in Jackson and in the South has a long lineage. Assemblies are connected to practices of community governance visible in the resistance by enslaved people, in labor organizing, and in the Civil Rights Movement. Indigenous practices throughout the world have centered community governance, and as Makani Themba said, “Everything good we can learn about governance comes from Indigenous peoples.”

Enslaved people held secret assemblies or prayer circles “to express their humanity, build and sustain community, fortify their spirits, and organize resistance.”<sup>13</sup> The practice continued in different and more public configurations through Reconstruction and into the 1960s as part of campaigns led by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). A common thread throughout these gatherings over time has been the exercise of self-determination by Black people who had faced the constant disregard of

their humanity by both the government and the dominant community. It was during this time that the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party formed, independent from the white-dominated Democratic Party.

In the mid-1990s People's Assemblies emerged in Jackson and throughout Mississippi through the leadership of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM) and the New Afrikan People's Organization (NAPO). Both groups were grounded in a vision for self-determination of Black people in response to the colonization, economic exploitation, and white supremacy that Black communities were subjected to in the United States. At this time, the population in Jackson was changing and it was becoming a majority Black city. With that demographic shift, MXGM and NAPO recognized the need to build community voice and power. The assemblies they formed, starting with the Human Rights Coalition, were a practice of that self-determination. They moved beyond a representative democracy to direct or participatory democracy through guided facilitation and without a hierarchical structure or decision making process.

The MXGM/NAPO model of People's Assemblies was part of a larger framework outlined in the Jackson-Kush Plan which had been developed to guide Black self-determination and economic democracy. The three components of the plan were:

- »» Building People's Assemblies
- »» Building an independent Black political party
- »» Building a broad-based solidarity economy<sup>14</sup>

The Jackson-Kush Plan described the combination of the People's Assembly gatherings and engagement in the existing political system with an independent Black political party as dual power. The plan recognized the necessity of imagining and creating a larger community-driven and liberatory vision, while also participating in the system as it existed.<sup>15</sup>

The Jackson-Kush Plan's commitment to a solidarity economy and developing autonomous community power was inspired in part by examples from around the world. It drew from work in Latin America to fight authoritarian and exploitative practices through cooperative economics grounded in "social solidarity, mutual aid, reciprocity, and generosity."<sup>16</sup> It also used lessons from the Mondragon Federation of Cooperative Enterprises in Spain, applying them to the context and experiences of Black people in the U.S. South by prioritizing the creation of cooperative enterprises, green development, urban farms and markets, land trusts, and expanding the public sector.

At the same time that the People's Assemblies were becoming a consistent community and political presence in Jackson, other communities, mostly in the South, were practicing People's Assemblies. Known as Peoples Movement Assemblies (PMA), these gatherings were inspired by global social movements, including an assembly at the World Social Forum in Brazil in 2001.



Starting in 2006, the PMA model of organizing was applied at Social Forums in the United States. At the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit in 2010, 100 PMAs convened more than 10,000 people. Out of this process, representatives developed a Social Movement Agenda. People who had participated in the PMA then brought the practice home to their communities and facilitated assemblies focused on issues from immigration to health to environmental justice.<sup>17</sup>

Today, with its coordinating home at the People's Advocacy Institute, Rukia Lumumba sees the current practice of People's Assemblies as critical to "collective governance, moving towards community-led governance."

If one were to draw a family tree of People's Assemblies, many branches of assemblies would emerge that have drawn people together to build community and political consciousness, freely express the challenges and oppression they experience, and think collectively about what they can do about it. The roots of People's Assemblies are in the power of people to exercise dignity and self-determination, from Indigenous communities to enslaved Black people to communities in the global South to New England town meetings. The fruits of that tree, some with a long ripening time, are changed material and political conditions, as well as change in how governance is not just experienced, but held by people in community.

## The People's Assembly Experience

**A PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY HAS THREE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS.** First, it is described as a mass gathering, and in the Jackson People's Assembly model the goal is that at least one-fifth of the population of a defined geographic area joins an assembly. Large numbers of people coming together is a show of power and force, as well as being critical to the democratic process. Sometimes an assembly can include 50 people, sometimes as many

as 175. A second characteristic is that it is a space for "addressing essential social issues." The purpose of an assembly is not just a listening space, but one where participants design solutions. Finally, the commitment of the People's Assembly is to direct democracy or "one person, one vote."<sup>18</sup>

"When you walk into a People's Assembly, no matter who you are, what you look like, how you're dressed, you immediately feel valued and appreciated and welcomed. It's 'Welcome, what do you have to say? We want to hear it.'" described Brooke Floyd, the Jackson People's Assembly Coordinator and part



*Jackson People's Assembly's Youth Assembly.*

of a coordinating team based at the People's Advocacy Institute that plans and facilitates assemblies. The assemblies prioritize sharing a meal—“before we talk,” Floyd emphasized—and offer child care so that people can be fully present and participate. They also support basic needs with resources like bottles of drinking water when the city is on a boil water notice.

Consistently creating a space that is welcoming and where people know their perspectives matter has been core to the sustainability of the Jackson People's Assembly (JPA). With that grounding, the JPA can also offer information and the political education that prepares community members to more powerfully engage with the systems that impact their lives. In between assemblies, the JPA makes a point of sharing information about how these systems work and what decisions are being made. One of Floyd's roles is attending Jackson City Council meetings, then reporting back to the community what she heard and how decisions will affect them.

“The People's Assembly helps build power,” said Gus Washington, JPA Assistant and part of the coordinating team. “We want people to feel confident and bold when engaging with their government ... we stress that this is an opportunity to participate in your care as a community member.”

Topics for each year's People's Assemblies are decided through an assembly at the end of the year, with the flexibility to be responsive to what the community is experiencing, which has become especially necessary during the pandemic. Seeing an alarming rise in violence done to and by youth, including the violence of young people being sent to jails and prisons, the priority emerged for a youth assembly. The coordinating team then checked with young people in the community who reiterated a desire for an assembly focused on issues they were experiencing.

Following the first youth assembly, the need for an assembly for women and caregivers arose from the deep sense of grief experienced by those losing children to violence or incarceration. The coordinating team worked to make that assembly space one of care and healing, offering a beautiful meal, access to therapists, and massages, in addition to the chance to begin developing solutions.

Strong facilitation skills are essential to supporting People's Assemblies. The coordinating team reflected on how setting the space as one that is safe to be open and vulnerable requires different approaches when bringing together young people, women and caregivers, LGBTQ community members, or other affinity groups.

Another element of People's Assemblies is an intentionally nonhierarchical process. All participants are treated respectfully as community members, not according to a role on the coordinating team, or holding elected office, or any other position. “When given the chance to speak, I spoke, too,” said Floyd, the JPA Coordinator. “We make every effort to show that this is not about us, this is about community.”

Since 2006, when the JPA became a more consistent process, there have been at least three assemblies each year. Some years call for more. Since 2018, more than 31,000 community members have engaged in People's Assemblies. In fact, participation actually grew in virtual assemblies during the pandemic.

## People's Assembly as Action

**ALL OF THE INTENTION AND WORK** that goes into setting the JPA as a welcoming space for community members to share their perspectives is for a clear purpose. Natt Offiah is Lead Organizer at People's Advocacy Institute and long involved in People's Assemblies in Jackson.



*Jackson People's Assembly.*

“The People's Assembly is a space for governance, to collectively make decisions,” said Offiah. “We communicate that this isn't a place like a town hall where decisions will be made about you and for you.” That message about the purpose of the JPA is a constant refrain, ensuring that anyone who enters, whether a consistent participant or new to the space, understands why the space exists.

The solutions that emerge from the JPA are meant to be pushed as change in policy and practice at the city level. The assembly is not the end of the process, but informs year round work to advance the decisions made at those gatherings into real change.

“That is an automatic given,” said Floyd. “It's a long process, people meeting and convening, getting ideas together, getting a plan together, and then presenting it as a full proposal with the complete community buy-in and approval. Nothing is done without the community saying so. Any time I've gone before the council it's because the community said we are ready to go.”

### Addressing the Infrastructure Crisis in Jackson

In 2013, one of the issues plaguing Jackson was crumbling infrastructure, including roads filled with potholes that residents had to swerve to avoid and water pipes that leaked, resulting in contaminated drinking water and low water pressure. Boil water notices—letting residents know that tap water had to be boiled before they could safely drink it—were a common occurrence. Unfortunately, the impact of a lack of investment in public infrastructure continues in 2022, with Jackson residents unable to consume the city's tap water in a water crisis that has drawn national attention.

The disinvestment in infrastructure in Jackson is part of a larger story of government neglect of necessary public goods. This disinvestment is racialized. In analyzing the present day water crisis in Jackson, Makani Themba wrote: “Its roots are in Jim Crow, the separate that was

never equal, where everything from water to parks to food and even air in our communities receives less investment, less protection, and less access. Broken levees in New Orleans. Toxic water in Flint. Crumbling buildings in eastern Kentucky. This is beyond a crisis in infrastructure. It is a crisis in justice.”

An idea emerged from JPA's process of community members coming together to define the issues they are facing, as well as possible solutions. Community members thought a small 1 percent increase in the city's sales tax could raise sufficient public funds to kick start efforts to repair water pipes, streets, and other infrastructure. Although sales taxes are regressive in nature and the funds raised would not fully address the need, community support was already baked in because the solution came from a People's Assembly.

The then newly elected Mayor Chokwe Lumumba agreed to push the idea forward, securing the support of the City Council. A referendum vote in January 2014 yielded overwhelming support with 90 percent of voters agreeing to the sales tax increase. Eight years later, only around \$11 million in sales tax revenue has been collected to fund infrastructure improvements in Jackson, a fraction of what is needed to address a problem that will require billions of dollars.

The solution was important but not enough to address the infrastructure problem. Furthermore, as allowed in Mississippi state law, a state commission took over the disbursement of the sales tax revenue. That commission can decide where and for what purpose those funds are distributed, which means the support of city infrastructure is always uncertain.

The People's Assembly process showed its power in moving a community-driven solution with the sales tax increase. The outcome, however, reminded the Jackson community that broader support from state government leaders and more resources are necessary to address an issue as large and entrenched as the longtime disinvestment in city infrastructure.

### **From People's Assembly to the Office of Violence Prevention**

In 2018, JPA held an assembly on safety and violence in the community. Political education was an important element of the assembly, setting the focus of the conversation on the city budget and how public resources were being prioritized. As the city's police budget grew, other program budgets had shrunk, yet the rate of crime had not decreased.

Political education laid the groundwork for a conversation about what the community could be doing differently. The idea of intervening before violence became an issue emerged from the People's Assembly. Through the assembly, community members named the lack of adequate mental health care, domestic violence interrupters, and conflict resolution facilitators in Jackson as underlying issues that, if addressed, could prevent violence from occurring.

The work that happens in between People's Assemblies started, and even through the pandemic, organizers were able to put together a plan, draft a proposal drawing on models in other communities, and raise resources including at the city. The #FundCommunities campaign grew out of the People's Assembly and has resulted in new community-based programs aimed at violence prevention. One example is the Strong Arms of Jackson Credible Messengers initiative, which with leadership by people directly impacted by the criminal legal system, provides training, mentoring, and resources to community members similarly impacted. A partnership between PAI and Operation Good and Safe Streets has resulted in the Cure Violence program, which addresses community conflicts with a violence interruption model.

As part of the #FundCommunities campaign, organizers pushed the City Council and Mayor's office to acknowledge the need for an Office of Violence Prevention, rather than increased police funding. The goal, according to Rukia Lumumba, is for the funds to go to community-based organizations that can lead the work that the People's Assembly process identified as necessary. The campaign won the commitment from the city of \$750,000 regranted from the National League of Cities to support this effort. More funding is necessary, especially since the community has seen how interconnected community needs are, including not just crime prevention, but also housing insecurity, health issues, and low access to education resources.

"We have an overwhelming sense of urgency about everything," said Brooke Floyd. "Violence is #1, but when you ask for \$750,000 and people don't even have clean drinking water, it becomes a thing where people are fighting for drops of water."

### **Power in Partnerships**

Critical to the success and sustainability of JPA is partnership with other community organizations. The People's Assemblies do not belong to any one organization, though in its current formation, the People's Advocacy Institute, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the Mississippi Poor People's Campaign, and One Voice Mississippi support and staff the necessary work to make assemblies happen.

Outreach and communication with the Jackson community is an ongoing process, including reporting on the City Council meetings, door knocking to let people know about an upcoming assembly, and reporting back as the solutions that come out of assemblies become policy proposals.

Other organizations bring their relationships and knowledge of community needs to the planning process, as well as their outreach capacity in keeping community members informed. For the recent affinity group assemblies for young people and for caregivers, it has been important to deepen partnerships with other organizations leading work with these communities, both for outreach and for facilitating the assembly.

"We have to think about how do youth engage with policy and government in a way that

protects their safety and autonomy. [The process] looks more like building relationships and opportunity,” said Gus Washington.

The JPA, as named earlier, is part of a larger family of Peoples Movement Assemblies that are both expanding in numbers and geography and deepening sustained assemblies over years. The Southern Movement Assembly is a mass assembly that has been holding annual gatherings in the South since 2012, and is anchored by the organization Project South which works in collaboration with other groups. The JPA and the People’s Advocacy Institute count themselves as among the many members of the Southern Movement Assembly.

## Impact and Sustainability

### Evolution in Governance

The JPA’s impact can be measured in multiple ways. There is the power of building community connection and voice through both political education and the process of imagining solutions to the problems they are experiencing. That has an impact on the overall health and wholeness of a community, as people exercise the self-determination that has been core to the People’s Assembly process from the days of the prayer circles led by enslaved people. In this way, the JPA is demonstrating a different form of governance than the one that most people experience in their interactions with traditional systems of government.

Another measure is in the ability that the People’s Assembly process creates to both push and partner with local government. The mass gathering and movement that is central to the People’s Assembly is a powerful organizing strategy that pushes government leaders to pay attention and be accountable to community demands. The size, consistency, and clarity of purpose of the People’s Assembly helps it function as a form of co-governance, as the assemblies help put the broader community in a power-holding and governing relationship with government systems.

“When you walk into a People’s Assembly, no matter who you are, what you look like, how you’re dressed, you immediately feel valued and appreciated and welcomed.”

– Brooke Floyd

Through the JPA, “people feel more connected to influence change and actually have a voice,” said Halima Olufemi, a member of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and Director of Participatory Defense at the People’s Advocacy Institute. “There used to be no way I would go to a council meeting because I thought nothing would change. I can see power shifting from ‘they won’t do anything’ to ‘what can we do?’ People are reimagining what it means to have ownership in their own lives.”



Several People’s Assembly partners described an evolution that moves to reimagine what government and governance can be. They see the JPA as moving toward a liberatory system of governance that is a more direct and people-powered version of democracy. The Jackson-Kush Plan saw the pillars of the plan as building toward autonomous self-governance and “radical participatory and horizontal democracy,” not reliant upon oppressive systems and capitalism. In this way, the People’s Assemblies are a mechanism to transform government to a system that is authentically of the community.<sup>19</sup>

“It starts as working with government, and then moves to self-governance,” said Olufemi. “I believe in co-governance until a certain point. That can only work for an amount of time; then we have to be strong enough to operate on our own.”

### **Changing Community Conditions**

Successful community-driven policy change and organizational growth is another measure of success, and several policies and commitments have emerged from the People’s Assembly process. These include the recent agreement to support the Office of Violence Prevention, including some initial funding to support efforts led by community organizations.

Other solutions that have emerged from the People’s Assembly process are embedded in community organizations, such as the Strong Arms Credible Messenger program and the Operation Good and Safe Streets Cure Violence program, which were designed by and are now operated by community members who participated in assemblies. In each of these cases, community-driven efforts were able to find an organizational home and move quickly to fruition outside of city government because of their connection to the People’s Assemblies.

People’s Assemblies have pushed for processes within Jackson that are more inclusive of the community, including the city’s first participatory budgeting process in 2019. JPA and the city of Jackson worked together to build a participatory process that engaged 13,000 community members and offered creative design processes, including a Monopoly-inspired game. The proposal that came out of the process won the support of the mayor and city council. Planning is in place now for the next participatory budgeting process. Similarly, changes to the city planning process were inspired by People’s Assemblies, which now includes community participation.

### **Sustainability and Power**

Part of the power of the JPA model has been its longevity and its roots within a larger practice of mass assemblies in the South.

“Mississippi is a special place,” said Rukia Lumumba. “People in Mississippi have been taking care of themselves for centuries. The People’s Assembly offers another opportunity to take care of themselves, along with the infrastructure, consistency, resources, and collective process for this care.”

She envisions making the People’s Assembly a formal part of government and governing in

Jackson through an office at city hall “so that the weight of the assembly has more impact. It would be a given that people need to be part of the decision-making process, not something we need to push. You couldn’t make a decision without referencing the assembly.” Within this possibility, the tension between government and governance emerges.

“Whenever you start to institutionalize anything, power starts to go away,” worried Halima Olufemi. Yet she recognized that the backing of government can support People’s Assemblies, and that sustained funding to support the outreach and organizing necessary would be a benefit.

“We would need to be careful if it did become a requirement, that it is always people-led, doesn’t become an appointed position. With leadership sometimes it’s not about who can lead the people forward but about their popularity. When you start institutionalizing, they take away pieces and make it their own, taking away from what it was in the beginning.”

To Makani Themba, institutionalizing can mean having authority independent of the city: “I don’t think of it as a matter of city authority or control. I think of it as part of the governing process, because they are recognized as an independent authority, which doesn’t mean the city has control over it.”

But the city “should allocate money toward it,” Themba stressed. “Right now, there’s no city money for People’s Assemblies. We raise that money.”

Without the fundraising held by the People’s Advocacy Institute and the partnerships in the community, the power of People’s Assemblies would be limited. It takes resources to get the word out and offer the welcoming spaces that assemblies are known to provide. The organizing that carries the solutions from a People’s Assembly to formal policy proposals or programs requires paid staff to be sustainable.

The question of whether organizing power can coexist as institutionalized power will be one that the JPA partners continue to explore as they seek to make the practice more sustainable.

### **More Branches to the Tree**

Just as the JPA has been informed by assemblies and other forms of community governance over time, other communities have been inspired by Jackson to initiate their own People’s Assemblies.

Organizers in Dallas have formed a People’s Assembly to address community safety. Similarly, the Lansing People’s Assembly in Michigan has named priorities that center community safety by funding community programs and mental health support, as well as naming livable wages and economic opportunity as underpinnings of community health.

Groups in Durham, North Carolina, have held a People’s Assembly focused on health care access. Florida Rising and the New Florida Majority have formed People’s Assemblies



throughout the state that have focused on multiple issues and emphasized building independent political power.

An institutionalized assembly process is in place in at least one community. The city of Newark, New Jersey, has created a city office that coordinates People's Assemblies in partnership with a consortium of community organizations.

“People in Mississippi have been taking care of themselves for centuries. The People’s Assembly offers another opportunity to take care of themselves, along with the infrastructure, consistency, resources, and collective process for this care.”

- Rukia Lumumba

## Conclusion

**THE JACKSON PEOPLE’S ASSEMBLY**—and other mass assembly processes—offers a more robust process of participation than existing systems of government have been able to design and implement. From the welcoming space to offering political education to the practice of direct democracy, the JPA is a process that not only engages the community but is dependent on the mass participation of community members for its very existence. As such, it works as a countervailing force against our country’s consumerist and transactional approach to citizenship.

“Every time we have a People’s Assembly you can feel the gears turning in people’s minds,” said Brooke Floyd of the coordinating team. “People want better, they just don’t know how to get it. It’s not that people don’t want to vote or be involved with politics. It is intimidating—this state tries to make sure that the people who are being hurt the most don’t know anything, keep them not involved, keep them uneducated so they can’t fight for what they deserve.” The assemblies build relationships and trust among community members, as well as the confidence in the community’s ability to impact the systems that affect their lives. Along the way, the assemblies have created a unique inside/outside dynamic, as they push city government toward policies it would not necessarily enact on its own.

The political education, along with the storytelling, trust building, and deepened relationships that happen through the Jackson People’s Assembly build the knowledge and power to counter intimidating political processes. Through the People’s Assembly model, the Jackson community is not just informing government, but changing how government functions.



# Restorative Practice in Paterson, New Jersey: Gentle Pressure Applied Relentlessly

With a clear vision and unflagging commitment, community members have helped move an entire school district from punitive to restorative practices that center the learning and well-being of all children in school.

## Introduction

**FOR YEARS, THE PATERSON, NEW JERSEY, COMMUNITY** struggled with an out-of-control school disciplinary system. Children were suspended for rolling their eyes. Kindergarteners were being suspended, losing class time in a critical period in their development.<sup>20</sup> According to the district code of student conduct, there were 27 ways a student could be suspended for level one infractions, with up to 70 percent of students getting suspended in a year.

Community members had been pushing back for years through the Paterson Education Fund (PEF) and the Parent Education Organizing Council (PEOC), two local nonprofits that focused on education advocacy and organizing, respectively. The push for change began with two Black women—Linda Reid and Rosie Grant. Over the course of a decade, they used their positions within the PEF and the PEOC to organize their community—parents, grandparents, students, teachers, principals, administrators, and the district superintendent—to embrace a new approach to school discipline. With additional support provided by the Dignity in Schools campaign, they successfully introduced restorative practices in the school system, and in so doing, changed both the policy and the culture around school discipline in Paterson. To date, they have introduced restorative practices in 19 out of 52 schools in the district. The ultimate goal is to have full implementation in every public school in the district by June 2023.

Today, Paterson community members have meaningful influence and power, which has led to a genuine responsiveness by school district officials and an expansion of its vision for restorative practices. Members of the PEF are on multiple task forces and teams that drive decision-making within the school district. These formal structures have helped create more collaborative decision-making between the community and the school district. In this way, the

push for restorative practices has provided opportunities for deeper democratic participation within the school system.

While the policy shift towards the use of restorative practices is the initial goal, the long-term cultural shift is equally important. Without culture change, the new policies would too easily be rolled back and would be susceptible to changes in administration. Because the PEF provides a sustained voice for restorative justice, both policy and cultural changes are more durable.

## History

**THE PUNITIVE PRACTICES FOUND IN PATERSON** were part of a larger nationwide pattern. Ever since its inception, the public school system in the U.S. has created barriers towards realizing the human right to a quality education for all students. The 1990s ushered in the era of “zero tolerance” both in schools and in the criminal legal system.<sup>21</sup> This was based on the disgraced theories of Broken Windows Policing, which posited that smaller acts of vandalism and petty crime (or behavior that was only technically a crime, such as hanging out in a park after dark) required extreme punishment in order to deter other crimes, and the “superpredator,” the myth that there were some young people who were innately so dangerous to society that they needed to be locked up forever. The mindset behind these policies were profoundly punitive and ultimately devastating, with students of color, especially Black Americans, suffering the most severe consequences. Small mistakes could destroy lives, and millions of people were sucked into the maw of a hyper-aggressive criminal legal system.

While the new “tough on crime” approach and “three strikes you’re out” laws are perhaps more well known, the same set of principles also began to be used in schools across the country without a public discourse concerning their harmful impacts. Police officers were stationed in schools, ostensibly to protect students, but in reality, their presence led to the criminalization of children. And with or without an actual police presence, children were getting suspended and expelled at alarming rates, with every suspension leading to an increased likelihood that a student would not complete school or would have some involvement in the criminal legal system.<sup>22</sup>

As “exclusionary discipline” became the norm, kids were being denied their right to a quality public education through lengthy suspensions and expulsions that pushed kids out of the classroom, and inexorably towards the carceral state. Eventually, this became known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

Kids were being arrested and taken to jail for minor infractions, and excluded from school via extremely high rates of suspensions and expulsions. In Los Angeles, students who were late to school (even if it was because they were dropping off a sibling at another school) faced punitive fines they could not afford to pay, which snowballed into criminal records.<sup>23</sup> In Mississippi, corporal punishment was used with the predictable consequence that kids would drop out of school rather than face a “paddling.”<sup>24</sup>

But this was not just an overly aggressive approach to discipline that needed reform. Instead, it was a systemic decision to “keep communities of color poor and lacking in power” through “racial domination” in the schools.<sup>25</sup> Often referred to as pushout, there are many factors that discourage or prevent students from completing their education, including unwelcoming school climates, harsh and exclusionary discipline like suspensions, expulsions and arrests, and curriculum that is disconnected from students’ cultures and communities.

The movement to address the school-to-prison pipeline began in different parts of the country. In Holmes County, Mississippi, in the 1990s, Black parents and community organizers called for the “Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse.” The movement gathered steam in the 2000s, spearheaded by [Padres Y Jovenes](#) in Colorado, [Black Organizing Project](#) in Oakland, [Power U Center](#) in Miami, and [CADRE](#) in LA. Each community had its own unique issues and context, but the movement was always based in community organizing, with a focus on racial equity and educational justice.

In 2006, the movement continued when the Dignity in Schools Campaign was founded to challenge the systemic problem of pushout in schools and to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. DSC’s vision of educational justice is grounded in a human rights framework, with restorative justice, a practice focused on rehabilitation and reconciliation, acting as a pillar in that vision.<sup>26</sup>

To date, DSC has more than 100 member organizations in its coalition. It provides support to local organizations across the country, building a national movement of parents, youth, organizers, advocates, and educators by providing key materials and funding, while building connections between organizations. The importance of this would become evident in Paterson.

## Restorative Practices

With its roots in feminist, Black, and Indigenous traditions, restorative practice is not just a policy shift, it is a profound cultural change. It banishes the mindset and practices centered on discipline and punishment that have been a key component of a racialized system that keeps communities of color poor and disenfranchised, and instead embraces the idea that mistakes are opportunities, and that everyone’s humanity must be honored. In so doing, it interrupts the cycles of anger, abuse, and violence that are prevalent in so many lives, and, when used within the school system, creates a community in which children can once again learn to trust each other and the adults who wield so much power in their lives. The effects are profound, as communities become safer, children stay in school, and lives are not destroyed through

harsh discipline practices. As a result, community members, both children and adults, learn important life skills such as conflict resolution, trust building, and the fine art of empathy.

One key element of restorative justice is called “the circle.”<sup>27</sup> Circles create a space with minimal hierarchies, where students and adults learn how to listen to and understand one another. Schools can use circles for a daily or weekly check-in. But they also can be used when problematic behaviors rear up. Using a practice of respectful, curious questions, the emphasis is always on solving the root of a problem and repairing the relationship, not defining a person as the problem. Students learn to create a narrative about themselves in which they address conflicts, trust one another, and show the courage to be vulnerable. The respectful, non-judgmental approach that is the bedrock of circles can thus be continued outside of a circle, in the one-on-one encounters between adults and students that add up over the course of days, weeks, and months into a culture of respect and trust.

In cases of serious harm, mediations, conferences, and harm circles are other useful restorative justice practices. Adults engaged in restorative justice use empathy and understanding, not blame, to get at the root of the problem, and allow the student to take responsibility, which a student can do without the fear of harsh discipline. Within this context, an open admission of mistakes made, and an honest attempt to repair harms are the ultimate goal—not punishment.

Often, the root of the problem can be found outside the confines of school, and in those cases a circle might include family members and other members of the community, which can become a collective process to identify how to repair harm. In this way, Restorative Justice creates opportunities for community participation and decision making, as well as an opportunity for the extended community to come into contact with restorative practices and absorb a new approach to conflict.

## “Solutions Not Suspensions”

**PATERSON IS A CITY OF JUST OVER 160,000** with 25 percent living in poverty.<sup>28</sup> The school district serves a large majority of students of color, including 68 percent who are Latina/o/x and 21 percent who are Black.<sup>29</sup>

More than 10 years ago, a Paterson Education Fund program manager, Linda Reid, learned that her granddaughter had been suspended three times. The child was in kindergarten.

Reid started asking around and heard more stories about how children in the school district were getting suspended for, as she put it, “stupid stuff”—rolling their eyes and sucking their teeth, for example.

She connected with Fernando Martinez, an education organizer in New Jersey. When ACORN became defunct, the pair founded the Parent Education Organizing Council to tackle the overreliance on suspension and other education issues in Paterson. When Martinez then left to become national organizer for DSC, he connected Reid and Rosie Grant, the executive director of the PEF, to DSC. DSC suggested that Reid look at the district data, a tactic their members had successfully used in the past.

Reid pulled the report cards from the state of New Jersey website, focusing on the suspension and expulsion data. Up to 70 percent of students were being suspended in a year, with the number of suspended high school students being even higher. When she presented a report on the data to the school board and administration, they initially did not believe the numbers—until she pointed out that she was using their own data. The deputy superintendent at the time, Eileen Shafer, indicated that she was open to the idea of changing the school policies, and gave them the charge to follow through. Thus began years of, as Reid and Grant like to put it, “gentle persuasion applied relentlessly” by the PEF and PEOC, to change nothing less than the culture and the policy of school discipline in Paterson.

Both women—Black, brilliant and determined—had worked for years to bring educational justice to the district, both as part of the PEF and the PEOC. The PEF, founded in 1983, is an advocacy group, with 51 percent of the board represented by local businesses, such as a print shop, a local lawyer, and the head of the local chamber of commerce. With headquarters in the



*Rosie Grant and Linda Reid*

office space of a local church, the PEF works with the whole community around educational issues. The PEOC spearheaded their organizing work. As Grant explained, “The PEF builds relationships; the PEOC goes hard.”

Both organizations focused on systematic change, with the PEF relying more on the power of persuasion, while the PEOC focused on claiming power that is rightfully theirs.

Combined, the organizations created a classic

inside-outside dynamic, with the PEF using their relationships to build support, while the PEOC could use a more confrontational approach to demand change.

At the same time, DSC, in partnership with the Opportunity to Learn Campaign, was leading a campaign calling for schools, districts, or states to enact a moratorium on out-of-school suspensions in favor of putting more positive alternatives in place called the “Solutions Not Suspensions” campaign. PEF and PEOC joined this campaign as it mirrored the goals of their own work in Paterson.

DSC suggested they compare the district's code of conduct to DSC's model code.<sup>30</sup> Reid and Grant began having lunches and dinners with the school board commissioners and other administrators to try to get them to change the school code of conduct and replace it with a restorative justice approach. When the Federal reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was launched, DSC then used their research and connections at the federal level to find out who the new New Jersey ESEA officers were before they had even been announced so that Reid and Grant could connect with them to put "Solutions not Suspensions" on the New Jersey agenda. Eventually, Paterson would announce a moratorium on K-2 suspension one year before the state did.

The PEF and PEOC's success at securing the moratorium was undergirded by the support of outside partners. DSC provided them with materials and financial support, but perhaps most importantly, it connected them to leaders from other communities who could provide invaluable support and guidance. Specifically, they connected them to Sheila Warren with the Portland Parent Union in Oregon, and Karen Lynn Morton from COFI/POWERPAC and Woman of God's Design in Chicago. Known as Mama Lynn and Mama Sheila, both women provided key support and training in restorative practices.

Mama Lynn came to Paterson to lead a training in restorative practices. Later, 11 educators and administrators, including Grant and Reid, went to Portland for a week-long master training with Mama Sheila. There, they practiced having circle conversations, learned how to build values, how to come to agreements, how to hear what is not being said, and how to support people when they become vulnerable. Later, Grant and Reid attended a training in Baltimore and did an online training with the International Institute for Restorative Practices once COVID hit. They then took all the different pieces of what they had learned and created their own approach to restorative circles.

Armed with the training and the conviction that this approach worked, and backed by the essential support of Ms. Shafer, who later became the district superintendent, they began the work of convincing principals, discipline officers, and teachers to make the necessary changes to integrate restorative justice practices in their schools. Meeting after meeting, lunch after lunch, Grant and Reid used years of relationship-building and trust—plus hard data—to convince key individuals to try the new approach. Their infinite patience and dogged determination to win over converts one at a time proved fruitful.

But friendly, private conversations weren't going to do the trick by themselves. They also had to organize and advocate at every turn. The women went to school board meetings; made presentations to the superintendent and the cabinet, as well as the board of commissioners; rallied outside of City Hall; and wore construction vests and hard hats to the School Development Authority board meeting in Trenton to organize for restorative practices, adequate facilities, and other education justice issues. The two organizations' approaches complemented one another. As executive director of the PEF, Grant might be in a meeting with the school board, while Reid was outside leading a protest organized by the PEOC.



As schools began to adopt the new practices and see the positive effects, it became easier to convince the next principal, the next discipline officer, and the next teacher. One by one, schools in the district began to adopt restorative practices.

There was resistance and it came in all forms—from administrators who were wedded to the old way of doing things and honestly believed that a “zero-tolerance” approach was the most effective way, to teachers who argued that they didn’t have time to implement restorative practices. But Grant and Reid kept at it. “How can a child learn in a class if they don’t feel safe or comfortable?” they asked teachers. “We are doing this for the kids,” they reminded administrators. “Emotional learning is an important part of education,” they told anyone who would listen.

Reid spent an entire year slowly but surely changing the mind of one powerful administrator, Dr. Gerald Glisson, who started out convinced that restorative practices did not work. After months of patient nudging by Reid and seeing for himself the positive impact restorative



*Dr. Gerald Glisson Restorative Justice Circle Room.*

practices were having on schools, Glisson became one of the leading advocates for the work. Sadly, he passed away from COVID, but his name is now emblazoned across one of the Restorative Justice Circle Rooms.

Before, the only option to handle a student who was misbehaving was to mete out various forms of punishment, but now administrators and teachers had a way to approach kids who were acting out. They could go to the peace room, have a circle, work it out, and come to an authentic resolution.

For example, Michael Hill, the principal of operations at Paterson’s John F. Kennedy High School, noticed that behavior was shifting after his school began to embrace restorative practices. He saw how important it was to help kids talk things out, figure out not “what” they had done but “why,” and to delve into what else was going on in their lives, thus enabling students to find a true resolution and peace. In particular, Hill notices that kids with academic and behavioral challenges, who often came to school feeling dismissed and ignored, now felt seen and understood.

A high school student punches a window and breaks it, seemingly for no reason. In the past, the path forward would be clear: suspension, perhaps expulsion. A loss of class time. Maybe a first brush with the criminal legal system, one that might be followed by others. But this happened in Paterson, so things went differently. The discipline officer knew to ask thoughtful, non-judgemental questions. What was going on? Why was he so upset?



The answer was devastating. The child had witnessed a classmate die in a drowning accident the previous weekend, and felt guilty and angry. Instead of punishment, the school rallied around him, making sure he got the help and support he needed from his family and from trained professionals. Instead of having the trajectory of his life knocked off course by tragedy, he was able to begin to heal and move forward with his life.

Vanessa Serrano, principal at Public School Two, explained that restorative justice is 80 percent relationship building and 20 percent harm reduction. She sees the work the district is doing through the lens of racial justice and equity as it “reduces the predictability of who succeeds and who fails.”

While restorative practices have yet to be introduced in every school, the district has rewritten its code of conduct, with the input of parent and student voices. Once, there were 27 ways a student could be suspended for a level one infraction. Today, there are only five.

Introducing restorative practices in schools and changing the code of conduct are far from the only work the PEF is engaged with. They began the “Breakfast After the Bell” campaign to address food apartheid in Paterson. Under the program, breakfast is served in the classrooms during first period to cut down on latenesses and to make sure no student starts the day hungry. The PEF started with one principal in one school, demonstrated that it worked, and got eight schools to implement the program the following year.

The PEF has also successfully changed school policy on absences. Previously, students who arrived late five times were charged with an absence. Through PEF’s advocacy, the district has changed that policy so that a late arrival is simply a late arrival, and an absence is an absence. They also pushed the district to ensure the curriculum was in alignment with state testing, so students would have a better chance to pass and avoid being forced to attend summer school. Recently, the PEF noticed that all the district’s new textbooks and school supplies were going to the wealthiest and whitest schools in Paterson. After the usual denials and disbelief, the district examined the data, saw a racially disparate pattern, and agreed to change its policies.

## Conclusion

**THE PATERSON MODEL IS AN EXAMPLE** of how powerful organizing campaigns, led by coalitions that build trust with their communities: students, families, teachers, school administrators and staff—can move the change that community members want. Using years of relationship building with the district, backed up with powerful data, the PEF and the PEOC used an inside-outside strategy to both make alliances with government entities and to demand more and faster movement toward the changes they wanted to secure. The PEF

has an MOU with two district schools and is a welcome partner within the district. Members of the PEF have joined the district's facilities team, the search team, the disciplinary task force, and the attendance task force. In short, they have built a true partnership between the community and the district. Throughout it all, they had crucial support from a national organization in DSC, which provided essential funding, materials, and training.

Mixed in with all the conversations, board meetings, and rallies, the Paterson school district has undergone a profound cultural change, one that has entrenched restorative practices within the community, and that will last long after the current leadership is gone. The power of kindness, empathy and trust is hard to deny, when given a chance.

The school superintendent, who has been such a strong ally, will retire next year. Before she retired, she was determined to institute restorative practices in every school in the district. In November, 2022, she began carrying out her goal, and the district announced that it was implementing restorative practices district wide. PEF has been awarded a bid to train a leadership team in each of 44 schools by June 2023. While they will miss her support, neither Grant or Reid is worried about who will replace her. In fact, Grant has been appointed to the hiring committee for her replacement and feels confident that any of the top three recommended candidates will support restorative practices.

Meanwhile, the movement has spread beyond Paterson; New Jersey is establishing four Restorative Hubs in Newark, Trenton, Camden, and Paterson, where restorative practices are being scaled throughout these communities, serving as examples for the rest of the state and the country.

# Worker Powered Co-Enforcement in the Bay Area: Pulling People into the Fight

Over the last 20 years, the Chinese Progressive Association has been organizing workers and partnering with city and state government to build a new model to enforce low-wage immigrant workers' labor rights.

## Introduction

**FOR LOW-WAGE WORKERS**—who are disproportionately women of color<sup>31</sup>—every dollar in their paycheck matters, and so does respect and fair treatment. Our laws and government are supposed to protect workers, but U.S. labor law is weak: the federal minimum wage is a poverty wage, and workers have no legal right to a guaranteed job or guaranteed income. But often the most immediate problem in low-wage workers' day-to-day lives is not the absence of better laws, but the fact that employers routinely violate the labor laws we already have. They steal workers' wages, fail to provide overtime pay and paid time off, maintain dangerous and unhealthy working conditions, and threaten to fire workers, cut their hours or report them to immigration enforcement authorities if they challenge employers' abusive practices. All of these employer practices are illegal, yet all are routine. And the systemic violations of existing law are highly racialized.<sup>32</sup>

The enforcement structures that do exist are woefully inadequate. Grossly under-resourced and too often hamstrung with limited power by corporate interests, labor enforcement agencies have been stuck on a hamster wheel that delivers too little too late to workers who speak up and no real consequences for abusive employers. [Less than 2% of the \\$50 billion stolen from workers annually is recovered.](#)<sup>33</sup>

In the communities most affected by this crisis of labor enforcement, disproportionately low-wage immigrant workers, working people of color, and women, “worker centers” have been created by workers and activists as a vehicle for grappling with how to build worker power in this environment. Combining services with community-based organizing and advocacy, a worker center movement has grown from a handful of organizations in the late 1970s to more than 250 in the U.S.<sup>34</sup> and 30 in California alone.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) in San Francisco is known to have created one of the first worker centers in the country.

This is the story of how and why CPA built power for workers and their community through an experimental co-governance model of labor enforcement, commonly called “co-enforcement.” Co-enforcement describes a set of strategies that put workers at the center of enforcing workplace laws, bringing public agencies and worker- and community-led organizations together to monitor and enforce low-wage workers’ rights. The base of Chinese immigrants that CPA organized throughout this time were often living with their families in single-room occupancy hotels (SROs) and other substandard housing while working in the restaurant industry. These workers, ranging from the lowest-paid “miscellaneous worker” to the tipped server, were experiencing minimum wage violations, lack of overtime pay, and unsafe conditions, as well as a great deal of stress and a sense of instability. Organizing these workers was a monumental task, and one that was utterly necessary.

## History

**CPA’S FOUNDING WAS INSPIRED** by Chinese elders who organized workers in the 1930s, the Black Panthers, and other liberation struggles. In the late 1960s, there were growing concerns with lack of services in the Chinese community, worker exploitation, and discrimination against Chinese immigrants. Young Asian American radicals in Chinatown



*Asian American activists in Chinatown*

learned from the Black Panthers and modeled “serve the people” programs, including childcare programs and women’s health clinics to activate the community, as well as build self-determination and power. Soon after, these young activists connected with and learned from elder Chinese activists, workers, and tenants to form CPA in 1972 as a grassroots organization grounded in the poor and working class Chinese immigrant community in solidarity with other marginalized communities.

By the turn of the century, San Francisco’s economy and politics were undergoing significant changes. Old industries like garment manufacturing were leaving for countries with lower wages, cheaper operating costs, and fewer labor protections. The tech industry was in the throes of the dot-com boom and bust. In San Francisco city and county, Asian, Latino/a/x, and Black residents together made up 57 percent of the population, with Chinese residents constituting the largest non-white community. In fact, San Francisco’s Chinese community was the largest in the country, representing one in five residents.

At the same time, people of color, especially working-class people of color, were poorly represented in politics. Just seven years before, state voters had passed the viciously anti-immigrant Proposition 187 to strip public services like education and healthcare from undocumented immigrants. Economic and political life in San Francisco was also powerfully

imbalanced in favor of employers, real estate investors, the tech industry, and upper-income and wealthy residents. However, the 2000 election marked an important political shift in the city, changing the terrain for organizing and CPA's workers' rights advocacy when progressives, labor, and grassroots community groups based in Asian, Black, and Latino/a/x communities were able to get six progressives elected to San Francisco's Board of Supervisors, forming a majority.

## Groundwork for Co-Enforcement

**THE CO-ENFORCEMENT MODEL IN SAN FRANCISCO** emerged out of the needs of low-wage workers at the turn of the century. Through the early 2000s, CPA—by then a nearly 30-year-old organization already with a rich history of organizing tenants and workers, especially in the garment industry—was responding to the garment industry laying off and stealing wages from workers in their community. Through CPA's unyielding efforts to win back wages for these workers, they laid a foundation for their leadership in future labor-community coalitions that would create the infrastructure for co-enforcement—formal community-government collaborations to enforce labor standards.

One particular workplace campaign broke new ground for CPA, forging key partnerships, new strategies, and a worker organizing center. Wins was the largest and one of the best known garment manufacturing operations in the 1990s in San Francisco with major clients like the U.S. military, JCPenney, Sears, Walmart and Tommy Hilfiger. In the spring of 2001, the Wins factories were operating without licenses, workers were not being paid or being given check stubs with no checks attached. As these violations came to light, one factory declared bankruptcy and closed, and the other two were closed by the Department of Labor. Up to 500 immigrant workers were laid off, even as they were collectively owed an estimated \$1.2 million, which amounted to months of unpaid wages.



*Wins workers protest.*

A tight-knit group of workers who had endured abuse for years were finally ready to fight for what they were owed. Guided by the leadership of a few key workers and the support of CPA, Asian Law Caucus, and Sweatshop Watch, the Wins workers, many of whom were elder, monolingual Chinese immigrants, protested. Their action drew the attention of the media, the public, and government, and caused most of Wins' major clients to cancel their outstanding orders.

A legal fight ensued, which ultimately exposed the tremendous shortcomings of the existing enforcement mechanisms to hold employers' accountable for egregious abuse. In 2008, after many twists and turns and due to continued community pressure, the workers were

ultimately paid the full \$1.2 million they were owed out of the state's Garment Worker Restitution Fund. However, the owners were never found liable and paid no penalties for their abuse of workers.

As one of the largest wage violation cases in California, the Wins case had a tremendous impact on CPA and worker organizing. The case was, at the time, a rare combination of organizing and legal advocacy. It jumpstarted new collaborations for CPA with partners like the Asian Law Caucus, the Women's Employment Rights Clinic, and government agencies. It also marked the launch of CPA's Worker Organizing Center, as "CPA" became synonymous with workers' rights advocacy and organizing in the Chinese immigrant community.

While the case exposed egregious labor practices in the garment industry and shamefully inadequate labor law enforcement, the story of the Wins workers' tenacity inspired future groups of workers to seek CPA's support. In fact, it spawned campaigns that would continue to reshape organizing and workers' rights in San Francisco and nationally. CPA decided they needed a strategic plan, and engaged in research to identify key industries for Chinese immigrant workers and to begin charting out a strategic vision for organizing beyond winning individual cases.

"When I began to experience wage theft, the boss frankly said that workers would never win because we didn't understand English and we didn't have legal connections, while they had money to hire lawyers to defend their violations. But wage theft had a huge impact on me and my family, and I felt depressed and powerless because I didn't know how to defend my rights. Later, we met Chinese Progressive Association and after more than three years of struggle, we won. This wasn't easy and I'm grateful."

-Li Liu

## Organizing for Stronger Enforcement

**OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS**, CPA developed and began implementing a strategy to make labor standards real for workers, synergizing organizing with workers on high-profile wage theft cases with coalitional power-building and policy advocacy. While CPA honed its organizing tactics through workplace cases, its advocacy strengthened a new local labor enforcement agency and established the nation's first publicly-mandated and -funded co-enforcement program.

In 2003, with the help of a new progressive majority on the Board of Supervisors, labor and community groups came together to make San Francisco one of the first in the country to establish a higher local minimum wage. This was one of the first times people-of-color-led organizations in San Francisco had engaged in a proactive ballot measure campaign. Soon after the minimum wage measure (called Proposition L)<sup>36</sup> passed, however, it was clear that the city lacked a plan to implement it, with no additional resources allocated to enforcement.



*CPA and its allies won Proposition L, raising San Francisco's minimum wage and making it the highest in the country.*

Two years earlier, the building trades and labor council had pushed the city to create San Francisco's Office of Labor Standards Enforcement (OLSE) to enforce prevailing wage requirements on city contracts, but the agency had just three staff when the local minimum wage law expanded OLSE's mandate exponentially. The agency also lacked the cultural and linguistic fluency to communicate with the large numbers of immigrant workers most impacted by the law.

Building on the broad community-labor coalition that came together to pass the minimum wage measure, CPA led the effort to craft minimum wage enforcement legislation that would clarify and strengthen OLSE's powers and to pass a city budget with increased funding for OLSE. The legislation also included the creation of a funded "community-based outreach program to conduct education and outreach to [San Francisco] employees" – a co-enforcement program in which community organizations like CPA would have a formal role in working with OLSE. It would take two years to pass.

While advocating for adoption of the Minimum Wage Implementation and Enforcement Ordinance, CPA shifted its organizing focus to workers in the restaurant industry. The industry employed the largest concentration of Chinese workers and was not subject to outsourcing pressures like garment manufacturing. Through its cases to recover stolen



wages, CPA built not only their base but also industry expertise and the experiential knowledge of and opportunities to highlight just how OLSE's limited staffing and resources were failing workers.

“We have to be able to be credible to the ones we are trying to bring into this fight, that there are actual things to be won by fighting. . . [There is a] baseline of having legitimacy with the base, showing them that laws can be real while also not trying to pretend that the laws are perfect or strong enough. . . we need to keep strengthening them and pulling people into the fight to improve the laws and policies that protect workers – and [that fight] is bigger than you, your workplace, and your boss.”

- Shaw San Liu, CPA Executive Director

CPA's first high-profile restaurant organizing campaign in 2004 was also its first case with OLSE. The King Tin Restaurant was one of the oldest and most popular mid-sized restaurants in San Francisco's Chinatown with a 20-year history. However, workers at King Tin were working on average 55 hours a week without breaks. In the most extreme cases, janitors and dishwashers worked up to 105 hours a week—15 hours a day, 7 days a week—at a wage rate of barely \$3.00 an hour. After 30 workers organized and contacted state labor officials concerning two months of unpaid wages, King Tin Restaurant closed in July 2004 and then declared bankruptcy.

With the support of CPA, workers maintained the visibility of their case. They rallied in front of City Hall and, with the solidarity of garment workers and other community supporters, protested in front of the bankruptcy court. With CPA providing organizing support, OLSE responded by starting a complicated legal process. Ultimately, the workers' perseverance and solid testimonies led the city attorney to file a lawsuit, reaching a settlement in 2006 that recovered \$85,000 in back wages and interest for seven workers. This was partly made possible by a unique feature in Prop L, the 2003 minimum wage law, that allowed them to recover wages even after the owners filed for bankruptcy.

The King Tin case showed that Prop L could be a powerful tool in recovering workers' unpaid wages, but also highlighted the need for resources and continued collaboration between OLSE and community organizing entities like CPA. CPA began meeting with OLSE regularly during the case, highlighting the unique role of community organizations, with workers' trust and knowledge of their workplaces, employers and industry, in holding employers accountable in working-class immigrant communities. CPA's organizing also created the political pressure that proved necessary to hold the government accountable for enforcing the law.

In 2006, CPA and their coalition partners secured passage of the ordinance and budget that increased funds for OLSE, enabling the agency to hire Spanish and Chinese speakers and creating the co-enforcement program. The next year, CPA and partners, representing Chinese, Filipino and Latina/o/x low-wage workers across multiple industries and two legal aid organizations working with Asian Pacific Islander and Latina/o/x communities, formed the San Francisco Worker Rights Community Collaborative. The Collaborative handily won the contract to implement the community outreach program and begin formally co-enforcing the law in strategic collaboration with OLSE. The contract amounts would grow over the next decade: from \$186,000 a year to over \$600,000 a year—roughly 13 percent of OLSE’s budget.

## Diversifying Strategies to End Wage Theft

**AS THEY CLOSED OUT THEIR FIRST DECADE** of workplace organizing, CPA managed to continue to build power, despite the twin challenges of a recession and intensifying gentrification in the Bay Area. CPA took on and sharpened its workplace organizing in the restaurant industry, while building out a more diversified strategy to push with their coalition partners for OLSE to address persistent barriers to a more effective and efficient enforcement process for low-wage, immigrant workers. Forming the Progressive Workers Alliance (PWA), San Francisco Rising, and a local Jobs with Justice chapter in 2010, CPA and their partners



Forming the Progressive Workers' Alliance (PWA) and building a multiracial alliance.

united low-income communities of color to transform the political terrain in San Francisco and ultimately win yet another round of policies increasing OLSE’s power and budget.

CPA’s experimental workplace organizing during this time led to both learning and setbacks.

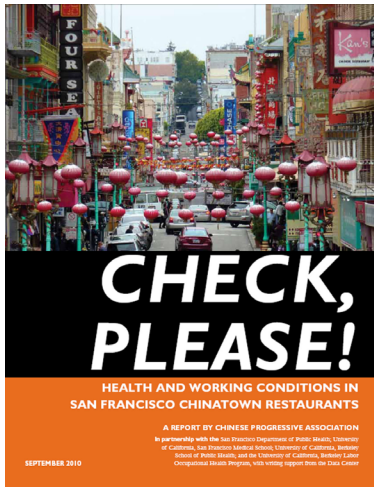
It lost wage-enforcement campaigns against employers, and through the process learned hard lessons around the importance of organizing broad community support and of fully

understanding the nuances of specific industries, including obstacles to enforcement.

Over time, these lessons helped CPA better determine what would and would not work and enabled the organization to hone its strategies and grow its capacity to build and exercise worker power to effect broader change. CPA developed a clearer assessment of power, achieving its first successful settlement without OLSE’s involvement, and overcame a persistent challenge in past cases: getting workers involved in a fight while they were still working for the employer.

At the same time, CPA recognized that abuses continued to affect its base even after wages were recovered. These issues were systemic and couldn’t be solved on a case-by-case basis.

In 2007, CPA, with academic and other research partners including University of California, Berkeley, launched participatory research with restaurant workers, engaging hundreds of workers in documenting their conditions. The resulting report, “[Check, Please!](#),” published in 2010, showed half of Chinatown restaurant workers were being paid below the minimum wage. “The report reflected what any worker could tell you,” Shaw San explained, “but [we]



*Check Please!, a report published by CPA on health and working conditions in San Francisco Chinatown restaurants.*

needed that legitimacy of hard numbers and a report to continue building political visibility and weight of the work and make it a crisis for decision-makers to prioritize.” The report called for government agencies to adopt proactive enforcement strategies, in addition to responding to workers’ complaints, more resources for enforcement, and stronger protection from retaliation. “Check, Please!” and concurrent organizing, which included presenting powerful testimonies from workers that had suffered from wage theft and abuse, helped galvanize policymakers to take action not only for Chinese workers, but for low-wage workers across the city.

In the context of the Great Recession, workers not represented by a union needed a vehicle to advocate for their rights, and PWA became that vehicle. CPA helped

to found the alliance in 2010, bringing together nine grassroots community organizations with non-union and unemployed worker bases to build shared vision and solidarity. While there was overlap in the groups participating in the Collaborative engaged in co-enforcement with OLSE, PWA was conceived as a separate organizational vehicle to do political organizing on workers’ issues.

CPA helped found other citywide alliances at the time, which also had some overlap with the Collaborative and PWA, but were unique vehicles for different strategies. These alliances included San Francisco Rising, a multiracial alliance that deepened and synergized the community-based electoral strategies they were implementing, and a local chapter of Jobs with Justice, a coalition of progressive labor unions and community groups. The progressive political blocks of organizations that these alliances represented ultimately helped to shape the political terrain that supported PWA’s policy campaigns and would lead to successful negotiations with Mayor Ed Lee in 2014 to put a strong joint measure on the ballot to increase the minimum wage to \$15.

In 2011, PWA launched the Campaign to End Wage Theft, turning “wage theft” into a political crisis. It was a city election year, and as a result of PWA’s organizing, all 11 mayoral candidates came out in support of action to end wage theft. PWA won passage of a Wage Theft Prevention Ordinance that year and, in 2012, pushed through another ordinance creating a Wage Theft Prevention Task Force. The new policy gave OLSE access to worksites,

doubled penalties for employers that retaliated against workers, and tried to put a one-year time limit on resolving workers' wage theft cases. Through the task force, which brought together seven city departments with workers' rights advocates and small business owners to research wage theft and make recommendations to the city, PWA made the case for the city to develop a comprehensive strategy to end wage theft, secured more funding for OLSE and the Collaborative, and turned the task force into a permanent structure.

"We can only develop our members' political vision so far in an insular space of only Chinese workers. [Through alliances like PWA] workers in CPA [were] realizing what's happening in other workplaces, seeing similarities and feeling the sense of coming together and supporting each other. The solidarity stuck with them. It counters the alienation that workers are made to feel in the system."

- Shaw San Liu, CPA Executive Director

## Scaling the Model with State Government

More recently, CPA has played a leadership role alongside other worker centers and advocates in establishing a community-based partnership with the state labor standards enforcement agency, enabling groups across California to experiment with leveraging the state's powerful resources to combat wage theft. The co-enforcement partnership was inspired by CPA's work at the city level with OLSE, and, just as in previous phases of CPA's work, a strategic, high-profile and groundbreaking workplace organizing case was instrumental in bringing it into being.

In the spring of 2013, three workers who had been fired from their job at Yank Sing, an award-winning, high-end dim sum restaurant outside Chinatown, approached CPA, detailing a long list of abuses. They described daily belittlement and lack of respect from managers, 10-plus hour days without requisite breaks or required pay, and stolen tips. CPA began working with the workers to file individual claims but, more importantly, to proactively organize the restaurant's workers for collective action through an underground organizing drive.

The initial worker conversations were met with resistance, fear, and plenty of rejections. But CPA organizers did not give up. Through word of mouth, home visits, mass worker meetings, and successful, inspiring workplace actions, the Yank Sing campaign grew. Prior years of relationship building across all segments of the community, from workers and small businesses to elected officials, service providers, unions, and the broader public, provided the

campaign with a powerful foundation upon which they were able to create a united front in support of the Yank Sing workers. Many partners provided concrete support to the campaign, including: the Asian Law Caucus, which represented the workers and collaborated on a legal strategy to complement the workers' organizing; UNITE HERE Local 2, which provided research support and boots on the ground; and elected officials and service organizations, which reached out to management to make their support known. At the same time, both city and state enforcement agencies advanced legal processes.

By the end of the summer of 2013, the campaign had well exceeded CPA's original goals. Despite their considerable fear of confronting their employer, nearly 100 immigrant workers, including cooks, dishwashers, and wait staff, got involved. In 2014, workers reached a groundbreaking agreement that included an increase in wages, new benefits, fair scheduling, eight hours of workers' rights training on paid time with CPA, and a grievance process to ensure compliance without having to go public. In fact, the agreement, which amounted to \$4.2 million, was at that time the largest minimum wage settlement at a single restaurant ever reached in the history of the California Labor Commissioner's office.

A lot of attention is paid to large financial settlements, but CPA is clear that these workplace campaigns are about more than the money. As the Yank Sing case demonstrates, their campaigns built off each other, with each designed to build power, shifting what workers and their community believed they deserved and were capable of winning. At the workplace level, there were ripple effects among the workers who were inspired by previous cases and were then willing to get involved in future cases. It was crucial to CPA that organizers and leaders from different cases were able to connect and support each other, building alignment across different issues.

"I worked at Yank Sing for 16 years, and these past couple of months are the happiest time I've ever had. Looking back, I wish I speak up earlier about the disrespect we endured. It took all of us standing together to have changes and respect on the job, and that's something all immigrant workers need to know."

"This is a hard-fought victory, and I asked my co-worker, 'Aren't you happy that we are going home this early? Don't you like our new benefits, like the holiday pay and more paid vacation?' And they would all nod in agreement. It took all of us standing up. How could we have won if it was just me or one person?"

- Mrs. Zhang (pseudonym), Yank Sing worker

The huge victory with the Yank Sing workers was achieved in large part because of the collaboration of OLSE and the state Division of Labor Standards Enforcement (DLSE). The DLSE's case provided important leverage in securing the transformative agreement. Subsequently, the opportunity emerged to formally bring local co-enforcement efforts across California to the state level. The California Strategic Enforcement Partnership emerged from the coming together of community groups, a friendly state labor commissioner who was reorganizing DLSE into a proactive enforcement agency, and the financial support of a private foundation.

CPA's relationship with DLSE dated back many years, but, in 2011, it was the appointment of Julie Su to lead DLSE that created new opportunities for CPA to experiment with leveraging state resources. Commissioner Su's leadership transformed the DLSE and she led the Bureau of Field Enforcement to establish a proactive "strategic enforcement" strategy that identified target industries with high rates of wage theft and effective approaches to conducting investigations with highly vulnerable workers and witnesses. Commissioner Su's DLSE also had the will to make the legal process more accessible to low-wage immigrant workers and ensure wage judgments the agency rendered were enforced.

Beginning in 2016, the Irvine Foundation funded the state co-enforcement partnership, which was kicked off with multi-day retreats bringing together investigators and community organizations for relationship-building and learning about each other's work. The partnership supported DLSE and community groups' strategizing together to use the state's ability to target key industries, strategically direct investigations of particular employers, and experiment with ways of being more aggressive and resolving cases more quickly. Commissioner Su has said that the co-enforcement partnership with community groups like CPA was in fact critical to the effectiveness of her agency's strategic enforcement initiative.<sup>37</sup>

CPA's efforts to bring worker power to scale has continued. In 2020, CPA joined the leadership of the California Coalition for Worker Power (CCWP), the only statewide coalition uniting worker centers, labor unions, and other advocates across the state, building a common vision and aiming to build worker power beyond the 1-2 year legislative campaign cycle.

## Conclusion

**WITH SIGNIFICANT LEADERSHIP FROM THE WORKERS** and staff of CPA, San Francisco's and California's systems of co-enforcement are powerful models for the rest of the country. But CPA leaders are the first to say that the model is experimental and hardly a perfect cure-all, and must be integrated with worker and community organizing if it is to be impactful. Wage theft has not ended. Retaliation continues to be a challenge for organizing workers. And the co-enforcement model alone isn't going to build worker power to the scale needed to contest corporate power. The larger project of building power among poor and working people and communities of color in politics and the economy remains the necessary and enormous ongoing challenge.

At the same time, there is no question that CPA's past two decades are marked by major victories and growth. Its steadfast commitment to workplace and community organizing has enabled workers to secure increasingly powerful material wins. The organization's pushback on the perspective that abuse of low-wage workers is normal, popularizing the now ubiquitous term "wage theft," has created a sea change in how its base, government, and local business owners view the issue. CPA's willingness to experiment with strategies to hold both employers and government accountable gave birth to co-enforcement, a new model of co-governance in labor standards enforcement that is being replicated formally, with funding for community-based organizations in Los Angeles, Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, and Austin. And its visionary leadership has continued to forge a citywide, regional, and increasingly statewide movement ecology that includes progressives, labor, and communities of color to respond to the multi-sector issues that impact workers' lives under racial capitalism.

"Building power has really changed what the norms are. When we started in 2003-2004, you couldn't even really say "wage theft," it was so taboo. Because of us building power, person to person, learning how to develop leadership to help people take collective action and take on bigger fights, we've shifted the norms in Chinatown, so people now know wage theft is bad, whereas 15-20 years ago people thought wage theft was normal and part of how we do business."

- Alex Tom, former CPA Executive Director

A key lesson for CPA throughout its years of workplace campaigns and policy advocacy has been the central importance of organizing and the goal of fundamentally building worker power. Their future victories were made possible only because of the core of organic worker leaders in the community that CPA has organized with over time, shifting the terrain for



workers' rights, along with the commitment and tenacity of staff organizers to spend months and sometimes years meeting with workers in order to gain their trust and willingness to join the fight. This is where having an organization like CPA—and all the other organizations they helped found and/or worked with, sometimes building coalitions in the process—is an essential part of building power.

At the same time, worker-by-worker, and then case-by-case organizing, by itself, is not enough to effect structural change; to do that, CPA needed to simultaneously employ multiple, intersecting strategies. As CPA's workplace organizing matured, its strategies diversified to include more intentional relationship building with diverse community stakeholders; formalizing a powerful political block by deepening alliances through joint work; sharpening its ability to shape public opinion; following up policy wins with enforcement; and engaging in the nitty gritty of governance.

People *are* the government, CPA stresses—it is not people versus the government. CPA learned how to work with the government and helped build OLSE in the process. During OLSE's first case—which was also their first case working with OLSE—CPA sent its own people into government to learn how it worked. CPA was not interested in merely doing outreach for OLSE, but in being strategic partners with OLSE. Formalizing and funding the role CPA and their partners played was an important part of creating that partnership, but, CPA found, it was still necessary to build real relationships with OLSE staff. For CPA, the relationships that enabled them to actually strategize together required finding time outside formal meeting spaces to build trust and shared understanding, person to person.

In its efforts to effect change in government, CPA found that access is not power and power is not governance. According to CPA Executive Director Shaw San Liu, effective governance involves “leadership, creating structural changes in how departments are run, protocols, training manuals...hiring the right people.” There is a lot of discretion in governing, and it is not easy to move an agenda within the government bureaucracy. They needed good people and good leadership inside government and political power from the outside. CPA's deep investment in building blocks of political power was critical to its ability to change this terrain.

An honest and timely assessment of CPA's power to move things was also important. CPA has worked with different agencies at different times, including OLSE, DLSE, the National Labor Relations Board, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Which agency they decided to work with in any particular moment ultimately depended on the political willingness of an agency to collaborate with them in the way that they needed for their organizing at the time.

Part of what creates a strong and powerful co-governance model is not only building trust and strong relationships with government agencies and politicians, but also the ability to push from the outside when progress is stymied. Time and time again, community and labor groups had to organize to push the city to enforce existing laws, pass ordinances, increase

funding, increase OLSE's powers, and to use OLSE's powers proactively. CPA was especially effective when they combined data with powerful personal testimonies to build narrative power and push sometimes recalcitrant government entities to make policy changes and enforce existing laws.

There are tensions in managing these inside and outside strategies. Wage theft still exists in San Francisco even after many years of building up OLSE, but the public, “outside organizing” campaigns can sound like criticism to those working on the inside. A key way CPA navigated these tensions was by organizing within government, building relationships and helping shape how those on the inside perceived the campaigns on the outside.

Over the last two decades, CPA's accomplishments have been a model for building power person to person and across communities. At the same time, the continued persistence of abuse—and the structural resistance to the changes CPA and workers want to see—compels the organization to continue the painstaking work of breaking the alienation of individuals working and living under racial capitalism. They are also tackling the challenges of building ever-more powerful alliances among immigrant workers and people of color struggling to meet their basic needs. To this day, CPA continues to expand its work towards workplace justice and economic democracy.

## Some key recommendations:

- **Don't conflate access with power.** After the minimum wage ordinance was passed, CPA spent the first decade learning how to govern, learning the bureaucracy, and grounding their advocacy demands in what was happening in real time in the community and continuing to organize workers.
- **Defend your wins.** CPA did not focus narrowly on getting legislation passed; they continued to organize and advocate for strong enforcement.
- **Work strategically with government horizontally across agencies, vertically from the city/county on up, and longitudinally across administrations.**
  - Maintain influence across political administrations to establish independent oversight and a relationship with the enforcement agency.
  - Coordinated enforcement across departments is important.
  - City enforcement agencies sometimes try to pass the buck to better-resourced state agencies. It's important for them to collaborate, but community groups still need to hold local officials accountable to take action.
  - Consider who is going to be your inside policy expert. It takes specific expertise to be able to engage effectively in political

and city bureaucracy fights, and building that expertise takes resources.

- Develop a bench of people you can send inside (to do their “tour of duty”) who can then take ownership of the process of rights enforcement.
- **Build strategic partnerships with core labor and community allies.** Well organized, strategically aligned coalitions can elect new representatives, reshape the public agenda, pass legislation and otherwise change political norms and policy outcomes much more effectively together than any organization can on its own.
- **Require and institutionalize collaboration with the community.** Beyond the outreach role, community-based organizations should be engaged in developing strategy and running the labor agency’s programs. Create a mechanism for independent/community oversight over the labor agency.
- **Support local government with technical assistance and expertise.** With the passing of progressive labor laws, local governments may experience some unconventional growth and transitions, along with a lack of experience among staff in developing systems and protocols.
- **Establish accountability and clearer communication with local government.** To be a true collaboration, internal protocols of the organization are necessary along with protocols of local government, including accountability mechanisms and regular meetings to establish communication and relationship-building. In the King Tin case, CPA worked with local government in “good faith” and believed that local government was accountable to the workers’ case. However, CPA and the workers needed to create the political will to hold the city and employers accountable. Additionally, there was a need for CPA to have regular meetings with OLSE.
- **Governance on the inside can only be as good as the organizing on the outside.** Labor and community organizations’ power is ultimately rooted in their membership base, and organizing and cultivating leadership in their base is always essential work. An organized, politically independent membership base provides nonprofit staff and government with direct information on people’s needs, challenges and priorities, helps hold them accountable, and provides the necessary political force to push through policy changes in the face of opposition and keep co-governance processes active and robust over time.

# Chinese Progressive Association | A TIMELINE



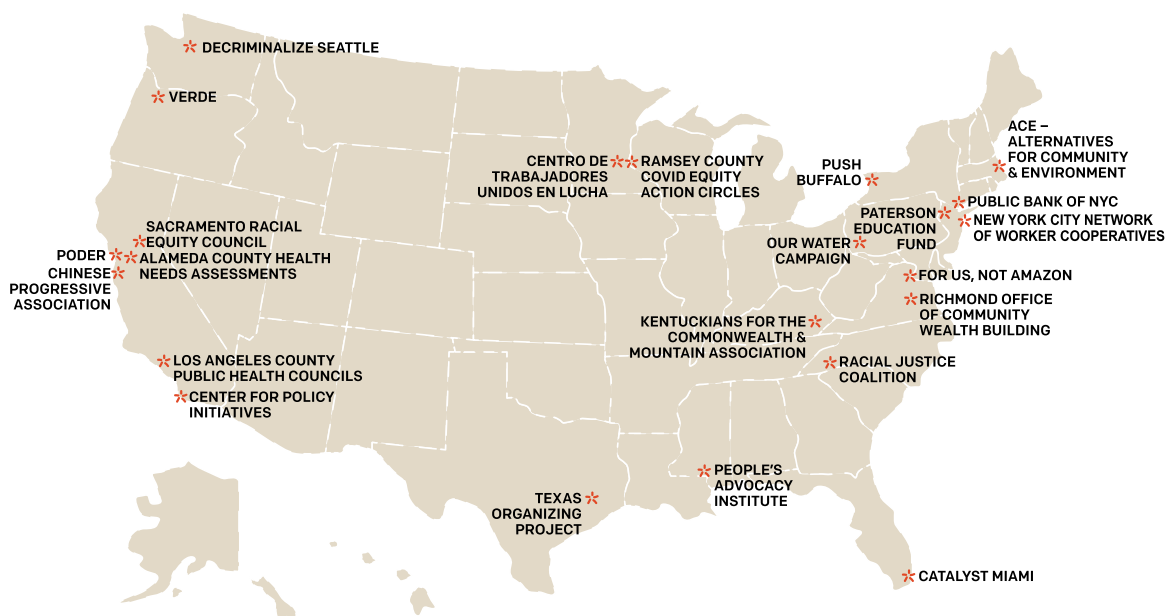
# Co-Governance and Participatory Democracy in Action Across the Country

**EVERY FIGHT IS UNIQUE**, and successful co-governance can look very different depending on local context and circumstances. Co-governance is a collection of participatory models and practices in which government and communities work together through formal and informal structures to make collective policy decisions, co-create programs to meet community needs, and make sure those policies and programs are implemented effectively. Given this definition, there are multifaceted ways in which co-governance can play out on the ground.

In other words, there is no “right” way to do co-governance, and often a community’s relationship to government agencies can fall under a spectrum of what we call “co-governance.” When thinking about impact, scale, and replicability, the following questions may be helpful:

- >> How much funding does the model have?
- >> Is the model formalized?
- >> Are community participants given both real power and flexibility?
- >> Are government agencies adequately staffed and committed?<sup>38</sup>

Below are several examples, each of which has its own, unique relationship to government. This list is by no means comprehensive, but rather points organizers and advocates to organizing experiments that have had impact. Taken together, these models demonstrate a spectrum of work to build community governance structures, exercise decision making power, and engage governing institutions in their cities and communities.



## Climate and Environmental Justice - Just Transition

### ACE - Alternatives for Community & Environment Boston, MA

Buildings are one of the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions in Boston. For more than two years, ACE-Alternatives for Community & Environment has been a critical participant in the development of a community-centered process to create strong performance standards for building emissions. ACE partnered with the City of Boston, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and One Square World, in an effort to bring climate adaptation advocates and activists to the table with their counterparts in the housing justice world, including organizations in the Right to the City coalition. Through that process, community members and residents discussed the impacts of the Building Emissions Reporting and Disclosure Ordinance (BERDO) and possible improvements to better serve residents and abutters impacted by emissions from buildings throughout the city. ACE co-facilitated a series of virtual gatherings over the course of 2020 and drew more than 80 participants to each meeting. ACE and Right to the City, along with the Green Justice Coalition, pushed for a standard that did not include the purchase of carbon offsets as a compliance mechanism—a hard no for the community—but did include a review board with a two-thirds majority of members nominated by community-based organizations with an expertise in housing, environmental, and climate justice. As a result of this collaboration, [BERDO 2.0](#) was introduced by Councilor Matt O'Malley, was unanimously adopted by the city council, and was signed into law by Mayor Kim Janey on October 5, 2021. ACE continues to work closely with the city to shape the regulations and implementation of the ordinance.

### PODER (People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights) San Francisco, CA

In 2019, the city of San Francisco launched an Office of Racial Equity and undertook a process of addressing equity throughout its agencies and offices. On the heels of this initiative, the Zero Cities project, offering the support of several racial justice and technical partners, engaged the San Francisco Department of the Environment to create a roadmap to the twin goals of equity and zero carbon emissions in the buildings sector. The city's community partner in the effort was the environmental justice organization People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights-San Francisco (PODER). PODER created a joint outreach plan with the city and engaged an array of stakeholders from different sectors including labor, tenants organizing, building owners, workforce training organizations, the municipal utility, climate organizations, and others. Out of a series of activities, a 25-page document of

strategies and potential actions that came out of the process was used to inform the climate plan update led by the Department of the Environment. In 2021, PODER was on the Community Climate Council for the Climate Action Plan update. PODER conducted outreach and advised the Department of Environment on the Climate Action Plan update. Following this work, advocates have been working with the Board of Supervisors to enact legislation for an inter-agency task force that convenes government agencies with community and labor, to address gaps and develop next steps for the implementation plan for updated Climate Action Plan, starting with equitable building decarbonization.

**Verde**  
**Portland, OR**

With the groundbreaking mobilization that led to the Portland Clean Energy Fund in 2018—fought for by the Portland Clean Energy Fund coalition and administered by the city of Portland—partnerships between the city and community organizations were already established when the Zero Cities project, offering the support of several racial justice and technical partners, engaged the city on the task of creating a roadmap to zero carbon emissions in the buildings sector. The environmental justice organization Verde had already been on the city’s radar when the Zero Cities team recommended them as a community partner. Verde convened a coalition of BIPOC organizations called the Climate Justice Collaborative to help advise and steer the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. Verde brought residents together through convenings and participatory action research to define the problems they face and identify solutions, which eventually informed the city’s thinking on the intersections between anti-displacement and energy cost burden, as well as its zero-carbon policy roadmap. The work has become a model for the city of Portland to defer to community self-determination. It is using the experience to create a next-generation Climate Action Plan under the terms of community, as well as an ordinance on energy efficiency standards for rentals.



**Texas Organizing Project**  
**Harris County, TX**

In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in 2017, Texas Organizing Project (TOP) organizers went door to door in Harris County and learned how deeply the Black and brown community was suffering from badly damaged housing conditions, including mold that was impacting the community’s health. TOP organizers realized that to have the power to direct the federal recovery aid toward communities that had been neglected, they needed representation on the county’s boards and commissions. As a [Demos case study](#) reports, “They then embarked on an electoral strategy to ensure that the area’s most vulnerable communities had decision-making power within these historically exclusionary institutional bodies—in the process, unseating a longtime incumbent county judge and electing an equity-minded successor, and implementing a racial equity-based governing framework.”

## Education

**Center for Policy Initiatives - Campaign for Community Schools**  
**San Diego, CA**

The San Diego Community Schools coalition is a group of community organizations, youth groups, and educators, who came together in 2018 with a shared belief that public education must continue to evolve to meet the needs of working families. One of the coalition’s campaigns is to reshape neighborhood schools into community schools. Effective community schools center community needs and integrate values like racial justice into the visioning, decision making, and everyday life of schools.

In July 2020, the campaign won a major victory when the San Diego Unified School District Board of Trustees unanimously adopted the coalition’s Community Schools Resolution, creating the structure and mechanisms to develop and implement community schools in the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD).

The Community Schools Steering Committee is the main entity that carries out the implementation of community schools. This committee, which includes teachers, parents, students, community members, and district staff, has been responsible for reviewing applications from school sites, recommending to school board members which schools are qualified to enter the implementation process, and selecting the District Community Schools Coordinator and the first Community Schools Site Coordinators.

In March of 2022, the coalition achieved a milestone when the San Diego Unified School District designated five schools as community schools. Ten more schools will become community schools in the 2023-24 school year.

## Finance

### Kentuckians for the Commonwealth and Mountain Association Statewide, KY

The fight for a just transition in Appalachia spans multiple counties and states, where the organizing ecosystem is thin and coalition-building is critical. As the coal industry takes its last breaths, communities struggling with unemployment and drug addiction work to build the next economy. Government entities and officials who once wouldn't even consider renewable energy, are now beginning to be open to working with local organizations, leading to the emergence of some co-governance relationships. The organizations Mountain Association and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), with 50- and 40-year histories in the region, respectively, have been working to ensure government spending and capital are accessible, and that communities have a say in shifting away from the coal industry that was the economic driver of the region for generations. Integrating inclusive financing with energy democracy, Mountain Association raised capital, then pursued partnerships with rural electric cooperatives to scale up energy efficiency for their members. By paying their upfront costs, the program allows members to save money in the first month, and then save money moving forward by paying back through the meter, rather than paying back a loan with high interest rates. The program utilizes the existing billing system for utilities. Combining Mountain Association's inside work with the coops and KFTC's outside pressure on the coops to scale up, the coalition partners are working to expand the program to hundreds of households in Eastern Kentucky. KFTC and other groups in Appalachia have developed a framework focused on community self-governance and community power, and are situating electoral justice work within that in connection to other forms of community organizing, mutual aid, and solidarity economy building. Behind all of this work is strong, grassroots organizing and trust building with communities for the changes ahead.

### Office of Community Wealth Building Richmond, VA

The Office of Community Wealth Building (OCWB) was established as a permanent city agency in Richmond, Virginia, in 2015 to provide anti-poverty strategy and policy advice to the mayor and to implement municipal poverty reduction initiatives and systemic changes around housing, education, and economic development. The OCWB emerged from an intensive investigation within Richmond by its residents into drivers of structural poverty and inequitable distribution of city benefits and the identification of solutions to redress these challenges. OCWB's efforts to

maintain a vital leadership role for community members living in poverty and to amplify their voices throughout Richmond city government are ongoing.

**Public Bank of New York City**  
**New York, NY**

Demos completed a [case study](#) on the New Economy Project's efforts through the Public Bank of New York City (PBNYC) coalition of over 40 community, labor, and cooperative groups. The New Economy Project and the PBNYC coalition are developing an alternative to profit-driven private banking in New York with a public banking institution that centers economic, racial, and environmental justice and that supports solutions like worker-owned businesses, affordable housing, and community solar projects. There are few models for public banks, but momentum is growing in multiple communities for a publicly accountable and community governed banking solution.

## Health and Healthcare

**Health Needs Assessments**  
**Alameda County, CA**

Since 2000, the Alameda County Public Health Department in California has partnered with neighborhood groups to conduct participatory assessments on local needs, capacities, and priorities. The department built its program around principles of community leadership, community capacity building, nurturing community assets, and building the community-agency relationship through mutual trust and shared power. The partnership's collaborative work has encouraged an expansive and creative vision of public health, encompassing both traditional health concerns and preventive community health projects like improving housing conditions and building a new neighborhood playground.

**Public Health Councils**  
**Los Angeles, CA**

In November 2020, a [coalition of labor and community organizations](#) and the LA County Department of Public Health co-developed a proposal passed by the County Board of Supervisors that created Public Health Councils to enforce public health orders protecting essential workers from COVID-19 in their workplaces. The order applies to four industries throughout the county—restaurants, food manufacturing, garment manufacturing and warehouses—and authorized workers in these industries to form Public Health Councils to monitor health violations that expose them to COVID-19 and report these violations to the Department of Public Health. The order includes key measures that enable workers to participate, allows unions and workers' centers to organize and train workers as public health monitors, prohibits

employers from retaliating against workers for participating in Public Health Councils, backs up this prohibition with fines and by allowing workers to sue employers for damages, and funds the Department of Health to administer the program.

**COVID Equity  
Action Circle**  
**Ramsey County, MN**

Early in the pandemic, Ramsey County, which includes St. Paul, Minnesota, formed an Equity Action Circle (EAC) of community members to co-develop strategies and solutions to support racially and ethnically diverse communities in addressing the impacts of COVID-19. The goal of forming the EAC was to address the racial disparities in the county, while also improving the county's systems and processes in delivering its programs by building co-design, implementation, and evaluation processes that center communities most impacted by systemic racism. The members represent diverse communities and experiences and are compensated at \$50/hour for their work on the EAC. They have developed recommendations to the county covering priorities including families and youth, healthcare, housing, and workforce, as well as county policies and procedures—all with a focus on the impacts in communities due to COVID-19. The county is now in the process of implementing some of the recommendations, including a culturally specific family coaching program for Black and American Indian families. The Board of Commissioners has supported continued funding of the EAC.

## Housing and Equitable Development

**PUSH Buffalo**  
**Buffalo, NY**

In 2008, PUSH Buffalo, an organization in Buffalo, New York, founded the Green Development Zone (GDZ), “an area that PUSH is making more environmentally and economically sustainable,” in a 30-square-block area of Buffalo's West Side, where many communities of color reside. Understanding that communities can combat gentrification when 30 percent of buildings and neighborhoods remain affordable, PUSH purchased vacant properties in the GDZ before developers turned them into luxury apartments. They were then able to assemble a community-controlled land bank of properties to be repurposed for affordable housing and worked hand-in-hand with the community to determine GDZ priorities that best served all community residents in the area. Through a community planning process, the GDZ planted the seeds of green, efficient, and affordable housing by transforming vacant land into public parks, rain gardens, and community spaces. Using a community congress model, residents identified priorities and goals, which determined the process and strategy to move toward these goals.<sup>39</sup>

## Infrastructure

### Our Water Campaign Pittsburgh, PA

The Our Water Campaign led by Pittsburgh United, a coalition of community organizations including labor, faith, and environmental groups, organized an inside-outside campaign to address high lead levels in drinking water, prevent customer shut offs, and keep water infrastructure a public good. They fought against efforts to privatize the local water authority and engaged the Pittsburgh community through organizing efforts like door-to-door canvassing, distributing water filters, and helping people address water bill problems. They worked with the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Agency to form community advisory committees and in 2019 won an agreement to keep the water agency a public entity. As detailed in a [case study by Demos](#), their message throughout the campaign was clear: “The way out of this crisis was greater accountability through public control, not an abdication of government responsibility through privatization.”

## Multi-Issue

### Sacramento Racial Equity Council Sacramento, CA

The Sacramento Racial Equity Council (RE Council) is a multi-stakeholder body of community-based racial equity groups, organizations, and designated leaders who are deeply connected and in relationship with communities of color across the city. It is working collectively to guide the city of Sacramento in establishing a plan to equitably partner with and be accountable to communities of color by shifting the culture of government so that it becomes a producer of racial equity in its practices and policies. The RE Council guides the city to transform how it governs and works to achieve racial equity, defines the role of the RE Council so that it has decision-making power and mechanisms to hold the city accountable when needed, guides the city council on development of an effective community engagement/community partnership program as well as a racial equity assessment, and guides the city in the creation and implementation of a racial equity assessment tool. The Racial Equity Council works in close partnership with, takes leadership from, and is accountable to the Racial Equity Leadership Network, a network of representatives that constitute the various groups and organizations working for a shared, bold racial justice vision in Sacramento.

### **For Us, Not Amazon Arlington, VA**

[A case study by Demos](#) highlights the For Us, Not Amazon (FUNA) coalition's efforts to stop Amazon from building corporate headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. Community groups saw that Amazon was not bringing public benefits to their communities, but instead worsening hiring practices and working conditions, increasing housing costs, displacing working-class households, and surveilling and developing partnerships with local law enforcement, and all with the support of public subsidies from local and state governments. The FUNA coalition was unsuccessful in stopping the Amazon headquarters from coming to Arlington, but did prevent the Arlington County Police Department from entering into a partnership with Amazon's Ring that would have increased community surveillance and criminalization. FUNA is working with national groups like Athena and PowerSwitch Action to build community power to fight corporate power and win over the support and partnership of government. Currently, its close government partner at the federal level is investigating Amazon as an unregulated monopoly.

## **Participatory Budgeting**

### **Decriminalize Seattle Seattle, WA**

In 2020, grassroots coalitions King County Equity Now and Decriminalize Seattle [called for](#) the City of Seattle to fund a community-led research process that would create an explicitly pro-Black participatory budgeting process. They worked with Participatory Budget Project (PBP) to [develop a vision](#) for citywide participatory budgeting in the creation of the city's public safety budget with a strong racial equity framework, which took nearly two years to [begin](#) implementing. The city gave a grant of \$3 million to the Black Brilliance Research Project to [produce a report](#) documenting how people were being affected by police violence, [contracted with PBP](#) to administer the program, and committed to giving communities control over how to spend [\\$30 million](#), a sum that will make Seattle's effort the [largest](#) participatory budgeting initiative in the country to date.

## **Reparations**

### **Racial Justice Coalition Asheville, NC**

In July 2020, under pressure from a coalition of local groups, including Black activists who organized as [Black AVL Demands](#), the Racial Justice Coalition of Asheville, and other organizations, the Asheville, North Carolina city council [passed a resolution](#) supporting community reparations for Black Asheville and

committed to “establish a process within the next year to develop short, medium and long term recommendations to specifically address the creation of generational wealth and to boost economic mobility and opportunity in the black community.” Buncombe County followed suit with a similar resolution a few weeks later. In 2021, the city convened the [Information Sharing & Truth Telling Speaker Series](#), bringing together local and national speakers to talk about how government policies and private practices have driven racial disparities in Asheville, and to facilitate “discussions with community members about past policies and practices, present trends and disparities and future initiatives.” In 2022, [the city and Buncombe County](#) convened an all-Black reparations commission to make recommendations to address local public policies that have driven racial disparities across housing, economic development, public health, education, public safety and justice. [The city budgeted \\$2.1 million](#) to go toward the reparations effort. (The first \$365,000 went to pay consultants to facilitate the process; no money has yet been allocated to reparations). The County Commissioners and City Council have added [\\$1,000,000 annually](#), in perpetuity, to future reparations budgets. The commission is tasked with issuing a report in 2023 offering concrete short, medium and long-term recommendations that the city and county could take to repair racial harms. Its success will hinge on how committed elected officials in both city and county governments are to following through on their reparations pledges, since the Reparations Commission has no implementation or enforcement power. It remains to be seen how effective this effort will be. Community members have come together to create the Reparations Stakeholder Authority of Asheville, a community-led reparations finance authority.

## Solidarity Economy Ecosystems

### [Catalyst Miami](#) **Miami-Dade County,** **FL**

Communities in rapidly gentrifying Miami-Dade County, through the organization Catalyst Miami and its coalition partners, are building a microcosm of what a local, solidarity economy could look like. The ecosystem includes several community-wealth building strategies. Worker cooperative development across several industries, with a focus on the care economy in partnership with the Miami Workers’ Center, ensures that cooperative worker-owners have the opportunity to push for better labor standards while building their own businesses. A real estate investment cooperative aims to convert several buildings to community ownership to promote neighborhood stabilization



and keep assets in communities. And engagement with long-term, place-based “anchor institutions” like universities, hospitals, and county and city agencies keeps expenditures local and flowing to small businesses instead of going to big corporations outside of Miami. In 2019, the city of Miami passed a resolution promoting employee-to-owner business conversions, and partnered with local nonprofits to promote their efforts. If public funding can be attached to conversions, the resolution provides an opening for significant expansion of employee ownership in Miami.

**New York City**  
**Network of Worker**  
**Cooperatives**  
**(NYCNoWC)**  
**New York, NY**

New York City has the ingredients for a vibrant cross-section of a solidarity economy ecosystem, some of which has been backed by the city with public funding. Community land trusts as well as an array of community-, school-, and public housing-based gardens are supported by city government to varying degrees. But most of the city’s public funding for the solidarity economy has gone to worker cooperatives, which has allowed the sector to expand massively given the economic barriers of starting businesses among low-income Black and immigrant business owners who comprise the majority of the New York City Network of Worker Cooperatives’ (NYCNowC) 70 member-cooperatives. With democratic forms of decision making and governance baked into cooperative principles, worker cooperatives present a critical and promising element of economic democracy. The city’s high metrics and funding demands for rapid expansion are a challenge for worker owners, organizers, and cooperative developers who are building infrastructure to support small business development under tight time constraints. But they are innovating to meet the challenge of scaling up. Since 2017, NYCNoWC’s Training Collective are cooperative worker owners who are hired by nonprofits to train people to stand up cooperatives, putting training in the hands of worker owners to expand what the nonprofits can do. Its Advocacy Council brings cooperative practices to the policy realm by supporting worker owners financially to be able to impact policy. NYCNoWC is partnering with the Cooperative Economics Alliance of NYC (CEANYC) to do shared donor organizing and fundraising activities, and with both CEANYC and Urban Homesteading Assistance Board to create shared programming. Both partnerships strengthen the ecosystem across sectors. CEANYC will be releasing an online map of the solidarity economy displaying the extent of the ecosystem sector by sector.

## Workers' Rights

### **CTUL - Centro De Trabajadores Unidos En La Lucha Minneapolis, MN**

Starting with the need to enforce workers' right to paid sick and safe leave, workers' rights advocates and organizers pushed for the creation of the City of Minneapolis Labor Standards Enforcement Division. This expanded the purview of an existing department to focus exclusively on workers rights policy. But like all labor rights enforcement bodies across the country, the core of the work at the division is complaint-based enforcement of worker protections. A fundamental challenge is that the most vulnerable workers, including workers of color and low-wage workers, who are most frequently and egregiously exploited, are also the least likely to complain. One of the most effective solutions to this systemic challenge is collaboration between labor enforcement agencies and community-based worker centers, which raise awareness of workers' rights amongst the most vulnerable workers. In line with this collaboration, "standards boards" are industry-based standard-setting structures. In Minneapolis, the Workplace Advisory Committee was created which is essentially an informal standards and enforcement board consisting of a minority of business representatives and a combined majority of worker, community, and public representatives. One of its key stakeholders and designers is the powerhouse organization Centro De Trabajadores Unidos En La Lucha (CTUL). Recently, the Committee created a worker-led subcommittee, a structure through which workers directly influence the rules and enforcement related to COVID-19 that the Committee advances in collaboration with the city. The committee is in charge of outreach—the city talks to the bosses and CTUL talks to the workers— and was active in the push for an increase of the minimum wage to \$15/hour. The ultimate goal is to build a worker standards board to make policy, whereas most others across the country just make recommendations.

# In Conclusion: Strategies for Co-Governance

**THE U.S. IS STRUGGLING WITH A PROFOUND DEMOCRACY GAP.** The laws of our land do not reflect what the people want. The majority of Americans want abortion rights<sup>40</sup>, stronger gun control policies<sup>41</sup>, and more democratic elections<sup>42</sup>. And yet every year that goes by, we seem to make little progress towards these goals—and in some cases, we are losing ground. At the same time, we face consistent inequities in income, wealth, jobs, education, and every other element of everyday life. Structural racism remains a devastating weapon that erodes democratic processes. It also prevents true democratization of our politics and our economy, in which everyone is guaranteed meaningful participation in public life and the essentials like good incomes, housing, and education that we all need to thrive. In response, we have seen and participated in some of the largest marches and demonstrations in the history of our country, and the 2020 uprisings remind us of the importance of long-term, on-the-ground movement building to continue the painstaking work of building power in between elections and spontaneous protests.

As the case studies and models in this report show, part of that painstaking work will entail shifting the relationship between communities and government entities, and in so doing, changing our conceptions of everyone's role in our democracy. The constrained, prevailing view of democracy is that of an exclusionary, passive, individualistic, consumer model of voting in which public opinion is measured and treated as a neutral, natural result of rational deliberation between individuals, and in which citizens are simply supposed to vote once every two years and then sit back to let elected leaders run the show.

This impoverished conception has led us astray. It is a double disservice: to all the people working in government who are actively trying to serve their communities and could benefit from the hard work, insight, and on-the-ground experience of community members; and to those community members who end up frustrated and disenfranchised when their government fails them. We must recognize that people don't exist as atomized individuals in society, but rather as members of communities. We must collectively cultivate a more active, robust and inclusive form of democratic participation by building equitable, collective decision-making and oversight into our systems of governance.

So how do we build power? As in Jackson, Paterson, and San Francisco, our solutions must intentionally, equitably, and systematically rebalance both political and economic power. To do that effectively, we must reshape public and private governance to give the communities and workers who are most harshly denied human rights meaningful, formal participation, and control in how public policies and key economic decisions are made and implemented. Communities must be able to hold both government and private powers accountable to upholding democratic decisions and human rights.

We need bigger, bolder, and better ways for communities and workers who are denied human rights to build power. This must include both encouraging the formation of politically independent community and workers' organizations outside of government as a check on concentrated private and public power, and restructuring public and private governance processes to provide formal, institutionalized ways in which communities and workers can wield meaningful power in decision-making, monitoring, and enforcement.

At the same time, co-governance strategies must be designed not just around equitable processes, but also around equitable policy outcomes that correctly and impactfully address racial, economic, gender, and other disparities.

Powerful and necessary as it is, co-governance is not a silver bullet. The challenges we face are multifaceted, so there is no single way to fix things. We need to protect voting rights and advance electoral reforms to make elected officials more representative and accountable to the public. We need advocacy and mobilization to counterbalance corporations and white nationalist movements, maintaining steady pressure on government to pass just laws and execute them fairly and effectively. We need community- and worker-controlled solidarity-economy models like cooperatives and community land trusts that build democratic ownership and control beyond the confines of government in our workplaces and broader economy. These will all be essential fronts of work in the coming years, but they are not enough on their own. Congress and state legislatures will continue to fail to take sufficient action on climate collapse, racialized inequality and the other pressing issues of our day, the courts will be hostile to human rights, and solidarity economies will need public policy and government support to meaningfully scale up. We thus also need to tackle the often-observed realms of bureaucratic and corporate decision-making to transform how they affect people's lives. In all of this, we must also see that we are stronger when we work together, and that includes recognizing that there are myriad opportunities for communities to find common cause with government entities—especially at the local and state levels—to build strong co-governance models.

## Piloting Co-Governance and Bringing it to Scale

**EXPANDING CO-GOVERNANCE AND BRINGING IT TO SCALE** could provide a significant break away from the neoliberal paradigms that have dominated over recent decades, moving us away from undemocratic market rule and unaccountable “experts” and toward participatory democracy in which everyday people enjoy real power to shift resources and advance just outcomes. While ambitious, it is not far-fetched; the foundations of equitable, participatory governance are neither hard to find nor new. Such models represent ways of living in society together that can be traced back through Native, Black and immigrant traditions to before the beginning of the U.S. itself. As we document in the Co-Governance and Participatory Democracy In Action Across the Country section of this report, many people are building models of participatory governance and economic democracy all over the country today.

Yet if models of collaborative governance and economic democracy are so deeply rooted, why are they not more widespread? For one thing, there are entrenched stakeholders who have zero interest in ceding any of their power. Our system of racialized capitalism has been all too successful for many politicians and corporations, and they would happily continue on exactly as things are.

Our experience working with grassroots groups to transform governance around the country has made clear that there are additional challenges. Collaborative governance models often lack political support and funding from elected officials; are inadequately resourced and poorly integrated into broader political processes; meet hesitancy from overstretched civil servants; are hampered by inadequate grassroots infrastructure and capacity; face outright political hostility by reactionary opponents of community and worker power; and are constrained by a lack of imagination and belief that more just, democratic ways of co-existing are even possible. The three in-depth Case Studies and the Models of Co-governance section in this report reveal a number of challenges and opportunities collaborative governance faces, and some of the strategies that proponents are using to strengthen and expand spheres of participatory democratic governance.

## Lessons from the Case Studies

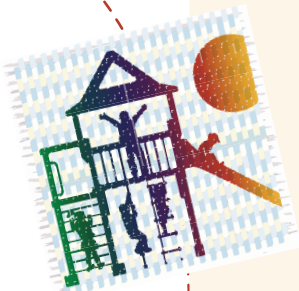
**USING OUR CASE STUDIES AS ROADMAPS**, we see the outlines of how to build powerful movements that transform their communities and eventually lead to co-governance. While the fight for education justice in Paterson, worker justice in San Francisco, and People's Assemblies in Jackson appear to be disconnected on the surface, we see a surprising number of overlaps within the challenges they experienced and the strategies they used to win.

1. CULTIVATE COMMUNITY CAPACITY
2. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS
3. PURSUE INSIDE/OUTSIDE STRATEGIES
4. MAKE CO-GOVERNANCE ENFORCEABLE
5. TRANSFORM THE CULTURE OF GOVERNANCE
6. SCALE UP AND SCALE OUT

1

### CULTIVATE COMMUNITY CAPACITY

The first step toward authentic co-governance is often **having an organization that can provide the bandwidth, structure and—crucially—access to sustained funding** for a fight that may last many years, if not decades. In Paterson, the structures of the Paterson Education Fund and the Parent Education Organizing Council allowed Linda Reid and Rosie Grant to rally their community and bolster their fight for years. They then leveraged crucial support, materials, funding, and contacts through a national coalition, the Dignity in Schools Campaign. In San Francisco, the Chinese Progressive Association



held firm in a decades-long fight for worker justice, and was able to help build multiple coalitions to strengthen its position and scale up to a statewide movement. In Jackson, the People's Advocacy Institute leveraged staff capacity and administrative backing to institutionalize the generations-long practices of People's Assemblies in the South, and share their practices with other organizations replicating the model in other regions, while participating as active members of the regional Southern Movement Assembly.

## 2

**BUILD RELATIONSHIPS**

Another crucial ingredient towards creating a co-governance model is **building relationships**. While every organizer knows this in theory, the stories in Paterson, San Francisco, and Jackson illustrate how difficult, time-consuming, and absolutely critical it is to build trust within their communities and with government officials. In Paterson, this meant meeting after meeting with district leaders, school officials, principals, discipline officers, and teachers. Change is hard, and the only way people are going to take a leap into the unknown is if they trust that they are being heard, and that their concerns are being taken seriously.

Similarly, CPA spent untold hours meeting with workers and their families to strategize with them, and in some cases to provide emotional support to entire families as workers risked their livelihoods. They built trust slowly, worker by worker, restaurant by restaurant, case by case. They also built relationships and support within the broader Chinese community. Each victory made the next one more likely, because the community began to let go of its fear, and trust in CPA and the work they were doing. CPA also worked diligently to build relationships with city officials, and then state officials, to push for stronger policies and for real enforcement of those policies. They built enough trust (and power, much of it garnered from their strong relationship with their community) that agencies were willing to create co-governance structures with CPA, including funding some of its work.

In Jackson, the People's Assemblies build trust and relationships among community members, and then offer them the political education that expands the community's shared understanding of the possibilities for change. This translates into deeper commitment to the strategies that emerge from the assemblies, and more strategic partnerships with government to actualize community priorities.



## 3

**PURSUE INSIDE/OUTSIDE STRATEGIES**

The carrots of strong trusting relationships are important, but sometimes you also need a big stick. This is where organizing power and **the need for an inside/outside strategy** come into play. As mentioned above, change is hard, and government can be slow to change. This is why working in partnership with government and organizing to demand change are both essential co-governance strategies. In Jackson, for example, Rosie Grant would meet with the School Board, while Linda Reid would be outside organizing a rally. In San Francisco, CPA eventually founded the PWA (Progressive Workers Alliance) as a separate organizational vehicle to push for change. CPA was also skilled at holding press conferences and rallies that garnered enormous press attention that catalyzed its agenda. Both movements were particularly successful at using the one-two punch of presenting powerful data and then using personal testimonials to build narrative power in their fights.

The People's Assemblies have also built a unique inside/outside strategy as they intentionally engage community members to identify problems and come up with solutions, and, with the backing of the mass assembly, are able to advocate for those solutions with the city council. At the same time, some solutions coming from assemblies are implemented directly in community organizations, demonstrating the self-governance possible within the community and modeling what could be replicated in the public realm.

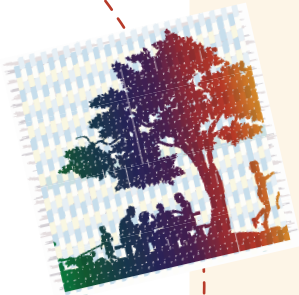
While pushing from the outside is often necessary, sometimes there is a reflexive urge towards creating contentious relationships with government entities that is ultimately a short term strategy. Demanding action is important, but it must be done in a way that upholds the possibility of building long-term relationships with people and entities that can support transformational progress.

## 4

**MAKE CO-GOVERNANCE ENFORCEABLE**

These movements also understood that **policy change is not a win if it's not enforced**. Worse, when laws are flouted, it undermines the community's trust in the possibility of change. As CPA's Shaw San Liu says, "Raise the floor and enforce the floor."

There is no one-size-fits all legal or technical solution to enforcing labor laws, restorative justice policies, or anything else, but at least a few key ingredients are necessary. Policies must state clear principles, goals, and measurable outcomes. They must include legal, political, or economic sanctions for violations like fines or the loss of government contracts or business licenses. They must empower people who are





most impacted by legal violations, like low-wage workers, to be able to speak up and initiate enforcement, which requires giving people remedies that they trust to work and protecting them from retaliation. They must be tailored to the varying dynamics and context of specific industries, localities, populations and conditions, paying special attention to addressing the worst violations, not just the lowest-hanging fruit. They must transform not just the laws and processes, but the culture and norms surrounding them that shape the ways in which all actors—employers, school officials, regulators, workers, students, etc.—collectively behave. Ultimately, effective enforcement is not a fixed institutional structure that can run on autopilot, but rather is an ongoing, adaptable process that requires continual commitment.



5

### TRANSFORM THE CULTURE OF GOVERNANCE

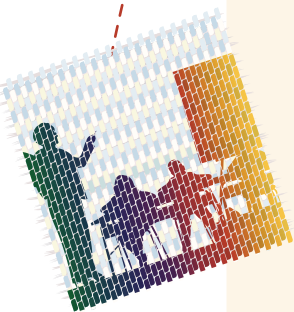
Policy wins must be reinforced with **cultural change**. It begins with a change in the community. For example, in San Francisco, the CPA began by convincing restaurant workers that wage theft and abuse was not acceptable or inevitable.

For co-governance to really work, there must also be a cultural change within government agencies and among officials. Public agencies need political backing, funding, training, and other forms of support for co-governance to succeed. In Paterson, success came partly when the district superintendent, principals, discipline officers, and teachers began to embrace a new approach to discipline and then encouraged other members of the school community to try it. In Jackson, community members now have an example of what it looks like when their voices are heard, and their government embraces their input. This is a powerful repudiation of the years of voter suppression and disenfranchisement endemic in Mississippi. Cultural change is essential for entrenching policy shifts, and for diminishing the danger that any policy wins will eventually be rolled back.

6

### SCALE UP AND SCALE OUT

Forward progress also requires growing the scale and impact of co-governance models by expanding their resources and powers, and also going beyond our individual fights to work across issues and build coalitions. Participatory budgeting organizers, for example, are working across issue silos to increase the number of dollars and budgetary decisions communities have control over, and expand participatory budgeting to more localities and levels of government. Jackson People's Assemblies are part of the Southern Movement Assemblies, through which they are part of a much broader effort to build participatory, racially just democracy across the South and



beyond. Community leaders in Paterson are part of the national Dignity in Schools Campaign, connecting them to parents, youth and allies across the country who are working to end punitive school push-out, and implement restorative justice practices in schools everywhere. CPA is a powerful example of an organization that is continually **scaling up and scaling out** — seeding new organizations, creating coalitions, and reaching out to build solidarity with other movements. By building these trans-local relationships and connections, these movements are sharing the lessons they've learned, are learning from others, and are building joint strategies to reshape policies across levels of government. As such, they are weaving their local fights together into a collective struggle.

While there is significant overlap in the winning strategies in Jackson, Paterson, and the Bay Area, we also recognize that every fight is unique, complex, and evolving. These winning strategies are not without limits or ways to deepen their impact. Organizational capacity and funding are critical—and government can play a role by providing funding for the organizing and community capacity building to make co-governance more sustainable. Relationships need to be sustained beyond individuals so that government offices and agencies can maintain trusting collaboration with community partners, even when there is change in staffing. Inside/outside strategies and accountability to implementation go hand in hand, and both require sustained organizing power beyond policy wins. All of this requires funding, capacity, and attention to the wellness, balance, and collective practices that prevent organizers from burning out. Moving forward will require iteratively testing co-governance strategies all over the country and continuing to learn from each other as we go.

## Balancing Participation with Focuses on Equitable Power and Just Outcomes

**WE MUST BE CAREFUL NOT TO FALSELY EQUATE** democratization with simply maximizing participation. Participation that is not paired with rigorous attention to balancing power and protecting human rights carries great risks:

1. **Exclusion and subjugation:** American history is a long lesson in how democratic participation can drive and enable the exclusion and subjugation of Black people, Native people, women, workers, people with disabilities, and other communities. This remains a critical threat today.
2. **Elite capture:** Private capture of participatory spaces by powerful interest groups like homeowners and corporations is a huge problem that has given us exclusionary zoning and housing policy, segregated and unequal schools, corrupt corporate-backed ballot initiatives, crumbling infrastructure, extortionate health care prices, and toxic exposure to an enormous number of potentially hazardous chemicals.

3. **Bureaucratic gridlock:** Though participation and checks and balances in government and society are crucial, many well-intentioned participatory mechanisms have decayed into sclerotic procedures that slow down or completely halt progress on infrastructure, housing development, and climate action, harming the very communities they were meant to protect.
4. **Demobilization:** For social movements fighting to win greater participation in governance, winning participatory mechanisms also carries the risk of demobilizing the very organizing that made those victories possible and that is necessary to keep them operating effectively, authentically, and with accountability.
5. **Burdening the oppressed:** While membership in society should carry responsibilities as well as benefits, poor people and people of color shouldn't have to carry an undue participatory burden and show up to long regulatory meetings in order to avoid human rights violations.
6. **False solutions:** Policymakers can tout policy outcomes that claim to solve real problems such as environmental and climate injustice by using the language of science such as "carbon offsets," while continuing to damage the health and livelihoods of directly-impacted communities.

## Participatory mechanisms gone awry:

- **NIMBYism ("Not In My Back Yard"):** Homeowners (usually white and relatively wealthy) have captured local land-use planning processes, showing up to public meetings to block construction of housing affordable to working-class people, and thereby entrenching racial and economic segregation in our neighborhoods, cities, and schools. Racial segregation in American metropolitan regions is worse now than it was in the 1960s.
- **Community benefits agreements (CBAs):** Real estate developers have learned how to hijack community benefits agreement processes, either slowing them to a crawl and threatening to walk away (as the Oakland Athletics are doing in the CBA for Oakland's new baseball stadium) or, as with Brooklyn's Atlantic Yards, creating a false "community" coalition to secure a sweetheart deal that lets them pocket enormous profits from redevelopment without delivering real benefits to local communities.
- **Ballot initiatives:** The progressive movement won ballot initiatives more than a century ago to provide a way for direct democratic participation to get around corrupt legislatures, but have been captured by corporations and billionaires who buy signatures and ads to pass or defeat popular initiatives. In 2018, for example, the dialysis clinic industry spent \$111 million to defeat California's Proposition 8, which would have stopped the industry from price-gouging patients and discriminating against people based on Medicaid or Medicare.

The key to avoiding these pitfalls is establishing clear goals and outcomes for the people most affected by an issue. These include reducing specific racial disparities, expanding participation (including of undocumented people, young people, incarcerated individuals, and others who face barriers to participation), or increasing community organizing power and mobilization. Also essential is building shared accountability, assessing progress toward these goals and outcomes, and course correcting along the way.

## The Road Ahead

- >> **“Do I have access to jobs that will pay and treat me well?”**
- >> **“Can I afford to go to the doctor and fill my prescriptions?”**
- >> **“Can I pay my rent or even buy a home?”**
- >> **“Can I send my kids to a well-resourced neighborhood school?”**

**FOR TENS OF MILLIONS OF PEOPLE**, the answer to these questions is no. Yet the fact that healthcare, housing, education, good jobs, and other essential elements of our lives are so precarious is neither natural nor inevitable: it is the result of concrete policy and economic decisions made both by government and by powerful private actors.

Policy can be changed, but the challenges are real. Opposition from hostile corporations, billionaires, and white nationalists; increasingly undemocratic political institutions like the U.S. Supreme Court and U.S. Senate; inequitable campaign financing, gerrymandering, and years of community frustration with “participatory” processes that fail to deliver changes are all significant barriers to real democracy. Yet multiracial democracy is less a destination than it is a collective practice. Every time we make a shift, even if small, toward a more equitable, democratic process or outcome, we grow our democracy bit by bit.

As community leaders in Jackson, Paterson, and San Francisco demonstrate, there is power in community members coming together to identify problems, work with like-minded people in government, and collectively develop policy solutions that can meaningfully change lives. A different future is possible. We can move past the neoliberal era we are in to build a multiracial democracy in which everyone’s needs are met.

Change can start small, such as the examples provided in the Case Studies. A spark may happen when a grandmother hears about her granddaughter getting suspended or a few restaurant workers ask for help with wage theft at their work. These moments can build and grow into profound movements for change. It takes organizations with the bandwidth for a years-long fight; deep, meticulous relationship-building; an inside/outside strategy; and a commitment to both cultural change and policy change. These fights are happening across the country, on every issue that is important to us.

Our future has yet to be written, and a multiracial democracy is in no way guaranteed. But moving boldly towards a vision of a transformed economy and politics—with universal, equitable public goods, shared democratic control, and racial justice at the center—is an absolute necessity.

## Endnotes

- 1 We define public goods as those essential goods that represent fundamental economic and social rights which government has a public responsibility to ensure are equitably accessible for all people at a reasonable level of quality and affordability. These goods may be ensured through community models, regulation, or direct provision. The core obligation of government is to create a system ensuring these goods and addressing obstacles such as speculation and profiteering that undermine access.
- 2 Anna Bahney, “Majority of Americans say they’re worried about being able to pay for housing,” CNN, August 15, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/15/homes/rising-rent-wages-housing>.
- 3 Noam Levey, “100 million people in America are saddled with medical debt,” Kaiser Health News, June 16, 2022, <https://khn.org/news/article/diagnosis-debt-investigation-100-million-americans-hidden-medical-debt/>.
- 4 Chuck Collins, “Billionaire Wealth, U.S. Job Losses and Pandemic Profiteers,” Institute for Policy Studies’ Inequality.org, May 4, 2022, <https://inequality.org/great-divide/updates-billionaire-pandemic/>.
- 5 For components and examples of this model, see Steve Williams, “Organizing Transformation: Best Practices in the Transformative Organizing Model,” Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung, May 2015.
- 6 For feminist writing on the public/private divide, see Patricia Boling, Susan B. Boyd, Grace Chang, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Cynthia Enloe, Arlie R. Hochschild, Janet Siltanen and Michelle Stanworth.
- 7 Note the contrast between the government response to Black people with crack addiction in the 1980s to the response to opioid addiction in white communities today (race demarcation); whose accessibility, mobility and safety is considered a policy priority, and whose is not (ability demarcation); and how stocks, overwhelmingly owned by the wealthiest 10%, get far more attention from political leaders and the news media than wages, debt and other bread-and-butter issues that matter to the rest of us (class demarcation).
- 8 “Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP),” SNCC Digital Gateway, SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University, <https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/alliances-relationships/mfdp/>
- 9 Bruce Hartford, “Civil Rights Movement History, 1951-1968,” Civil Rights Movement Archive, Duke University Libraries and African American Civil Rights Network, <https://www.crmvet.org/tim/timhome.htm>
- 10 “MFDP:”
- 11 “Fannie Lou Hamer founds Freedom Farm Cooperative,” SNCC Digital Gateway, SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University, accessed Oct. 28, 2022, <https://snccdigital.org/events/fannie-lou-hamer-founds-freedom-farm-cooperative/>. Rebecca Turi, “Building the Collective “voice of Negro women in Mississippi”: The National Council of Negro Women in Mississippi in the 1960s and 1970s,” Mississippi History Now, Mississippi Historical Society and Mississippi Department of Archives and History, June 2020, <https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/building-the-collective-%E2%80%9Cvoice-of-negro-women-in-Mississippi%22-the-national-council-of-negro-women-in-mississippi-in-the-1960s-and-1970s>.
- 12 In this report, we refer to Latino, Latina, Latinx and Hispanic people as Latina/o/x to inclusively refer to people of Latina/o/x origin of all gender identities. We understand that not all Latina/o/x people use terms such as Latinx and Latine, and we are committed to the use of inclusive language wherever possible.
- 13 “Jackson People’s Assemblies Overview” (Organizational document, Jackson, MS), 2.
- 14 Kali Akuno for the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and the New Afrikan People’s Organization, “[The Jackson-Kush Plan: The Struggle for Black Self-Determination and Economic Democracy](#)” (Organizational document, Jackson, MS), 4.
- 15 Akuno, “[Jackson-Kush Plan](#),” 8.
- 16 Akuno, “[Jackson-Kush Plan](#),” 9.
- 17 Seth Markle, Foluke Nunn, Emery Wright, Ruben Solis, Stephanie Guilloud, “Peoples Movement Assembly Organizing Handbook” (Organizational document, Atlanta, GA), 7.
- 18 “[Jackson People’s Assemblies Overview](#),” 3-4
- 19 Akuno, “[Jackson-Kush Plan](#),” 10.
- 20 Álvarez, Brenda. “School Suspensions Lead to Stark Losses in Instructional Time.” NEA, <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/school-suspensions-lead-stark-losses-instructional-time>.
- 21 “S2PP 101.” endzerotolerance. Accessed November 10, 2022. <https://www.endzerotolerance.org/general>.
- 22 Fabelo, Tony, et al. “Breaking Schools’ Rules.” CSG Justice Center, 23 Apr. 2020, <https://csjjusticecenter.org/publications/breaking-schools-rules/>.
- 23 \* Jim Freeman, Daniel Kim, and Zoe Rawson, “Black, Brown, and over-Policed in L.A. Schools - Fix School Discipline,” accessed October 26, 2022, <http://www.fixschooldiscipline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/5.Black-Brown-and-Over-Policed-in-LA-Schools.2013.pdf>.

- 24 Diana Hembree, "'Corporal Punishment Is Violence': Black Communities Vow to Ban School Paddling," MindSite News, May 4, 2022, <https://mindsitenews.org/2022/05/01/corporal-punishment-is-violence-black-communities-vow-to-ban-school-paddlings/>.
- 25 Warren, Mark R. *Willful Defiance: The Movement to Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline*. Oxford University Press, 2022, 16.
- 26 "Restorative and Transformative Justice Toolkit." Dignity in Schools. Accessed November 10, 2022. <https://dignityinschools.org/toolkits/rj-tj-resources/>.
- 27 Cohen, Richard Jaffee. *The Transformative Nature of Restorative Narrative Justice in Schools*. 2018, <http://restorativeschoolsproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/RCohenArticle.Revised5.pdf>.
- 28 "Paterson, New Jersey Population 2022." Paterson, New Jersey Population 2022 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs), 2022, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/paterson-nj-population>.
- 29 "Paterson Public School District - U.S. News Education." Paterson Public School District, <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/new-jersey/districts/paterson-public-school-district-111799>.
- 30 "Model School Code on Education and Dignity." Dignity in Schools. Accessed November 14, 2022. <https://dignityinschools.org/toolkits/model-code/>.
- 31 According to a report by the National Women's Law Center, women make up just under half of the workforce in the United States but represent nearly two-thirds of the workforce in the 40 lowest-paying jobs. Women of every race — especially Latinas, Native American women, and Black women—are overrepresented in low-paid jobs.
- 32 Jessica Shakesprere, Batia Katz, and Pamela Loprest, *Racial Equity and Job Quality: Causes Behind Racial Disparities and Possibilities to Address Them* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, September 2021).
- 33 The estimated [\\$50 billion](#) that employers steal annually from workers' wages is three-and-a-half times the average annual cost of all robberies, burglaries, larcenies and motor vehicle thefts. Yet we spend a paltry [\\$2 billion](#) a year on labor standards enforcement, compared to the [more than \\$100 billion and \\$80 billion](#), respectively, that we spend each year on police and corrections. State and local labor enforcement agencies, where they exist at all, operate on budgets that are a fraction of that. Nearly half the states have a budget under \$150,000 for labor enforcement or no budget at all.
- 34 See Janice Fine, *Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream*. (Economic Policy Institute / Cornell University Press, 2006).
- 35 Nik Theodore, Beth Gutelius, Ana Luz Gonzalez, *The Worker Center Ecosystem in California: Organizing to Transform Low-Wage Industries*, Labor Innovations for the 21st Century (LIFT), 2019, <https://theliftfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2019-CA-Worker-Center-Ecosystem-Theodore-Gutelius-Gonzalez.pdf>.
- 36 The second in the nation after Santa Fe and indexed at COLA, starting at \$8.50/hr. See *City Minimum Wage Laws: Recent Trends and Economic Evidence*, National Employment Law Project Fact Sheet, April 2016, <https://www.nelp.org/wp-content/uploads/City-Minimum-Wage-Laws-Recent-Trends-Economic-Evidence.pdf>.
- 37 Janice Fine & Gregory Lyon, "Segmentation and the Role of Labor Standards Enforcement in Immigration Reform", 5 J. ON MIGRATION & HUM. SEC. 431, 441 (2017).
- 38 For existing frameworks on community-government collaboration, see Sherry R. Arstein, *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, 1969; Elizabeth Rocha's *Ladder of Empowerment*, 1997; and Rosa Gonzalez and Facilitating Power's *The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership*, 2019.
- 39 Leah Obias and Emi Yoko-Young, *Energy Democracy: Honoring The Past And Investing In A New Energy Economy*, October 20, 2020, [https://www.raceforward.org/system/files/pdf/reports/RaceForward\\_Energy\\_Democracy\\_5.5.2021.pdf](https://www.raceforward.org/system/files/pdf/reports/RaceForward_Energy_Democracy_5.5.2021.pdf).
- 40 Hannah Hartig, "About six-in-ten Americans say abortion should be legal in all or most cases," Pew Research Center, June 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/06/13/about-six-in-ten-americans-say-abortion-should-be-legal-in-all-or-most-cases-2/>.
- 41 Rani Molla, "Polling is clear: Americans want gun control," Vox, June 1, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/23141651/gun-control-american-approval-polling>.
- 42 Rebecca Salzer and Jocelyn Kiley, "Majority of Americans continue to favor moving away from Electoral College," Pew Research Center, August 5, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/08/05/majority-of-americans-continue-to-favor-moving-away-from-electoral-college/>.

