

ALLIANCES FOR CHANGE: ORGANIZING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

In 2008, the Building Movement Project, Miami Workers Center, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste/Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United (PCUN), and Tenants and Workers United came together to discuss emerging organizing and alliance building practices in the U.S. The three organizing groups first kicked off their discussion the year prior at a gathering of the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation. All three are constituent-led, base-building organizations with track records of significant community wins, such as one to one replacement of public housing in Miami, state legislation for minimum wage increase and paid rest time for farmworkers in Oregon, and living wage legislation in Alexandria, Virginia. They also had all developed non-traditional aspects to their organizing work and were interested in learning from one another (and others), especially on how to integrate non-campaign activities. These activities, which range from service delivery to media ownership to voter engagement, aim to extend the reach of these organizations and promote power in low-income communities, especially communities of color. The Building Movement Project agreed to document these practices and to share organizational successes and challenges among a larger audience around the country.



Directors as well as member leaders and staff of the four groups, with support from a Kellogg Foundation grant, came together for several days in late February 2009 at PCUN in Woodburn, Oregon to learn PCUN's integrated approach to building community power. They were joined by representatives from Oregon's Rural Organizing Project and two other affiliated groups, the Social Justice Fund Northwest and the Funders Committee for Civic Participation. The visit was the first step in a cross-organizational learning process that will bring together additional organizations sharing urban/rural perspectives for forging new models of civic engagement adaptive to the cultural diversity, urgent challenges and political opportunities at the beginning of the 21st century.



LEARNING TOGETHER AT PCUN

The visit to PCUN centered on critical intergroup dialogue between the learning partners combined with multimedia informational presentations, hands-on tours at four housing sites, and participant observation at two mass membership gatherings organized by PCUN and its eight sister organizations. This

intensive and exhilarating exchange on the very grounds where PCUN's model has been formed brought out rich discussion and new questions relating to the lessons of PCUN's approach and its application to other groups.

Adding On or Spinning Off: Building the Base from the Ground Up.

PCUN's multi-faceted model reflects its self-identity as a movement. That movement was founded out of an immigration organizing and legal defense organization more than 30 years ago.

PCUN emerged in 1985 and developed into a 501(c)5 farmworker union with 5,000 members, who have contributed more than \$1.5 million in dues to the organization since its founding. At the same time, PCUN has spearheaded the development of eight other intimately connected and, for

the most part, independently governed sister organizations. These include unincorporated groups, 501(c)3s, a 501(c)4 and a PAC all located within the agricultural region of the Mid-Willamette Valley, Oregon south of Portland. Together, the sister organizations live out their movement principles of building and reinforcing a strong base through democratic practices, supporting collective leadership development, and examining the different roles needed within a comprehensive systemic change strategy.

Although several of PCUN's sister groups are housed in PCUN, union President Ramón Ramírez says that the intent is not to build up PCUN itself, but instead to foster new leadership, capacity, and power that goes beyond the limitations of one organization; in this way, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Independent organizations also provide expanded opportunity for direct constituent participation in organizational governance. Unlike the proliferation of unaligned nonprofits in many urban settings, these organizations have been built through collaboration and from the ground up within a model now referred to by PCUN as its "pyramid of power".

Conceptualizing Power through a Coherent Strategy

At the top of PCUN's strategy pyramid lies its primary institutional impact initiative and social change objective: To

win and institutionalize collective bargaining on a major scale in Oregon's \$5 billion agribusiness sector. PCUN anticipates that this systemic change will ultimately alter the balance of institutional control in the state through the realization of immigrant labor power. However, as seen in the pyramid diagram, the potential of this win rests on PCUN's base-building capacity connected to direct individual and family services, as well as to key victories in community organizing, such as comprehensive immigration reform.

During the visit to PCUN's service center which offers translation, referrals, and immigration legal services to union members, PCUN's services director, demonstrated how a sophisticated yet simple-to-use member database allows them to link services to membership. By meeting basic human needs and helping families remain together, PCUN provides an immediate incentive for membership, and builds trust.



Oftentimes services also remove inherent obstacles to campaign participants' involvement in organizing. For example, in the early 90s, when farmworkers who joined the union were threatened with eviction by growers, PCUN co-founded the Farmworker Housing Development Corporation – where affordable, green, and quality rental provided a safe space for workers and organizers and brought together an additional base of farmworkers unaffiliated with PCUN's existing membership. The housing developments institutionalize resident input in management through elected tenant associations and all residents can participate in educational services, leadership development and community organizing campaigns.

Organizing to Scale through Alliance Building.

PCUN's efforts reflect a regional alliance, building up to the scale of the political challenge of achieving state-wide legislative and institutional change. The scope of the work, including ownership of a low-power farmworker radio station, and electoral action by a Political Action Committee comprised of Latino voters, creates additional resources and power for sustaining momentum beyond incremental policy wins. Building to scale for PCUN also necessarily involves work with progressive allies such as the Rural Organizing Project who have a seat at the table in the state wide immigrant rights coalition, CAUSA. Another sister group, the Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality has galvanized parents in communities of color to hold schools accountable for disproportional disciplinary and drop-out rates among their children. During the site visit, participants had the opportunity to attend a CAUSA meeting which drew 450 community members. At the same time in a nearby school building, the S-K Coalition for Equality was a prime sponsor of a district-wide meeting on No Child Left Behind, drawing over 1,200 parents, primarily Latinos and African-Americans. Acting on a strong set of principles, PCUN also was a visible participant in fighting Oregon's anti-gay ballot initiatives.

NEXT STEPS

The site visit to PCUN created a space for dialogue on the roots of building movement, extracting best thinking, hardest questions, and the answers that no one knew were already there. Seeing the trip as just a beginning of their exchange, the groups came away with next steps to develop deeper ways to engage in this process, including:

- » **Creating More Opportunity for Dialogue around Lessons Learned.** The organizing groups who came together at PCUN will continue to discuss lessons learned and new organizing forms through site visits to other organizations. They will also invite additional organizing groups to join the learning process.
- » **Documenting New Models and Distributing a Full Length Report.** Building Movement Project is writing a report based on the PCUN visit, as well as interviews with ten other organizing



groups. This report will help serve as a learning tool to extend discussions with other organizations.

- » **Creating an Informational and Data Hub.** Through ongoing exchange, research and documentation, the learning partners will identify expertise among similar organizations and others who can add important additional resources around the changing practices of community organizing. Individual organizations each have their own documents, narratives, curricula, video documentaries, etc. that they can add to the data hub in order to deepen the understanding and mutual benefit garnered from the learning process.

These next steps will be guided by these additional questions relevant to different community organizing work, in different settings, and at different scales, including national and transnational work:

- » What is the timeframe for developing to scale, and can groups scale up initiatives over a compressed period?
- » Where is the funding for these activities and do organizations have the flexibility to grow and contract?
- » What are the specific challenges to building across race and ethnicity? In what ways do an array of service, community building, and electoral work contribute to Black/Brown alliance efforts, and what are the pitfalls that exacerbate divides?
- » When does it make strategic sense to focus on building one's own membership, versus moving a organizing agenda rooted in an analytical framework regardless of membership gains?
- » How will alliance building at the national level among rural organizers provide a vehicle for interfacing with other national scale urban-centric alliances, such as Right to the City?
- » What is the role of organizing work vis-à-vis the state especially for groups that engage in electoral work?
- » In what ways does alliance building at the national scale allow for a role for U.S. organizing to link with and learn from movements internationally?



To learn more about this learning initiative contact Frances Kunreuther at **Building Movement Project** at fkunreuther@buildingmovement.org. Or, visit the websites of the learning partners: **PCUN** www.pcun.org, **Miami Workers' Center** www.miamiworkerscenter.org, **Tenants and Workers United** www.tenantsandworkers.org, **Rural Organizing Project** www.rop.org, and the **Building Movement Project** www.buildingmovement.org. The Miami Workers' Center and Tenant and Workers United are also founding members of the **Right to the City Alliance** www.righttothecity.org, a grassroots alliance of community organizing groups across the U.S. working for urban justice.