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Organizing for solidarity? Strategies to deal with everyday racism in tenant and worker struggles

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Abstract

This article uses comparative research on the tenant and trade union movements in Germany to discuss how these organizations foster solidarity. We explore the challenges and opportunities these movements face in fostering cooperation across diverse communities and workforces, as well as how they deal with everyday discrimination or authoritarian ideologies. Despite the fact that organizing fosters self-empowerment and improves material conditions, organizers grapple with societal divisions, prominently marked by racism. We present findings from our qualitative, empirical research on six different organizing projects. By identifying two strategic clusters, "All or nothing" and "The road is the reward," derived from our empirical material, we illustrate the different strategies and their consequences for the organizations. In doing so, we offer a framework that can inform future organizing efforts seeking to strengthen relationships and address racism beyond formal political education.

Keywords: Migration, racism, solidarity, labor unions, tenant movements

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1 Introduction[1]

As social inequality increases alongside a political shift to the right in Germany, trade unions and social movements seek new strategic approaches. Since 2013, the radical right-wing party AfD (Alternative for Germany) has broken into the mainstream, dominating political discourse. These developments shape the conditions under which trade unions and social movements operate: they are confronted with a shrinking base and, at the same time, with the acceptance of discriminatory ideas among a significant part of their members (Dörre et al. 2018, 58). In light of this, many organizations have begun to rethink their strategic orientation. A key element of this shift lies in the activation and expansion of their social base.

In the mid-00s German trade unions rediscovered the concept of organizing, inspired by debates on union revitalization in the USA (paradigmatically: Voss and Sherman 2000). In trade union practice, organizing approaches have since found use in temporary projects, particularly collective bargaining rounds. Labor disputes in the public sector (hospitals, public transport, municipal services) attracted particular attention in recent years for their employment of organizing methods. With the housing crisis coming to a head in major cities, organizing has also been gaining ground in neighborhood and rent policy initiatives since around 2010. Against this backdrop, more attempts are being made to use organizing as a means of fostering solidarity between trade unions and social movements (Bescherer et al. 2023, 78). For too long, trade unions concentrated on their institutional power resources, causing industrial disputes to take on a ritualized form, carried out only by proxy between industry and union officials. Similarly, social movements have relied on campaigning and street protests, whose reach has not been able to surpass left-green social milieus. However, only addressing those who are of the same opinion and limiting contact to one's own constituency by merely maintaining membership lists does not bring about social change.

In some form or another, organizing always takes place when interests are to be collectively enforced. Individual actions require coordination, roles and tasks must be distributed and individuals integrated into larger structures capable of going into conflict. What sounds self-evident is by no means the case when examining trade union and social movement practice. In McAlevey's (2016) words, for far too long, the focus has been on advocacy and mobilization. Organizing, on the other hand, is structure-based. It aims at "mass participation by ordinary people" (McAlevey 2016, 12), many—or even most—of whom have no political affiliation with trade unions or social movements. But because their social position as wage workers or tenants involuntarily places them in a conflict of interest, they are crucial for changing structural power imbalances.

Unions and social movements are therefore switching their strategic outlook, focusing instead on building organizational power by means of organizing (Bescherer et al. 2023, 78). This approach encompasses activation of broader societal groups who share a common interest in respective conflicts. For the organization of wage workers or—in our case—tenants, previous experiences in political struggles, participants' political stance and their sociocultural backgrounds are initially irrelevant. What matters is their active participation in the implementation of their organizational interest. Therein lies the crux of the matter: Successful development of organizational power inevitably leads to great heterogeneity among those involved, as they reflect all of society and its divides. This represents both an opportunity and a challenge. Shared interest in improvement of work or housing situations does not exclude divisive points of view such as racism or other forms of discrimination.

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We will argue in this essay that the promise of organizing lies in its ability to build and strengthen a form of solidarity capable of invalidating everyday racism and other forms of discrimination. Although—or perhaps because —this is not the immediate goal of organizing, which is to raise wages or lower rents, organizing has antiracist potential. We argue that this is due to the particular form of solidarity that emerges in the organizing process. Solidarity does not simply appear from the start when people work together or live next door to each other. Rather, it should be understood as a practice in which differences are bridged through the formulation of common interests. It is therefore the solidarity with "others" in the pursuit of shared interests and the promise of structural change. As Stephan Lessenich (2023, 29) puts it, it is "cooperative, performative and transformative all in one."

We examine how organizers meet this challenge and how to design an organizing process that enables both strength in the face of conflict as well as methods to effectively combat and critique discriminatory attitudes amongst its participants and to deal with potential conflicts that arise from this topic.

This structure-based approach naturally causes organizers to be repeatedly confronted with racism and authoritarian populism among employees or tenants, many of whom welcome such a direct approach and are willing to use their collective power. However, they may sometimes present demands for improving their own living situation via patterns of devaluation and exclusion. This presents a challenge, but also an opportunity for the organizers – where else can the normalization of right-wing images of society be effectively countered, if not in everyday life, at the workplace and in the neighborhood? In this sense, their task lies in resolving claims of participation from their racist linkages.

We address these questions by first providing an outline of the U.S. literature on union and community organizing and how racism has been addressed in such movements to date (Section 2). After presenting our own research cases and method (Section 3.1), we briefly discuss how employees and tenants link their demands for better work and housing conditions with forms of exclusion and devaluation (Section 3.2). We then use our empirical material to tentatively construct two "strategy clusters" that span the field of practice in which community and union organizers operate in their attempts to foster solidarity while pushing back on everyday racism (Sections 3.3 and 3.4). While the literature review focuses primarily on measures such as inclusion and representation, we expand on these to explore ways of dealing with and confronting racism. The final section of the article (Section 4) summarizes our findings, referring to the initial question and the current state of research.

2 Literature Review: Fostering Antiracism, Diversity, and Solidarity in Community Organizing

Addressing racism is not a completely new challenge within community organizing (CO). Having gained importance in the United States in the wake of the social movements of the 1960s (civil rights movement, student movement, anti-war movement, welfare rights movement), newly founded CO initiatives soon began to critically reflect on social exclusion in their own practice. Who works as an organizer? Who is addressed by CO? How can unity and difference be mediated at the social base of an organization? In this section, we summarize contributions from research and activism that deal with these questions. The reviewed literature focuses on different and mutually intertwined mechanisms of domination (race, class, gender) and how to break down barriers that hamper access to CO initiatives and work as an organizer.

Based on his experiences with ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now!), Garry Delgado raised questions on the character of larger social movements: “should they be based on class (the unification of poor blacks and poor whites) or race (the unification of all blacks)?” (1986, 30). ACORN “opted to preserve class unity by developing an anticorporate political program that did not directly address salient issues of race and sex” (143). However, class unity can make people colorblind – all oppressed people are treated equally, despite the effects of institutional racism and white privilege. Such structural discrimination is “overlooked” with the best of intentions. At worst, a lack of confrontation with racism directly leads to its reproduction. One cautionary example of this is the Chicago CO initiative founded by Saul Alinsky, that resorted “to keep African-Americans out of its white working-class neighborhood” (Delgado 1994, 50). Appeals to class unity are insufficient for two reasons, according to organizer, trainer, and author Linda Stout. “First, many people come from backgrounds of poverty, racism, sexism, or other oppression where they have lost their voices or their power because they don’t fit societal norms. Second, without being aware of it, groups often base their work by default on a culture of middle-class white people – a culture we learn throughout our lives in school, in society, and in media” (Stout 2011, 15). Accordingly, in the mid-1980s, Delgado (1986) identified the “fundamental assumptions that (1) economic issues subsume issues of race and gender; (2) organizers must be trained in the dominant culture even to work in their own communities; and (3) the structure of the organization need not change in order to successfully bring in people of color” (197) as shortcomings of most CO groups in the United States. And a decade later, Stout (1996, 8) notes that “too often, social movements in this country are run by middle-class leaders (often white and male) who are not directly affected by the economic inequalities and other problems they are trying to solve.” As long as organizers in Black and poor communities are primarily white, male, and middle class, progressive CO has “failed to organize across class, race, and gender lines” (Stout 1996, 10).

In response to white male organizing, various countermeasures are proposed and discussed. They aim to improve community organizations’ accessibility for marginalized groups as well as their working methods, which are shaped by socially hegemonic perspectives. Accessibility and diversity require consideration of particular barriers and needs. Instead of just inviting everyone, building a neighborhood association depends on, for example, “sitting down with key leaders and helping them become invested from the beginning. Trust and community building has to start before the gathering even begins” (Stout 2011, 40). From this perspective, matters having nothing to do with the purpose of organization at first glance start to gain relevance – McAlevey (2016, 151) for instance names issues with migration law during efforts to organize a large slaughterhouse. To ensure inclusion, language is also an important starting point, in the sense of multilingualism and translation, but also due to its inherent “symbolic violence” (Pierre Bourdieu). Organizers should not “speak in ways that not only do not communicate to, but also disempower, low-income folks” (Stout 1996, 121). In other words, formulations must be based on everyday language and messages must be clearly understandable as communicative connection and trust are generally not the result of impressive arguments, but of storytelling. The interlocking of the “story of self” (personal motivation), the “story of us” (collective identity), and the “story of now” (context of the decision) is an important part of Organizing for Democratic Renewal, as Marshall Ganz (2024) most recently explained. Additionally, greater inclusivity measures in CO include changing the way meetings are organized. Nearby and easily accessible venues, considerate meeting times, and childcare offers can break down barriers. Eloquence and expert knowledge should not be prerequisites to participation. Rather, the focus lies on the meeting's specific purpose (Why am I here?), with goal-oriented decision-making and clearly delegated tasks.

For the internal organizational structures to reflect a neighborhood's diversity, divisions between paid, white, middle-class organizers and voluntary Black and poor Indigenous community leaders must be overcome. In Alinsky's CO tradition, the roles are kept separate due to organizers only taking on a supporting role, while the real power is seen as coming from the community. Despite criticisms of this division (for good reason), organizers' working conditions present their very own problem. "Low salaries prevent organizations from building diverse staff," according to Linda Stout (1996, 164). Organizers must be able to afford such low wages, which often limits organizer positions to white college kids from middle-class families supported by their parents. In the case of ACORN, "salary differentials and other incentives for minority recruits" (Delgado 1986, 196) were introduced as a solution to this problem.

For membership-based organizations in immigrant societies, inclusion and diversity are a functional necessity. As part of our own research is located in this field, we refer to a study on migration-related changes made within the German trade union ver.di (Unger et al. 2022). With its decidedly antifascist stance, ver.di emphasizes that all employees, regardless of their origin, are represented in asserting their interests vis-à-vis the employer. However, concerns over centering People of Color (PoC) have been raised, as it may undermine trade union solidarity (Albrecht and Karakayali 2022, 142). Overall, intercultural openness is currently "not a priority" (Baykara-Krumme et al. 2022, 21) in view of many diverse organizational policy requirements. A targeted recruitment strategy for migrant members does not yet exist and although so-called migration committees have their own structures within ver.di, their demand for migration quotas in all trade union committees was not implemented – unlike the women's quota. In organizing campaigns carried out by the trade union, the special requirements of migrants have been considered, i.e., through multilingual communication, the use of multipliers (who enjoy trust among the workforce based on shared origin), and low-threshold informational material about the German trade union system. Overall, however, a universalist approach still dominates, which can "conceal specific needs and reinforce structural barriers" (Karakayali and Kern 2022, 223).

An alternative to inclusion and expansion of participation opportunities in existing organizations is the independent approach of "organizing in communities of color" (Delgado 1994) or "multiracial organizing" (Wood 2002). In corresponding organizations, such as those under the umbrella of the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO), organizers, leaders, and members are less sharply divided by class, race, gender, and cultural background. To achieve this, organizational structures may be quota-based: For example, the Piedmont Peace Project (PPP) has set a requirement for two-thirds of its board members to be low-income, two-thirds to be PoC, and two-thirds to be women (Stout 1996, 51). In "minority-controlled organizations," the "dominant culture is kept at arm's length" in order to "foster the development of minority activists whose leadership might be suppressed if greater white involvement were present" (Wood 2002, 114). Practical tools for this include cultural events, such as shared meals or neighborhood gardening, which are "not oriented in any immediate way toward achieving political objectives" but have "important long-term political implications" (Wood 2002, 101). This approach is accompanied by a different understanding of effectiveness and temporality: "Multiculturalism is a hard row to hoe, and people are simply not used to taking the time to make sure that everyone has a common understanding of what the options are" (Delgado 1994, 54). Nevertheless, Wood (2002) diagnoses multiracial organizing as having limited reach, as the commonality generated primarily lies in cultural differentiation from the majority society and distance from its institutions.

The measures and (new) approaches mentioned aim to make CO more accessible to PoC. However, antiracist organizing is not exhausted by the diversity of membership and organizational structure. During crisis-driven societal developments, "scapegoating of immigrants" increases (Delgado 1994, 33), and the "fight for scarce municipal resources" (Dreier 2009, 25) intensifies. CO groups must acknowledge "the reality of increasing racial diversity" and seek "ways to build bridges across races and neighborhoods" (Dreier 2009, 25). This includes confronting everyday racism at the grassroots level of organization, as "unless we deal with the racism of the folks we're organizing, any victories we have along the way will be short-lived" (Stout 1996, 77). One aspect of this confrontation is political education, which provides background knowledge about the structural causes of job loss or neighborhood neglect and rejects blame being placed on "foreigners." Knowledge dissemination should be embedded in the organizing process so the participants can develop an interest in changing their attitudes – specifically because these attitudes conflict with the organization's goals and are thus self-damaging. Such collective learning processes can find practical expression in agreements referenced during meetings and visibly displayed in the room (Stout 2011, 54), or in the form of a credential, a ritualized and identity-forming introduction of the organization at the beginning of an event (Wood 2002, 37). Political education also applies to the organizers themselves. In addition to their employment conditions, their working conditions are also relevant for addressing racism and discrimination: training, mentoring, and supervision can prepare them for stressful situations as well as provide support structures.

The reviewed literature allows for classifying different, but not mutually exclusive, approaches to address racism within community organizing. Table 1 assigns a wide range of measures against issues every organization must cope with (problem areas). They concern access to the organization (actively lowering the hurdle to participation), organizational culture (cultural practices as connecting people from different backgrounds), work and employment (considering antiracism an aspect of the organizers' working conditions) and racism among members of the organization (antiracism as collective responsibility and commitment). Although the table correctly understands antiracism as an everyday, structural, and procedural challenge, the reviewed literature primarily focusses on considerations for better inclusion and representation of PoC. But does antiracism really boil down to inclusion? What exactly does confronting "racism of the folks we're organizing" look like? What else, besides political education, are an organizer's means to confront racism while simultaneously building strong relationships with community members? And how is structural racism problematized in this process? These questions guide our empirical analysis.

Problem area	**Measures**
Access to the organization	• Targeted outreach to PoC and other discriminated groups • Multilingualism and use of everyday language • Timing and locations compatible with daily life • Childcare to facilitate participation for single parents • Independent organizing in communities of color
Organizational culture	• Diverse core group instead of broad outreach

	• Quotas for committee appointments • Cultural events that strengthen organizational identity
Work & employment	• Living wages • Training on addressing racism and discrimination • Supervision and mentoring to enhance personal resilience
Racism among members	• Political education embedded in the organizing process • Agreements and credentials as antiracist commitments

Table 1: Approaches to addressing racism within community organizing

3 Empirical Findings

3.1 Research Cases and Methods

In the following, we make a tentative distinction between two perspectives that organizers adopt in their confrontation with casual right-wing tendencies.

Our analysis primarily focuses on the issue of racism, which is predominantly addressed under the term "antimigration" in the empirical findings, though it encompasses much more. While it would also be possible to concentrate on other topics like climate change or gender, we concluded that the dynamics most relevant to questions of solidarity can be most effectively discussed through the lens of racism. Findings are based on our empirical material, but the systematic analysis has not yet been completed. Our preliminary considerations are based on around 30 interviews and 30 observation protocols conducted in 2023 and 2024. To start with, we present the research cases and outline our research methods. Table 2 provides an overview of the five different cases that are distinguished by characteristic (but imaginary) denominations.

Case	City	Constituency	Type of organization	Organizers' status	Issue
TrashForce	A-City	Employees of a waste management company in the public service	Labor union	Paid union staff, paid external organizers, volunteers from the workforce	Union revitalization efforts seeking to strengthen worker participation
BillCheck	A-City	Tenants of a listed housing company with stocks throughout Europe	Tenants' initiative	One paid full-time organizer, mostly volunteers from the neighborhood and from social movements	Tenant organizing across multiple neighborhoods against displacement and disinvestment
Fix It Right!	A-City	Tenants of a listed housing company with stocks throughout Germany	Tenants' initiative	Two paid full-time organizers, volunteers from the neighborhood and from social movements	Tenant organizing across one neglected neighborhood against

					displacement and disinvestment
MoveTogether	B-City	Employees of two public transport companies	Labor union	Paid union staff, paid external organizers, volunteers from the workforce and social movements	Cooperation with the climate movement in demand of better working conditions
ModStop	C-City	Tenants of a municipal housing estate	Tenants' initiative	Volunteers only from the neighborhood and social movements, all active members live in the area	Tenant organizing due to disagreements over refurbishment and modernization levies

Table 2: Case Studies

Subjects of our research are organizing initiatives in two companies and three urban districts located in three major cities in East and West Germany. The first case (TrashForce) is set in a waste management company in A-City with several thousand employees. It is faced with intensive efforts at union renewal after entanglements between the union and the staff council. The case is also characterized by a pronounced understanding among the workers of unions as service providers, with union politics merely consisting of delegated participation by proxy ("the union is where you get pens," sarcastically described by one organizer), rather than workers seeing themselves as active participants in labor struggles. Both issues have been weakening workers' assertiveness in the company. Also based in A-City, where rents are rising rapidly and residents are being displaced, we are investigating two tenant initiatives organizing various neighborhoods, which are both supported by paid organizers from one project. Our focus lies on one initiative (BillCheck) which focuses on the portfolio of a listed housing company where high operating costs were the reason for collective action by the tenants, as well as another initiative (Fix It Right!) in a large housing estate with a high proportion of migrants, where a financialized housing group is profiting from disinvestment. The fourth case consists of two public transport companies in B-City, where the trade union is working with the climate movement to achieve better working conditions (MoveTogether). The fifth case is a tenants' initiative in C-City (ModStop), based in a municipal housing estate, where disagreements over refurbishment and modernization levies prompted tenants to organize.

To better understand the initiatives, it is important to consider that four of the cases involve paid full-time organizers. In the field of unions, there are two types of staff involved: permanently employed trade union secretaries and temporary employees who work as organizers supporting collective bargaining but are hired through an external company. In the field of neighborhoods, a few are paid full-time and are tasked with coordinating and organization building. The majority are voluntary organizers with years of knowledge and experience, who dedicate significant time and effort to the project without being paid. Notably, only the case in C-City has no paid resources at all and is based completely on voluntary work. It is also the only case in which organizers with an activist background also live in the housing stock they are organizing.

To answer the research question, we use a range of qualitative social research methods.[2] We conduct guided interviews with actors from the field, i.e., active tenants and employees, as well as experts. Experts include both full-time and volunteer organizers who play a particularly active role and contribute to developing organizing strategies. Methods of ethnography and activist research are also an important part of our research. In this way, we engage directly with the experiences of organized workers and tenants and try to understand the interpretative framework that shapes their understanding of precarious working and living conditions. In doing so, however, we do not claim to eliminate the separation of subject and object of research, as is the case in co-research (Choudry 2014).

Before looking in more detail at the antiracist strategies of the initiatives we have analyzed, we will first take a closer look at how division and discrimination manifest in the cases we have studied. Understanding these dynamics is essential to contextualize the strategies we will discuss later.

3.2 Division and Discrimination at the Workplace and in the Neighborhood

In the cases mentioned above, we find numerous examples of discriminatory divisions. Both tenant organizations we investigated, as well as the trade union structures, are confronted with racism, sexism, and social chauvinism. Racist stereotypes, in particular, are reproduced in ubiquitous divisions between old tenants and "new" tenants who have just moved in, as well as among employees when talking about people who have been with the company for a long time and those who have only recently joined. These group categories are homogenized and often linked to corresponding attributions about origin, culture, and religion, as well as associated with problems within society as a whole. This can be seen, for example, when older German tenants project current problems in the estate onto their newly arrived racialized neighbors or when local transport workers attribute the declining quality of service to the migrantization of the workforce.

Conflicts between old and new tenants and workers also occur between racialized communities themselves, for example, between migrants who have lived in Germany for a long time and recently arrived migrants, such as refugees. Despite the shared experience of racialization in Germany, these different groups are not automatically in solidarity with each other. Socially chauvinistic statements can be found, for example, among tenants who identify neighbors that are dependent on social benefits as the ones to blame for the neighborhood's decay. Since they do not have to pay for their apartment, they are assumed not to take care of the living environment. They are seen as having no interest in organizing, making any attempt to involve them a waste of time. Similar statements can also be found among trade union activists, for example, when employee Julius[3] from TrashForce assumes that "foreigners […] don't want to have anything to do with such an organization [the trade union]" and are characterized as unable to represent their interests. We also encounter manifestations of racism during our research visits in the field. At a tenants' meeting of Fix It Right!, for example, two older women talk quietly and disparagingly about the fact that hardly anyone in the neighborhood speaks German anymore. When discussing possible childcare during the meeting, they whisper that they don't even know how to deal with Arab children and imply that Arab children need a different educational treatment than German children.

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[2] The research methods followed guidelines for ethical research provided by the university's ethics committee (https://www.fsv.uni-jena.de/8960/ethikkommission) and by the German Sociological Association (https://soziologie.de/dgs/ethik/ethik-kodex).

[3] All names are pseudonyms.

In the tenant initiatives analyzed, the regular and fierce debate about alleged littering is particularly striking. Litter is interpreted as a symptom of general deterioration of the neighborhood. Tenants then project this problem onto racialized people or those dependent on welfare benefits. Rubbish often carries the function of a racist cipher: It is not even necessary to say who is (supposedly) responsible for the rubbish problem in the estate, rather, it is automatically associated with the foreign neighbors. Organizer Lasse from Fix It Right! reports from experience that "the person who says it just wants to signal that a certain group of tenants with a certain origin is causing the problem […] they then think, yes, I'm already being understood, they already know who it is."

As a white research team, it is difficult to understand or grasp the subtle nature of racism, and it took quite some time to build enough trust to hear about the authentic experiences of the people involved. For example, a migrant tenant from the same initiative describes how she immediately notices without looking that someone with racist attitudes has entered the room, because the way the person behaves towards her feels different. Within her initiative she describes the feeling of sometimes being excluded or prevented from carrying out certain tasks or joining certain working groups in the initiative.

Based on the findings collected so far, we can generally say that there is ample evidence for the existence of racist discrimination among the addressees of organizing. Some core players perceive and reflect upon the issue as a challenge. Other discriminatory hierarchies also repeatedly play a role and, particularly in the case of socially polarized topics, identitarian attributions are strongly linked to political attitudes, for example, age and habitus with interests in the climate conflict. Another dimension of the complex situation outlined here is that landlords and employers who are antagonistic towards the organizations often take a clear public stance in favor of social diversity. Tim, a union organizer from TrashForce, for example, criticizes this as an "identity policy-washed image" of the company. In our empirical material, assessments that primarily criticize the workplace reality deviating from the image conveyed to the outside world by the employer are mixed with opinions that generally assess equality and antidiscrimination efforts as unfair patronage policies.

In our research, we have identified two distinct approaches to addressing the given situation, derived from an empirical basis. The first approach can be labeled "All or nothing," since racism is excluded from the organizing process, either by resolute action or by simple ignorance. The second approach can be labeled "The road is the reward," because it actively addresses racism from the beginning of the organizing process, thereby risking restoring the boundaries between political camps it tried to overcome in the first place. These two paths do not correspond exactly to the distinctions between trade union and housing policy organizing—they appear in both areas. Sometimes organizations alternate between these approaches or hold internal negotiations to decide which strategy will dominate at a given time.

Every organizing project faces the challenge of addressing marginalization and discrimination without deepening conflicts or divisions while still maintaining unity against a common adversary. However, we can identify two distinct tendencies in navigating this contradiction, which will be explored further in the next section. For this reason, we refer to them as "strategy clusters" for dealing with discrimination and marginalization.

3.3 Strategy Cluster "All or nothing"

In order to preserve cohesion within the organized base, racist statements are either seldom addressed, or they are very decisively rejected and viewed as a red line. At first this seems to be part of different strategies, but the motivation behind both ways to deal with racism is to give as little space as possible to the topic to avoid conflict and division between the tenants or workers. For more obvious or direct racist aggression, it means immediately reacting by setting clear boundaries and even excluding people from the organization ("all"). For more hidden examples of racism this means ignoring them completely ("nothing"). Red lines are drawn, and consequences are imposed, but the red lines are in an area where criminally relevant statements and symbols are involved. Racism that emerges long before this remains accepted. Although they appear to be contradicting responses, both ways avoid addressing racism as a deeply seated aspect of the workplace and neighborhood's social fabric. The "All or nothing approach" tries to simply exclude racism from the collective struggle, rather than overcome it in a sustained multifaceted effort. This somewhat polarized mode takes place in the context of a strong campaigning approach to organizing. The framework is usually formed by a collective bargaining round or a time sensitive plan to win, which puts a lot of pressure on the effectiveness of the organization. Organizing can take place more or less schematically under these conditions. In practice, the focus lies on broadly addressing all those structurally affected.

Since injustices, e.g., due to the housing crisis, do not stop at borders of origin or political conviction, organizing is associated with the expectation of "overcoming one or two discriminatory approaches," as Johanna, a tenant activist, describes it. TrashForce-organizer Tim emphasizes that this effect is not so much the result of education but should be "part of practice": "When colleagues share experiences with their Turkish, Arab, Romanian colleagues during a strike, it's worth a thousand times more than if I say you're not allowed to say the n-word." Thomas, active in the same union, links building sustainable personal relationships among employees with the possibility of addressing racism in the first place: Only when "people come together under a common goal is there a bond. And when the divisive ideologies come up, you can take that bond and say: Hey, we're all in this together, we have to pull together."

The interviewees report that the direct approach practiced in organizing can create a new sense of belonging. For example, Johann, an active trade unionist in TrashForce, reports: "Well, you really saw how it was mixed by origin and age. Then the people of foreign origin sat there, because nobody bothered with them, and now it's all really nice, a colorfully mixed bunch. So, they sit with the older people, because now the groups are naturally mixed." The importance of social events is something that has been discussed for quite a long time in organizing literature, and our own observations contrast Johann's experience. The social events during the collective bargaining rounds are very culturally coded, e.g., they may involve alcohol and most of the time German bratwurst—the creation of more culturally diverse spaces does not seem to be in discussion. In TrashForce most of the workers adapt to the hegemonic culture and try to emphasize the common identity as "trashmen." In contrast, MoveTogether has a longer tradition of migrants in the organization and more strategies and practices that belong to the cluster "The road is the reward." Practically, this manifests when the "German coded" buffet from the union is naturally supplemented with Arabic finger food by volunteers from the workforce. According to Tim, working together in the trade union, for example, means that employees "always keep their mouths shut" on certain topics. They learn, says Thomas, that "racist dirty talk is not welcome right now."

Organizers recognize the limitations of such adaptation processes but also gratefully accept them to preserve a sense of unity towards company management or the housing group. This view is reinforced by a supportive understanding of their role, as Emma, who also works at TrashForce recognizes: "We don't want to open up this moment of division during the collective bargaining round. So that's what they decided, that's what we'll do afterwards." This support can lead to glorification of the "oppressed" and even to a "truce," a phrase introduced by organizer Tim. In order not to jeopardize the prospects of success during a bargaining round, conflict between different political positions is avoided.

Let us illustrate our interpretation with an example: Carina, a trade union activist with TrashForce, describes an incident where younger colleagues reported racist abuse to management. Carina rejects the racism but criticizes involving management: to preserve workforce cohesion, it would have been better to clarify the problem among colleagues. There is a strong focus on performance in the company, which supposedly stands in the way of discrimination. Origin, culture, gender, and sexual orientation don't play a role: "Work with us, and then there's not really any fuss about it" (Carina). What happens outside of work also remains outside, explains Johann from the same company: "That's the kind of thing where you say, okay, that's your opinion. Well, private is private." "All or nothing" organizing runs the risk of doubling down on these idealized notions of private and public and glossing over the racism embedded in the performance norm (El-Mafaalani 2021, 49) as well as structural disadvantages and general disenfranchisement (for example on the housing market). The idealization is expressed, for example, where the racist use of language is directly linked to the social situation: "And people, seriously, they have other worries. If you earn €1,500 net in A-City and you're a single mom, I'm not going to tell you not to say Z-Schnitzel,[4] who am I? That's just madness!" Would organizer Tim make an issue of such language used by higher earning colleagues? And is the close link between attitudes and social structure even plausible? Empirically, this does not seem to be the case: Even if the class divide is more pronounced in so-called internal-external conflicts, which generally revolve around migration issues, than in other areas of conflict, considerable overlaps can be seen across the entire spectrum of classes and opinion from left to right, particularly among workers (Mau et al. 2023, 294).

Critically, it can be noted that the "truce" is obviously not permanent and that the hopes for the solidarity-building effects of organizing will likely not materialize. In any case, he notes that there is "ubiquitous racism and sexism among colleagues" in the company. "As a result, I believe that a large proportion of colleagues who are affected by racism did not participate in the campaign." We also observe this in our field research: Those spaces that pursue such a policy of truce continue to be very homogeneous—namely white and male.

At the same time, these spaces are used by the union to communicate strong values of solidarity and cohesion in times of crisis. During our fieldwork, a terrorist attack on a strike demonstration took place in another city, but with workers from the same collective bargaining process. The racist appropriation of the incident was actively resisted by many union members from different branches involved in the strike. The union's success in unity is the starting point for arguments against racist divisions, and the experience of the strike builds self-confident speakers in the male-dominated field who stand up for left values. On the one hand, this actively creates a counter-publicity in the company that addresses authoritarian realities; on the other hand, it strengthens the interpretive sovereignty of certain activists over more marginalized perspectives.

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[4] "Z-Schnitzel" refers to a German dish whose name includes a racist slur aimed at Romani and Sinti people.

The strategies represented in this cluster are subject to certain conditions. These include the organizing history and the composition of the company or neighborhood: In a middle-class neighborhood with many tenants in creative professions, organizing is easier and solidarity with "others" is less challenged; if there are strong power and dependency relationships in the company, this leads to "people simply holding back on some issues and not discussing them, even though they actually know that the other person is taking a political position that they cannot accept" (Henry, active in TrashForce). An important boundary condition is resources for dealing with everyday racism: Even where the "All or nothing" organizers recognize the dilemma between breaking off relations with some and excluding others, there is simply not enough time for the desired discussion. The union organizers in the waste union neither ignore when racist remarks are made, nor do they break off the relationship, but rather: "That's what we do. We say: Hey, we'll stay here, but let's sit down together again in a quiet moment to discuss why what you're doing here isn't working." At the same time, Thomas concedes: "But you have to find the time to do so."

3.4 Strategy Cluster "The road is the reward"

The ModStop-initiative in C-City reflected that the aforementioned strategy did not have the desired effect regarding social divisions such as racism. Even though a process of adaptation had taken place and barely any racist comments were made in their presence, migrants were hardly part of the organization process. If they came to meetings at all, it was only for a short period. After several years of organizing experience, the initiative reflected on their work and decided to change their strategy. From now on they want to "invest more time to create practical solidarity." They are interested in a strategy that already counteracts lines of division more clearly on the way toward organizing, thus not only addressing a limited section of tenants.

Therefore, the second strategy cluster found in our empirical material can be labeled "The road is the reward." This means that lines of division such as racism and social chauvinism are addressed on an equal footing during the organizing process. Unlike in the "All or nothing" cluster, they are not subordinated to the primary goals of better working conditions or lower rents but are embedded along the way. This strategy seems particularly suitable for newly emerging structures. For example, the circles of active participants—especially at the beginning of an organization, which strongly influence further development—should already be designed in such a way that a neighborhood's various communities feel represented. Organizer Lasse reflects: "Other people then feel addressed, who perhaps […] come from a similar milieu or are from a similar background." This means having only certain people represented in your organization will reproduce the growth of the organization with more people from this group. He adds: "breaking that up […], once it's on a path like this or something, that's just more difficult than if you think about it right from the start." Moreover, antiracism seminars are integrated into the organizing process, allowing participants to discuss ways of dealing with racism and reflect on their own experiences of racism.

By representing different communities in the active group, it becomes easier to involve those communities in the organizing process in the long term. This is crucial for diverse neighborhoods to become more active and achieve joint recognition. On the other hand, different needs and interests of the communities can be considered. During our field research, we also observed the effect that diverse groups have on organizing practices and discrimination. In spaces with more diversity in terms of gender, origin, and language, this has a direct impact on the overall atmosphere. But we also observe how lived diversity is much more self-evident in spaces that are diverse in terms of origin – for example, when the Arabic colleague brings Arabic homemade pastries for lunch for everyone, or Turkish neighbors talk briefly in Turkish during the meeting to clarify a misunderstanding in a quicker way. It is not seen and noted as something strange or peculiar but is a natural part of the organization.

Similar to workplaces, there are also tenants with particularly dense networks who would be described as organic leaders in organizing terms. The concept of organic leaders stems from workplace organizing and describes people with a particularly important and respected position in the company who therefore need to be won over (McAlevey 2016, 34). Transferability of this concept to neighborhood organizing is only possible to a very limited extent. Nevertheless, tenants with a special social position can be found here. If they attract attention through racist statements, organizers have different strategies for dealing with them. For example, some popular tenants who have made discriminatory statements in the past are nevertheless accepted in the joint organization. They may then be able to filter their statements well and know where and when they are undesirable. On the other hand, some neighbors who are known for their racism are explicitly not offered the opportunity to organize. Organizer Lara, for example, describes how organizers are "not allowed to turn a blind eye" simply because "that person might be an organic leader." Initiatives of this cluster characterize their red lines by the fact that racist or other discriminatory attitudes are an integral part of the individuals' interpretation.

According to organizer Barbara from Fix It Right!, a red line is met if discriminatory statements are not just incidental, but if a person's interpretation is clearly and primarily racist, "when this is somehow totally central to them […] what they wanted to convey to us was that my non-German neighbors are to blame for the fact that it looks like this here." However, the initiative's preventative approach described here means that red lines are rarely crossed. Before setting up the core group, organizers contact important stakeholders. This allows them to obtain strategically relevant information about the neighborhood's social structures and relationships. These include neighborhood meetings, women's committees, and other community representatives. Chances are that such structures already work very well in providing direct support in everyday life and can therefore be of use for the joint fight against landlords.

But even if support structures have been in place for a long time, as is often the case with trade unions, there exists an opportunity for union representatives and active employees to attract colleagues with more than one monothematic focus. For example, one of the union secretaries from the public transport union in B-City (MoveTogether) mentioned the importance of addressing the exploitation of foreign workers in subcontractors not only morally, but because of the way myths and misinformation about these companies and drivers interfere with unions' collective goals. Many workers believe that subcontractors pay better and the migrants are favored, which leads to envy debates. The union secretary emphasizes that he also brings into play his own background from a guest worker family to address the bad working conditions and pressure for the workers at the subcontractor company. Moreover, the composition of existing activist structures is relevant for addressing other colleagues: If more women or migrant workers are part of activist structures, rather than only the white male norm of the workforce being represented, there is a much higher chance that corresponding parts of the workforce will also regard trade union organization as something that concerns them and represents their interests.

When discriminatory statements emerge in one-on-one conversations, organizers who can be classified in the strategy cluster "The road is the reward" try to contradict them without making tenants feel small or stupid. Here too, they follow the paradigm of opposing discrimination from the ground up.

The strategy of the "The road is the reward" cluster takes a much slower and more cautious approach than that of the "All or nothing" cluster. In turn, it faces the challenge of not getting lost along the way: Initiatives need to remain effective despite all odds, never losing sight of the goal of organizing. Otherwise, there is a risk that previously organized campaigners will lose interest again and leave the organization. Thus, constant consideration of social divisions and the need for a certain level of effectiveness constitute a field of tension which organizers must navigate. In addition, this strategy cluster's application does not automatically mean that activists become less racist, as the question of adaptation rather than change can also be raised here.

Table 3 and Table 4 summarize the empirical results by assigning distinctive practices to the strategic approaches. Some initiatives primarily use strategies from one cluster, while others change their strategy over time or temporarily. An example of how the focus of practice can change is the tenants against operating costs. Here, neighbors were approached and involved very cautiously, especially at the beginning of the organization; people with racist tendencies were not invited. During the intensive phase of a campaign, less attention was paid to this and the question of translation, for example, was also dropped more quickly at meetings. Thus, the tenants against operating costs alternated between practices from the strategy cluster "The road is the reward" and, during the intensification phase of a campaign, adopted elements from "All or nothing."

Practice	Cases	Explanation
Exclusion	TrashForce, BillCheck	Defining red lines (e.g., comments or symbols) and enforcing them by impending exclusion
Avoiding addressing subliminal racism during intense conflict	TrashForce, ModStop (before 2024)	Organizers do not address everyday racism, esp. during strike or other collective action
Culturally coded social events	Trash Force, BillCheck	Festivities, shared meals, etc., allow for cross-cultural encounter (however, they often stick to hegemonic cultural practice)
Creating an antiracist and antifascist public image	TrashForce, Fix It Right!, MoveTogether	Public statements, leaflets, etc., take a clear stance on racism and right-wing extremism
Keeping employees with dubious opinions away from the organizational core	TrashForce, Fix It Right!	Focusing on those of the constituency that are close to union values
Successful collective actions	TrashForce, Fix It Right!, BillCheck, ModStop (before 2024)	Rooted in the expected antiracist effect of a joint action
Avoiding language policies	TrashForce, ModStop (before 2024)	Benefit of the doubt: seeking for the reason behind harsh words; avoiding polarized discussions

Table 3: Strategy cluster "All or nothing"

Practice	Cases	Explanation
Building a diverse leadership team	Fix It Right!	Building the organizational structure with caution; ensuring diversity among its members
Consulting with local stakeholders first	Fix It Right!	Gathering information for a targeted approach
Collective counseling at the beginning of group meetings	ModStop (before 2024)	Addressing pestering issues allows for diverse and low-threshold participation
Antiracism training	Fix It Right!, BillCheck	Hosted in the neighborhood, the training addresses racism as an issue present in everyday life and even the organization
Translation as a routine feature of group meetings	Fix It Right!	Volunteer translation during every meeting common
Actively addressing racist divisions among the constituency and disproving prejudice	MoveTogether, Fix It Right!	A collective agreement on red lines ensures that they rarely get crossed; crossing a red line means revealing a deep-seated hostility than blabbing stereotypes
Language sensitivity	Fix It Right!	Counteracting subliminal racism to avoid deterrence of migrant neighbors

Table 4: Strategy cluster "The road is the reward"

4 Conclusion

In our article, we have shown that, in view of neoliberal transformation and the accompanying exacerbation of material distribution issues in Germany, a surge in trade union and tenancy struggles can be identified. These struggles are part of renewal processes that are turning away from delegated participation towards organizing. At the same time, the rise of authoritarian political movements makes these struggles even more urgent. The consolidation of right-wing power and the shrinking of democratic spaces build an environment in which solidarity needs to be actively created. But not only the experience of solidarity but also the experience of collective power should be seen as important knowledge from below for the struggles to come.

Through organizing, we argue, far-reaching solidarity can be established in addition to improving material conditions. Nevertheless, organizers are commonly faced with social divisions that present challenges. Racism is particularly prominent in our material. During the organizing process, organizers claim to counteract these divisions. To this end, we have identified two strategy clusters from the interview material, between which organizers alternate. The first cluster, "All or nothing," describes the consolidation of strategies aimed at a kind of "truce policy" that prioritizes the goal of collective bargaining or rent disputes. Relationship building is intended to create an opportunity to tackle lines of division after a dispute's peak phase. The "The road is the reward" cluster, on the other hand, describes strategies that take up lines of division from the very beginning of the organizing process, on an equal footing with disputes over working and housing conditions, thus possibly excluding some interested parties but offering others an opportunity to participate in the first place. This cluster, in turn, faces the challenge of not being able to work effectively enough and losing fellow campaigners along the way, as success might not be achievable when solely focusing on the path.

The approaches for dealing with racism presented in the literature review are also present in the empirical material. Despite not every measure is implemented in practice, there is no case in which obstacles connected to a societal shift to the right don't have to be overcome. Therefore, participants emphasize low-threshold access to their organizations, actively try to further diversity, organize cultural events, and map out rules of conduct or antiracism trainings. In one case (MoveTogether), participants also recounted migrant-only electoral lists for upcoming works council elections.

And yet, compared to experiences in the United States, tiptoeing around issues of discrimination still seems to play a larger role in German organizing contexts. Our empirical findings point towards strong tensions between unity and diversity, or to put it differently: between fighting power and sufficient critiques of racism and other forms of discrimination. Compatibility between the two seems possible only via trade-off. Additionally, exclusion as a means of combating discrimination after crossing certain red lines is rarely addressed in U.S. literature. This may be due to the strongly polarized landscape of opinion under Trump, which stands against the full spectrum of political opinion even in organizing campaigns.

Overall, in both clusters, organizers are aware of social divisions and seek to combat them. But they decide to deal differently with the contradiction between achieving success through unity and growing through conflict. While the organizers of the "All or nothing" cluster prioritize building a strong united workforce during strikes to empower workers and tenants as political subjects, the organizers around the "The road is the reward" cluster prioritize the relationships between the workers and tenants, so the solidarity and support system between them helps create success and also serves as a kind of security net in case of failures. Both strategies share the hope that experiences in the organizing process will lead to learning processes which change individual attitudes in the long term.

Reflecting on the significance of these organizing approaches, our research reveals that antiracist community organizing operates within fundamental tensions that cannot easily be resolved. The challenge lies not in choosing the "correct" strategy, but in navigating the inherent contradictions between building collective power and addressing discrimination. In the current political climate, where authoritarian movements capitalize on social divisions, organizing offers a crucial counter-practice: creating spaces where solidarity can be actively cultivated across difference, even when imperfectly. The organizing process itself becomes a site of political learning, where participants encounter alternative narratives to right-wing scapegoating by engaging directly with diverse colleagues and neighbours.

At the time of our research, we conclude that most of the progress we observe are forms of adaptation. While the "All or nothing" cluster tries to weaken right-wing tendencies through the presence of union-based or tenant-based narratives of solidarity, the "The road is the reward" cluster seeks to empower marginalized people to take on a more prominent role in the organizing processes. In view of ongoing precarity and flexibilization of labor, privatization, and displacement processes, as well as, last but not least, intensified political conditions, the need for transformative organizing strategies that build inclusive solidarity will only increase.

These findings open up several avenues for future research. First, more in-depth research could be conducted around the question of exclusion as a strategic tool: Under what conditions does drawing red lines strengthen rather than weaken collective power? Second, comparative research across different international contexts regarding community building in various organizations could illuminate how institutional frameworks and political cultures shape the possibilities and limitations of antiracist organizing, as well as what shared strategies can be derived from them. Third, longitudinal studies could examine whether and how organizing experiences translate into sustained shifts in political consciousness and racist attitudes among participants over time. Lastly, research should explore how organizing strategies might evolve in response to increasingly authoritarian political environments and right-wing hegemony, particularly as the spaces for democratic contestation continue to narrow. Questions about building resilience, using scarce resources wisely and negotiating conflicts under pressure, would deepen our understanding of organizing not merely as a tactical approach to workplace or housing struggles, but as a critical practice for building democratic structures in an age of rising authoritarianism.

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