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The Organizing Moment: Dispatches from Our Practitioner Network

Edited by Lara Rusch and Tobias Meier

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Introduction

The Community Organizing Journal is committed to elevating the voices of professional organizers, as insightful field practitioners and in collaboration with academics building practicable theory. In preparation for Issue 2, the Journal's editorial board reached out to its network of organizers to invite short statements on their current work. We asked that these reflections address the guiding questions for this issue, including how their work intersects with social movements, unions or electoral politics, their experiences of working in and against authoritarianism, and their efforts to defend or promote democracy. The following statements from four colleagues across three continents offer insights from diverse organizing networks and roles: an organizer turned local official in Hungary; a director of Faith in Action affiliates for Central America; an immigration organizer for the African diaspora in Detroit, and a lead organizer for Berlin, representing one of the largest German organizing networks.

These organizers elevate a democratic vision of humanity in their undaunted commitment to people — their neighbors, *compañeros*, and fellow travelers¹ — as both capable of community leadership and sharing responsibility for community well-being. While so many of us feel discouraged, uncertain, and fearful in the face of emboldened authoritarianism and rapidly shifting alliances, these authors illustrate the durability of democratic organizing: adapting local organization-building to unique contexts, rooted in peoples' lived realities. They agitate us to face political challenges pragmatically, to build power, and to continue the work together.

Community organizing and electoral politics – a case from Budapest

Tessza Udvarhelyi, Deputy Mayor of Józsefváros, Hungary

As the most diverse area of Budapest, the 8th district (Józsefváros) is a place of contradictions. It has some of the poorest and most segregated residential areas right next to upper middle-class neighborhoods. It is home to many Roma Hungarians along with immigrants from all over the world. Józsefváros has played a central role in labor union organizing, the Roma movement and housing justice movements. At the same time, voter turnout is significantly lower than in other parts of the city and the electorate is extremely polarized. For years, the district was a laboratory

¹ Inspired by *yoldaş*, a Turkish word meaning friend or "road companion."

for punitive, exclusionary and anti-poor policies, while today it is a pioneer of progressive politics based on social solidarity, sustainability and participation (2014; 2023).

Community organizing and grassroots activism have played a key role in the political transition of the district, while institutional approaches to community involvement contribute to its long-term transformation. After 14 years of rightwing rule, a coalition of liberal-leftist political parties, local civic organizations and social movements won the municipal elections in 2019 and then again in 2024. In both cases, our electoral campaigns were strongly rooted in the ethos and methodology of community organizing that stood in sharp contrast to the traditional clientelist politics of both the left and the right. Both campaigns were built on the work of hundreds of volunteers, empowered coordinators, relentless emphasis on direct outreach, and a participatory process of writing the mayoral program. In both cases, voter turnout grew significantly — a hallmark of improved democratic engagement.

Importantly, this approach did not end with our electoral victory but has since permeated how the local government works. With an office dedicated to both the development of democratic culture inside the municipality and the empowerment of grassroots organizations and activities, the relationship between the municipality and local residents is transforming day by day. Our work illustrates how democracy is created from both above and below. For this to work, those in power have to be open, responsive, and responsible, while local residents have to be organized and focused on getting what they need. We need both sides – those in official positions of power and those whose lives are affected by their decisions – to evolve together and the practices and principles of community organizing are essential sources of methodology and inspiration.

I often receive the question: how is all this possible in an authoritarian country like Hungary? My answer is threefold. Hungary is not a monolith socially or politically. There is another Hungary, which is less visible but still present. Local governments are in a good position to be the basis for building this Other Hungary. Local and regional municipalities were empowered after the collapse of state socialism in the late 1980s, and even though their powers, resources and competencies have been significantly curtailed by the current regime, they still enjoy a certain level of autonomy. Finally, in a local government deeply rooted in social activism and opposition to the authoritarian state as ours in Józsefváros, we make great efforts at using municipal autonomy at the fullest to implement an alternative vision of our city rooted in social justice.

References

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Reflection on Organizing and Democracy

Alberto Velázquez, Director of Comunidades de Fe Organizadas en Acción in Central America

What is organizing?

Organizing should not only be the spontaneous response to a personal or group problem; organizing is taking the right steps toward the appropriate response to a complicated or routine

situation, which could include anything from community safety concerns to a personal job search, in order to achieve a positive outcome. When we talk about community organizing, we mean collectively taking control of situations that are negatively affecting all of us. We organize to live more comfortably and securely, both personally and for our families and community.

Why organize?

For the leaders of Comunidades de Fe Organizadas en Acción (Communities of Faith Organized for Action) (COFOA), organizing is a call from our faith to fulfill the two main commandments: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord. You shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:29-30).

For COFOA leaders, organizing is a response to current injustices and social inequality. It responds to the problems currently experienced by families and the community at large. It is basically about bringing the Kingdom of God to earth.

It is a commitment of every person who professes faith and every person of good will who seeks a safer and more balanced world for their children and recognizes that we must all participate in the organizational work that allows us to transform the world, where violence and a lack of values are leading to chaos and disorder.

Why is organizing necessary for democracy?

In many of our countries, citizens only participate actively in elections and then allow their representatives to act freely without demanding accountability or responsibility towards their constituents. This current political situation allows for deficiencies in public policies and leaves us with poorly-administered health, education, housing, and transportation systems.

There is an urgent need for more active participation in society. Citizens must take a more active role in political life in their communities, cantons, villages, municipalities, departments, and countries.

Citizens can ask their representatives, mayors, and deputies for regular meetings to hold them accountable and to consult the people on decisions regarding laws, before being voted on in the legislature. They must act with the consent of those they represent. For this reason, it is important to establish regular plebiscites with mayors and deputies, through agreements between authorities and citizens.

COFOA leaders know that their representatives are their employees, that they have given them the responsibility to administer public assets. At this moment, it seems that they are the bosses and the people are their employees.

That is why it is vital to be organized for a healthy democracy. In many cases we are living under partisan dictatorships, where groups of people with a great ambition for power but little passion for serving the people are fighting to sit in power. They develop their own and their party's agendas, but not the national agenda that will lead to progress and development.

We invite you to join us in active citizenship, to organize your neighborhoods, your villages, cantons, municipalities, departments, and countries without partisan, religious, or group colors, but simply with the values of equality, justice, and respect for human dignity, so that together we may work for solidarity and the common good.

Organizing through Traumas Past and Present

Elouise Z. Sirleaf, Immigrant Rights and Community Organizer, Michigan United (USA)

My journey began in Liberia, where my mother was a local politician and my father worked in a government immigration office. They were both killed during the civil war when I was a teenager, and suddenly I was responsible for my younger siblings. Everything I saw during that time I can never unsee.

I began volunteering with Michigan United in 2018 and started working full-time as an organizer in 2020. In the early days I canvassed door-to-door for health care access in a conservative county in southeast Michigan. I discovered both that residents had a lot of myths about immigrants and how important it is to have patient conversations, even when facing derogatory language. That patience comes from my experience surviving war, displacement, and moving to the U.S. as a refugee. Every step of the way – finding a new home in Liberia after the war, seeking asylum here, and getting a green card – meant dealing with suspicion and stereotypes.

Now as an organizer within Michigan's African immigrant community, I've noticed a recurring challenge. Our community is organized but not very active politically. Even when planning actions for food access, people will ask, do I have to give my name? When I first started working in this space, I was frustrated. Why weren't people showing up to meetings? I realized I needed to reflect on my own experience. It took me a long time to get involved in social justice work because I had to heal from my own traumas. And I felt immense pressure to earn money, both to support myself and to send remittances back home.

Most of us came to Michigan in the 1990s, fleeing more than 20 civil wars across Africa.

Many refugees come believing deeply in the promise of American democracy, with hope for peace and safety. From afar, it looks so beautiful, almost heavenly. But when we settle in, the reality is more complicated. Some people never get past that "oops" moment when they realize the challenges here. Many of us find safety in enclaves, working hard and supporting each other. But it also means many aren't aware of what's happening: civil rights issues, local government decisions, or how to vote in elections.

In my community, our trauma as immigrants is twofold: enduring war and then being uprooted from our families and childhood homes. Some of us grew up with war as a constant companion; we learned how to run for safety when the shooting started. I remember how we would hear shooting in the distance and, if it wasn't too close, the women would keep cooking. Mental health is still a taboo topic, and I didn't see enough support for it in our organizations. One of my organizing goals is to embed mental health awareness and access to services within our immigrant groups. In 2023, I helped organize the first mental health meeting for African immigrant organizations, and we held a second in 2024.

I also spend a lot of time helping people navigate applying for citizenship; some people have held green cards for five, ten, or even twenty years, but are intimidated by the forms and the process. Many worry that applying is like taking a test they'll never pass; I can help with the paperwork or connect them with pro bono attorneys.

It's taken me about six years to build relationships within the immigrant African community. Now with everything going on politically, it's put me back six years. After the 2024 election our community receded into a shell and my priority became keeping us safe. Many of us have heard

the threatening language before — “We’re coming for you” — that has become common in the United States. Seeing it play out in real time reignited old traumas.

My drive for community engagement comes from the collapse of society I witnessed during Liberia’s civil war. That’s why I always warn people: You cannot take democracy for granted. If people don’t fulfill their civic duties they can lose everything.

With the present dehumanization and violent rhetoric directed at immigrants, and the escalations of military-style attacks on protesters and sympathizers, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to everyone standing on the side of democracy and justice.

Finally to my immigrant community, I feel the hurt, the degradation, the humiliation, and cry as every family is broken and separated. Please remain peaceful and vigilant by knowing your rights, having a plan for separation, and getting involved with organizations to build a network of support. We are IMMIGRANTS. We are HUMAN BEINGS, “and we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are, Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Power and Good Intentions

Sami Atris, Lead Organizer Berlin for Organizing Germany

The situation of civil society is changing in Germany, as established forms of engagement are no longer working. For decades, participation was mostly managed by associations and lobby groups that were structurally integrated in German policy making and were heard in decision making processes (there are even laws that certain civil society groups must be heard as “public interest bodies” / “Träger öffentlicher Belange”). And politicians were often an active part of this process, having an association-based background before getting elected or going back to advocacy after their electoral turn. This well-balanced system between associations and politics is nowadays only semi-functional, as people engage mostly outside of these formally recognized associations and look for other means to organize themselves.

This leads to a lot of talk within German living rooms and public spaces about the future of German democracy. But most of these discussions remain primarily technical: How could we find new members for the associations? Or how could digitalization be used to address the needs in a better way? Or could there be a social innovation to reconnect locally? But one point often missing in these discussions is a question of who is ready to build power in a new way and how will we find people to realize and execute this power.

The Trap of Moralism

“Power corrupts”—this phrase runs deep. So deep that many committed people reject power altogether. They want to educate, raise awareness, and shift the discourse. But take responsibility? Fight for a position? See a conflict through to the very end? No—because that would put them on the same level as “those people.”

This attitude is both comfortable and fatal. While some renounce power for moral reasons, others wield it all the more ruthlessly. Democracy does not thrive on the absence of power, but on its fair distribution. Those who reject power do not abstain from voting; they give their voice away. The excuses are many:

"I'm not a political professional."

"That's for people who know what they're doing."

"I don't want to offend anyone."

Behind all of this lies fear: the fear of making mistakes, of being criticized, of being unpopular. But democracy is not a popularity contest. It means organizing shared interests, confronting conflicts, and living with the consequences.

The Trap of Individualization

At the same time, a second poison has spread: the illusion of self-sufficiency. We live in an era in which people find their identity in digital communities, interest groups, and lifestyles. The physical place where one lives—the neighborhood, the district, the small town—becomes nothing more than a backdrop to one's personal life.

"What does the neighborhood have to do with me? I have enough problems of my own." This sentence, in a thousand variations, is the death blow to lived democracy. Because democracy does not begin in parliament; it begins right outside one's own front door. It begins where people take responsibility for their shared living space.

But this is happening less and less. The traffic-calmed street? "That's what authorities are for." The littered park? "I don't have kids anymore." The closure of the local post office? "I do everything online anyway." Everyone looks for an individual solution, not for a collective one. The result: empty town-hall meetings, failed initiatives, political desolation.

The Price of Restraint

The combination is toxic. People who do not want to take responsibility for their surroundings cannot develop power. People who reject power cannot shape their place. This creates a vacuum—and political vacuums rarely give rise to the forces we hope for.

Meanwhile, the same people complain about "politics," about "those at the top," about their own powerlessness. But powerlessness is not a force of nature. It is the result of inaction.

What Would Be Needed

Democracy needs people who are willing to be uncomfortable. Who seek conversation with the difficult neighbor instead of avoiding them. Who come together, organize majorities, and assert their interests—even in the face of resistance.

It requires the insight that power is not corrupt per se, but neutral. What matters is who exercises it and for what purpose. And it requires the willingness to see responsibility not as a burden, but as a privilege—the privilege of helping to shape one's own surroundings.

The place where we live is not negotiable. We cannot click it away like an unpleasant message. We share it with others—with all its challenges and opportunities. Democracy means shaping this space together, not leaving it to itself.

The key question is not whether we want to have power. The question is whom we leave it to if we do not engage in its distribution ourselves.