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Introduction to Issue 2: Community Organizing and Democratic Visions

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Abstract

This second issue of the Community Organizing Journal explores how community organizing elevates a democratic vision of humanity, amid growing challenges from authoritarianism and the concentration of wealth. This introduction categorizes author contributions into "organizing as politics" and "organizing within politics," reflecting the twin challenges of addressing both internal group dynamics and broader, systemic political contexts. The issue's articles investigate organizations employing different methodologies of organizing and explore topics such as leadership development, anti-racist strategies, and youth-led climate action. Reflections from experienced practitioners suggest new approaches to achieving democratic social change.

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Introduction

In Cologne's well-known Botanical Garden assembly hall, there was a buzzing atmosphere of people arriving and taking their seats for the founding of a new organization in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. It was 2015 and everyone was excited for this culmination of a two year trust-building process in the Northern districts of the city. People from Christian parishes, African diasporic groups, Muslim congregations and civic associations had been holding in one-on-ones, house meetings, and small public actions, and were now ready to present themselves as a new community organization "Stark! im Kölner Norden" (Strong! In the North of Cologne) to the public. Business leaders, politicians and religious leaders were also invited and came to react to this new approach to civic engagement and hear new ideas for better housing, for more gathering places for young people, and for more humane politics of migration. As the moderators, an African woman and two young men from Catholic and Muslim congregations, began, the room went silent and everyone was realizing their shared effort in bringing together a diverse, active civil body from and with local leadership.

The memory of this event persists in the minds of the people who attended that day. It was not only a rational realization of power and the possibility of changing something locally but also the emotional feeling of the power of an inclusive democracy and a strong "celebration of democracy," as another comparable action was named some years later.

But 2015 is already 10 years ago. Since then, the political context has changed dramatically. Right-wing populism has risen in many nations as a social movement and in party politics. In Germany, the old consensus of working together at the local level has been attacked by reactionary populists—spreading misinformation, shifting the narratives of societal consensus, and raising doubts on who is part of society who is not. Although there are strong mobilizations and "celebrations of democracy" (e.g. 1200 demonstrations against populist extremism in 2024 with more than 900,000 people on the streets in Germany) the fight for democracy gets tougher. In the United States, as we write, the political and social dimensions of the "polycrisis" described in Issue 1 is deepening. Basic civil liberties, previously taken for granted, are being flagrantly disclaimed by the current administration; peaceful protesters face bodily harm by immigration and border patrol agents. And tens of thousands of detained people, including children, are held in inhumane purgatories, awaiting deportation (Reichlin-Melnick 2026). Previous steps toward addressing the climate crisis and health inequality in the United States have been reversed or removed from the national policy agenda.

Just as compelling as the extent of antidemocratic action is the outpouring of stories: of neighborhood mutual aid, rapid response trainings, and creative community monitoring of federal agents. These forms of resistance and support reflect both the urgency of the moment and the sturdy civil resilience built over time by neighborhood block clubs, labor unions, child care centers, and other efforts of all stripes. Organizations have coordinated, drawing on each other's numbers and local knowledge to further strengthen their capacities to help the community through this crisis, calling to mind what Tattersall and Iveson (2025) describe as an "ecosystem" of overlapping approaches to democratic, urban change. State and local governments also are taking public stands against the assertion of unconstitutional federal power. In the United States, subnational governments retain substantial authority over matters of public welfare, policing, and the electoral system, and appear to be coordinating with nongovernmental entities in new ways for community

defense, perhaps leaning on trainings, restructuring, and relationships built in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests and the Covid-19 crisis. While the future is highly uncertain, frightening, and demoralizing, current dynamics suggest that organizations on the ground will have built new relationships and organizational muscle as a result of the current political crisis.

The failure of longstanding political institutions, as well as many corporate and even educational institutions, to prevent or respond effectively to authoritarian demands, is a grave reminder of what democracy requires. From a social action organizing perspective, the enactment and realization of democracy requires "spadework," coined by civil rights trailblazer Ella Baker. An organizing powerhouse who always prioritized elevating the capacities of the average person, Baker's influence on the U.S. civil rights movement cannot be overstated. She organized Black consumer cooperatives in New York, agitated NAACP chapters across the South as field secretary, managed the organization (and egos) of the Southern Christian Leadership conference, and initiated and coached into being the more radical Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (Ransby 2003). For Baker, spadework was the first and most important part of organizing; it meant being on the ground, developing relationships with local people, and in doing so, understanding political dynamics from the perspective of those most affected (Payne 1995).

The COJ values the voices of community organizers as practitioners in continual communication with community members growing into their democratic roles. Because of this ongoing connection and faithfulness to their communities, practitioner contributions are an important part of what makes the Journal unique. By incorporating their perspectives, in addition to and in collaboration with academics, we can better understand and communicate what spadework and strategy entails across different places and politics. Toward this end, we have solicited "dispatches" from several professional organizers working across three continents. These reports are the second part of the Opening section of the Journal, after the Introduction.

Overview of the Issue

This issue furthers the work of Issue 1, to grow and strengthen the community of scholars and practitioners committed to a shared, developmental, and liberating understanding of power. The editorial team posed this overarching question for Issue 2: In what ways does the field of community organizing elevate a democratic vision of humanity? The following questions guided the authors in developing articles to address the theme:

1. Is community organizing connecting effectively with other forms of political and civic engagement including social movements, labor organizing and unions, and electoral politics?
2. How does organizing defend and promote democracy?
3. In what ways does organizing challenge the growing concentration of wealth and power and the rise of antidemocratic, authoritarian movements?

We categorize the articles as falling within two broad approaches to the study of community organizing. First, the contributors document and analyze organizing as politics: the experiences and political dynamics within localized organizing efforts and the different methods and internal challenges facing organizers and community leaders. Second, the authors analyze the practice of organizing within politics (writ large), as a part of broader political contexts and processes. Both

types of inquiries raise questions of what counts as "real organizing" and how scholars conceptualize unique contributions of democratic organizing in different contexts.

In Spring 2023, twenty national community organizing networks collaborated on a whitepaper calling for an Organizing Revival as an "antidote to authoritarianism" (Arias 2026). The report outlines "factors that have undermined the focus on basebuilding and relational powerbuilding in community organizing and caused confusion for the philanthropic sector," such as over-reliance on digital and mobilization tactics and lack of shared strategies across networks. As stated above, one of the guiding questions for this issue is whether community organizing as a field effectively connects with other forms of political and civic engagement, including social movements, labor unions and electoral politics. The Organizing Revival report, and Calpotura's reflection essay later in this issue, suggest the answer is "no," or not yet. But true to form, they offer solutions rooted in cross-sector strategic planning that would enable allied organizations to respect their own local cultures and internal democratic practices. Capoltura offers a vision of a shared horizon and offers means of charting toward it through specific campaigns. The Organizing Revival framework, led by People's Action Executive Director Sulma Arias, proposes how local organizations and their networks can collaborate on fundamentals such as leverage, turnout, demands, and metrics of success (Jacob and Mumm 2023). The Revival toolkit uses a musical metaphor, where community organizations are producers at the mixing board of democracy, turning up the volume on those strategic aspects that work the best for their respective communities. These frameworks illuminate how democratic organizers can collaborate, analyze, and act in real time to address the twin challenges of internal and external politics.

Organizing as Politics

The first set of research papers consider the relational and iterative processes of organizing as politics, including the navigation of group dynamics within organizations, developmental learning practices, and tools, across what Lee Staples (2016) describes as different "arenas" of organizing, such as turf, issue, religion, and workplace. The following authors reflect on a variety of organizing methodologies, including neighborhood, tenant, labor, and the significance and challenges of leadership development within.

In the first paper, Aaron Schutz turns to an almost-forgotten model of neighborhood organizing and the work of Tom Gaudette in 1960s Chicago. He points to an alternative to institution-based community organizing that built on micro-local campaigns, semi-autonomous "civics," and organization-wide committees that formed the base for a broader organizing effort. With this structure, Northwest Community Organization sustained for years and became a key founding organization of the current national organizing group People's Action. He concludes: "Organizers today could learn much from this example. They should consider how this model might inform their own work in communities today, potentially adapting these ideas to new realities."

Research by Peter Bescherer and Kathleen Lopez compare organizing approaches in tenant and union organizing across three German cities, observing patterns in organizers' efforts to address racism among their ranks. Their timely effort directly addresses the challenges facing antiracist organizing work incorporating immigrant workers and neighbors, and the different ways in which professional organizers understand and respond to instances of racism among members. They observe that organizers adapt and develop different approaches to address member racism across

types of organizing. These strategies at different locations include a wide variety of options from avoidance, to selective membership and exclusion of problematic individuals, to group research, discussion, community consultation and training to directly address discrimination. They conclude, "The challenge lies not in choosing the "correct" strategy, but in navigating the inherent contradictions in building collective power and addressing discrimination," which requires members to reconsider their sense of identity in being part of a new and more inclusive collective. They explain, "The organizing process itself becomes a site of political learning."

Nooreen Fatima and Jy Josephson focus not on staff organizers but on the experience of leaders, which in organizing parlance refers to members who have dedicated themselves to training and action, and have taken responsibility to involve others. A core feature, perhaps "the" standout quality of organizing in contrast to other forms of political action, is its loyalty to ongoing leadership development, as the authors describe, "in which organizations develop "skills and capacities" of leaders… build relationships with other leaders and with public officials, and provide ways for leaders to shift their own self-understandings to make their work more effective." Fatima and Josephson's interviewees report that organizing practices affected the way leaders thought about power relations and increased their efficacy through working with others to challenge inequality and hold power holders accountable, as well as responding to people's needs inadequately addressed by governing institutions.

Organizing within Politics

The second set of articles fall under the category organizing within politics, here referring to *politics* as those systems, institutions, and narratives that democratic organizing seeks to influence, disrupt, and replace, but that exist beyond the scope of local organizing. Organizing within politics therefore refers to the variety of contexts in which organizing projects emerge and interact with other political organizations and efforts.

In his detailed case study of a community organizing project in Camden, New Jersey, Stephen Danley and Kathleen Lopez illustrate how the organization adapted community organizing techniques to function within a semi-closed local political system. Their efforts to pressure local corporations to increase and be accountable for local hiring included multiple strategies, including countering the semi-closed system, using the power of referendum, and emphasizing community voice. The successes and failures of those adaptations provide insight into the workings of semi-closed political systems, and how democratic action groups can learn from their efforts to organize within them.

Social action organizations use a wide variety of tactics to challenge policies and shift political narratives; legal action is one key tactic. Allison Guerette analyzes the federal court case *Juliana v. United States* (2015), which ultimately spanned 10 years, in which 21 young people sued the United States government for knowingly allowing and contributing to the harm caused by fossil fuels. She explores how young people might be understood as a conceptual and strategic "boundary object," or theoretical bridge, for organizing to tackle and thwart the climate crisis. Young people embody and, at times, act on behalf of future generations. Guerette's analysis proposes how organizers (including youth leaders) might leverage the representation of youth to "generate collaborative work, even in the absence of consensus, to protect young people and future generations from the looming climate crisis."

In the final article in this section, Sawyer Rogers examines the case of a New England Town Meeting in New Hampshire and analyzes resident discussion in this form of local participatory governance. The "open" town meeting is a unique deliberative form where citizens vote directly on local legislative policy. Through observant participation and video analysis, Roger identifies four themes from participant speech in this setting, including: the use of authority, discovery (information gathering), process (procedure) and emotion. The research suggests that participants' rhetoric may be associated with aggregative mobilizing or transformative organizing, within a participatory governance model.

Reflections: Democratic Visions and Horizons

Issue 2 concludes with reflections from practitioners that encourage us to look at longstanding organizing practices with new eyes. To demonstrate how organizing elevates a democratic vision of humanity, it is fitting to turn to organizers' use of theater for training. In the first reflection essay, Peter Szynka revisits the Melian Dialogue exercise commonly used in IAF-trainings. In its original form, participants "learn how to negotiate, to anticipate the viewpoints and reactions of the opponents, and to exercise power in a responsible way." When Syrian and Ukrainian refugees participated in a training in Paris in 2022, the author realized the scripts should be adapted to their experiences. As a result, Szynka and colleagues revised the dialogue to incorporate a second round of role-play that enables different outcomes. Melian dialogue 2.0 expands the play's dynamic to a longer timeframe and provides participants an alternative reading of its results.

In the concluding reflection, organizer Francis Calpotura tackles the persistent question of how to maintain the unique qualities of local organizing and achieve systemic social change. Rooted in his experience leading the Center for Third World Organizing and the Coruscant Center, Calpotura advises us to not get lost in debates between tangible wins and social movement idealism, or to inadvertently create a sense of hopelessness through "the culture of urgency and crisis that undergirds traditional community organizing" (Piñeros-Shields and Vincente-Angeles 2025, 6). Rather, he proposes a "horizon-focused" strategy to help practitioners map out and coordinate short term goals across campaigns and to build toward long term goals for a sustainable society. This inclusive approach "shifts the organizing calculus … to a governance agenda [that] demands the nurturing of an ecosystem of players." Finally, this concluding essay also reminds us of the joy and camaraderie of organizing. Calpotura's personal history, humor, and thrill in shared victories, convey the democratic organizer's fulfillment in solidarity.

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