

Practical Radicals Podcast Ep04 Base-Building in Community Organizing with Make the Road NY's José Lopez and Ángeles Solis

[Start "phrasal verbs" theme music]

Ángeles Solis

Amid this pandemic, we proved that paternalistic, Band-Aid solutions were unacceptable. And then we went on to secure the largest ever economic assistance package in the history of this country for excluded workers like undocumented workers.

EXCLUDED WORKS FUND AUDIO "This win is a win for all working people! We are here and we are essential and they will never exclude us again!"

José Lopez

And none of that, none of that would have been possible absent laying that ground game for so many years, building those relationships for so many years, creating space where people could lean on each other and laugh together and cry together and organize together and eat together for so many years.

Deepak Bhargava

Welcome to the Practical Radicals Podcast. I'm Deepak Bhargava.

Stephanie Luce

And I'm Stephanie Luce. Today on our show, how to build a base of supporters to win a victory few thought possible. José Lopez and Ángeles Solis from Make the Road New York will tell us how it's done.

[End "Phrasal Verbs" Theme Music]

In our last episode, we introduced the base-building model and talked about some of its strengths and weaknesses. I spoke with Greg Nammacher about how his union, SEIU Local 26, used base building to bring more members into the union and win real gains. On this episode, we're going to keep exploring the base-building model by looking at how community organizations use it.

Deepak Bhargava

So there's a lot that's similar and how community organizing groups do base building and how unions approach the work. But there's some big important differences too. Stephanie, what do you see as the key differences?

Stephanie Luce

Well, for one thing, unions have to follow a very restrictive set of labor laws, and it actually makes them one of the most highly regulated forms of organization in the United States. And while it's a strength that unions are democratic bodies, it's also a challenge because it means by law, they have to represent everyone in their bargaining unit, including people who don't even believe in unions. So community organizations are organized differently than unions. Deepak, can you talk a bit about what forms they usually take?

Deepak Bhargava

Yeah, so community organizations are usually non-profits, typically charities and social welfare groups, under the IRS code, 501c3 and 501c4 organizations, that are subject to some of their own limitations because of the source of their funding and their tax status. They can be funded by members or by donors or foundations, and funding from outside parties can create its own contradictions. Community organizing groups take many forms. We talked about the Student

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, in the last episode, which played a pivotal role in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Today's community organizations exist as neighborhood, city or state-wide groups with individual members who may share certain characteristics — like being low-income or working class or people of color. They might be tenants organizations or federations of churches, synagogues, and mosques. There is a wide variety in the forms these groups take, but all of them involve recruiting people into membership and then taking action on issues together.

Stephanie Luce

Yeah, so it's a wide variety of groups, but there are some common principles that tie them all together. Deepak can you go through some of those principles?

Deepak Bhargava

So I learned a lot from a key mentor, Arnie Graf, legendary organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation for decades. Arnie got his start in the civil rights movement with CORE. Arnie wrote a book called *Lessons Learned* that offers one of the best distillations of the key principles of community organizing that I've ever seen.

Stephanie:

So what's the first principle Arnie talks about?

[Start "wondering" underscore]

Deepak Bhargava

The first principle is the importance and centrality of power to achieve social change. Arnie quotes A. Philip Randolph, the founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, an underappreciated but crucial force in the black freedom struggle in the 20th century. Randolph famously said, quote, "at the banquet table of nature, there are no reserved seats. You get what you can take, and you keep what you can hold." Randolph argued that the key to power for underdogs is inevitably organization.

[End "wondering" underscore]

Stephanie Luce

It's a pretty unsentimental view of how change really happens.

Deepak Bhargava

Yeah, and it leads naturally into the second principle, which is self-interest.

[Start "Five-oh" underscore]

Arnie talks about how you can't get anywhere in social change unless you understand your own and others' self-interests. And just to be really clear about this, self interest isn't selfishness. Self-interest is what we want, which can mean our values and our deepest beliefs about how society should be organized and how we should treat each other. And self-interest isn't just about our economic interests, it's about our need as human beings for recognition, for meaning, too.

[End "Five-oh" Underscore]

Stephanie Luce

And that really resonates in the union world as well because a lot of worker struggles are not even just about wages and working conditions, but about dignity and respect.

[Start “blessings” underscore]

Deepak Bhargava

That's right. And the third principle Arnie discusses is relational power, people working together to discover their self-interests and what they share in common. Building relationships is critical to what we call solidarity power in the book, it's really the foundation of all base building. The fourth principle is the importance of distinguishing between a problem and an issue. A problem is a massive thing like economic inequality. An issue is something that is more specific and winnable, like a campaign to raise the minimum wage

[End “blessings” underscore]

Stephanie Luce

But should organizing groups really only work on things that are winnable right now? It seems quite narrow. And there's a real critique of unions and community organizations that are parochial working on small issues rather than trying to change the system itself.

Deepak Bhargava

So that's a fair critique. A lot of community organizations and unions are parochial. But I think it's important to remember that there are many traditions of organizing that emphasize the importance of working on issues that have deep roots, like white supremacy, and won't be solved in a year or by just one campaign. Ella Baker really embodies that tradition of organizing. She and others did spadework for decades developing local leaders in the South, which created the conditions for the movement upsurge that emerged in the 1960s. Many organizers today work on systemic, long-term issues and try to connect immediate fights to a deeper analysis of racial capitalism. But I still think it's important to be grounded in people's everyday experience and for organizations to work on issues that matter to them, not just on grandiose dreams of a better society. When progressives get disconnected from those everyday issues from the ground, we get in a lot of trouble.

Stephanie Luce

Yes, for sure. That's a huge problem in our movements. And that's a great segue to your interview with José Lopez and Ángeles Solís of Make the Road New York. That organization has been deeply grounded in the experience of its members and pushed for aspirational demands that seemed impossible at the time, finding the balance between a radical vision and practical change in the here and now. It's the very definition of a practical radical.

Deepak Bhargava

José Lopez is one of the three co-executive directors that make the Road New York, and Ángeles Solís is the lead organizer of Make the Road's workplace justice team.

[Fade up music to take us into interview]

Deepak Bhargava

Welcome to the show, José and Ángeles. We're really excited to have you on. This is one of my favorite stories, examples in the whole book. So I want to start by asking you, hardly anybody when they're growing up as a kid says, “I want to be a community organizer.” And not too many parents are thrilled when their kids end up doing it. I remember my parents saying something to the effect of, “Seriously, after all that money we put in, you're going to work for this raggedy community group called ACORN?” So it's kind of countercultural, and a lot of people don't understand it. So I just want to start off with some grounding. What is community organizing, or base building, as we call it in the book? And yeah, what does an organizer do every day? And José, let's start with you.

José Lopez

Sure. First of all, thanks, Deepak for allowing us the space to sit with you on the podcast. This is my first podcast, even though I've been in organizing for over 20 years. So it's exciting. Uh community organizing, you know, to me, and the most basic definition, organizing is really the act of bringing people together to take action toward significant and long-term change. In 2002, Marshall Ganz described organizing simply in saying that organizers identify, recruit and develop leadership, build community around leadership, and build power out of community. And so for me, there's that question about, like, how do you dissect those three things, identify and recruit, build community, and build power? All organizing to us here, and I really think in our movement is based on building relationships. And that really is about finding common ground. Personal relationships are the foundation for mobilizing members into collective action. We can't mobilize people effectively if we don't know what matters to them, if we don't know what, what motivates them. And it really is through those in-depth, face-to-face conversations, that we're building the trust of people that we are in contact with. We get to assess where people stand on issues. We identify people's passions. We understand self-interests. We understand what motivates people. We understand what inhibits people. We ask people why they think things are the way they are. And then we ask people what they think can and should be different. And in that conversation, right, after you're doing so much listening, asking questions and listening, listening, listening. I think a lot of us remember the 80 /20 rule, right? Like, talk 20% of the time, but really just listen for 80%, then you can move to agitation. And we've been trying to build up that skill of our staff in our shop to make sure that when we move to agitation, it's about how the problems that the community member named won't fix itself, how some people with power are very comfortable leaving things the way that they are, and how if we don't push those people, it could be that no one ever will. Right? And are we comfortable enough in status quo that we're willing to not at least try? And then that organizing conversation moves to goal setting? Right? That's, that's the kind of that's the exciting part that's still like, what are the solutions to the very specific problems that we name and that we want to pursue? At Make the Road, the birthplace of many of our campaigns start in those one-on-one conversations with members, and it gets tested in our weekly committee meetings. It's in our weekly committee meetings. And in those spaces, where the community determines if the issue that we name is widely and deeply felt, if it is easy to understand, and if it is worth doing something about? And where the answer is "Yes," that's where we move to build power out of community. So I'll stop I'll pass it over to analysts who may want to might want to get in on this. She's a seasoned one of our best organizers in house? And I'm sure has has a lot to share on this question.

Ángeles Solís

Thank you, José. José really spoke to a lot of, let's say, the mechanics of organizing. And I think right now, there's a lot of terms sometimes in philanthropy, academia, advocates themselves using new terms for what really are the fundamentals, right distributed leadership, or relational organizing. I once saw the whole moving from like agitation to action model called Innovation and emerging strategies, and those all have their own values. But at the end of the day, it's, it's like José said, organizing really is about moving people from fear or doubt, to action. For me, organizing is about listening. It's about being able to sit and live and the nuance of the messiness of community as well. Right? Not just the linear strategies of we move people from one-on-ones to meetings to action, but really being able to sit with ourselves. As a person in that space, can you move people from fear to action? Can you listen? Are you willing to ask the right questions? Are you willing to admit when you've gone wrong and confront others when they've gone wrong? So that we are not also replicating the dynamics that we are trying to shift in society? Organizing is knowing how to ask the right questions. I think that's taken for me at least a decade of of learning of successful failures of knowing how to measure people power, of knowing how to question our measurements, how we bring an analysis of race, class, and gender to the work at every level of our work, from our committee spaces, to the outreach in the streets, to the Halls of Albany, to Congress. And then making sure we don't just stay in theory, but live in action balancing both. Just to speak a little bit about the base organizers that make the road, they're meeting people every day, coming through our doors are in the streets, people who are facing deportation. People who are facing eviction, who are facing exploitative conditions in their in their daily lives at work, right in a city that every single day becomes more and more unaffordable and unlivable. So they're doing the hard work in organizing, of holding that urgency of of the material struggle and suffering that person's life, trying to bring them into an ideology and then to a shared space where they

don't feel alone. And then as José said, being able to define the problems to find the real target, who is responsible, and then move towards action. And I just to add on, I think part of the of our challenge as major organizations in the movement is learning how to not stay in the same cycles of issue-based campaigns, but really long-term strategy and ideology for building power at scale. So no matter the fight, community members know and have an internalized truth that there is power and organization and not just organizing for issue-based campaigns but for a real working class movement.

Deepak Bhargava

Fantastic. So I really see Make the road as on the cutting edge of community organizing in the country. And José, I'd love you to just tell our listeners a bit more about Make the Road, what it is, its scale, its scope, the range of issues that the organization tackles.

José Lopez

Yeah, absolutely. So make the road was founded in 1997. In the rectory of St. Barbara's church here in Bushwick, Brooklyn, the mission of the organization is to build the power of immigrant and working-class communities to achieve dignity and, and justice. And really, our model is advancing core strategies for concrete change at the same time. One of the core pillars is our legal and survival services work. And that really is work to tackle discrimination, abuse, and poverty. Another core pillar is transformative education, to develop our members and our leaders, and their ability to lead not just in house organizationally, but in their homes, on their blocks in their barrios. The third pillar is community organizing, to transform the systems and power structures impacting our neighborhoods, and four is policy innovation, right, really thinking about how we can rewrite unjust rules and make government and democracy accountable to all of us. The organizing that we do focuses on the intersecting challenges that working-class and immigrant New Yorkers face every single day. overcrowded and under-resourced schools, an economic system that drains resources, health, and good jobs from our neighborhoods, housing market, where real estate only sees our homes as ATMs, over-policing of young people, and trans bodies, in our schools and on our streets. And front and center for us, given the people and the demographic of people that we're organizing is the constant fear of deportation, and family separation. So where do all those things intersect? And how can we make sure that our model, whether it's through legal through education, through organizing, or through policy, can identify solutions and really tackle some of the underpinnings that create the conditions by which we live by our reach in New York extends throughout New York City's five boroughs. We have offices in Brooklyn, in Jackson Heights, Queens, and in Port Richmond, Staten Island. But we also extend into Nassau and Suffolk County and Long Island. And we extend into Westchester County as well. Statewide, we represent over 27,000 members. And these are folks who have joined us because they believe as we do that, together, we can catalyze action and, and win meaningful victories for our gente. And so that's that's where we are in a nutshell.

Deepak Bhargava

So I'd love to hear from each of you what your own path into movement and to make the road has been, and Ángeles, why don't we start out with you?

Ángeles Solis

Sure thing. So I grew up in a farmworker community in eastern Washington, and not too far from one of the largest nuclear energy plants in the planet, Hanford, Washington. And I grew up the daughter of a construction worker of a migrant nurse, and in a union household, and in eastern Washington, where major agricultural corporations and federal contractors at Hanford literally dictate the conditions in which your neighbors live and dictates of majority of employment in a community. You learn real quick, who's the boss, and you also learn real quick the power of organized community. So at 12 years old, I was on the picket line with my dad. He was a union steward. He helped me to walk out and he was a very active member in his union and I got to see there that in the union hall and on the picket line that being in a in a union is not just a matter of politics or better benefits, it's literally a matter of life and death, especially in very dangerous industries. So I was exposed to the power of organizing at a very young age and think that

forever altered the way that I see the world. I went on to join United Students Against Sweatshops in college, and that's where I was introduced to strategy, of the ability to hold hostage economic leverage at a university and how it can shift market power and bring brands like Nike to their knees, right? So it wasn't just that we're gonna get together and we're gonna fight or we're gonna protest. It's what is our strategy? How do we shift power? How do we build numbers to take on the biggest corporation in the world and solidarity with garment worker unions. Went on to SEIU foundation organizing and landed at make the road because this community organization that primarily was composed of immigrant workers wanted to take on Amazon, and my first few weeks at make the road before I even knew how to do a timesheet Amazon HQ 2 came down to Queens and wanted to colonize queens in the same way I'd seen them do it in Seattle, not too far from where I grew up. And this community organization said, "no, absolutely no, no negotiations, no concessions." Cuomo had already signed a deal behind closed doors. And I saw how community members stood up and said, "No, no to criminalization no to increased surveillance, no to tax breaks, no to helicopters for Jeff Bezos no to gentrification." And this barrio beat back a billionaire. That was my first campaign up Make the Road New York and it showed our power that even even the most underestimated communities in this country can take on the world's elite and win when there's enough political will, when there is enough people power and relentless organizing.

Deepak Bhargava

What an incredibly powerful story. Thank you for sharing it and José, what's your path into movement to make the road

José Lopez

So I think you probably know my story. Well, Deepak. My introduction to movement is make the road I first walked into these doors as a 13-year-old high school student that summer struggling to find summer youth employment. On the inside of these four walls, I met a young woman and founding director by the name of Una Chatterjee. And Una happens to know a thing or two about organizing. And she agitated me by asking, how could it be that there is no money to fund summer youth employment but the then-mayor had a budget allocation of \$64.6 million to expand to youth detention centers that were not even at full capacity. That simple question agitated me and it and it agitated dozens of young people in Bushwick, and hundreds of young people city-wide. And so we formed the No More Youth Jails campaign, a coalition of students and allies dedicated to pushing the city to divest from youth jails, and invest in youth jobs. By the way, we won. We moved 53 million of the \$64.6 million out of the expansion of Crossroads and Horizons youth detention centers. And for me, that effort, and that victory at just at that time, 14 years of age, solidified that community organizing is the thing I wanted to do for the rest of my life. 23 years later, and I'm still here.

Deepak Bhargava

There's such poetry in seeing your own journey from being a youth member activist participating in your first campaign to being co-executive director of Make the Road New York. It's just amazing. Um, so let's talk a little bit about the role of members in the life of of Make the Road and what's their role, José?

José Lopez

By definition, a member agrees with the vision and values that make the Road New York, the basic idea that we all deserve neighborhoods where we have the freedom to stay and the freedom to thrive, stay in safe, affordable, and dignified homes and, and thrive with good paying jobs with great public schools. And a strong social safety net that is available to all. An active member is engaged and joins two activities per month. And those activities can include attendance at committee meetings, they can include participation in demonstration and action. But activities could also include joining a phone bank or a text bank, or even cooking a meal to help feed other members and allies inside of our weekly meetings. And so that's the kind of difference between how we define member versus active member. And then we have what we call member leaders. And a leader serves on their issue committee's leadership team. And so beyond joining activities, a leader has a vested interest in seeing the organization, grow in size and empower. Leaders identify new people who are going to join the organization. A leader is accountable and checks in with the members of their

committee. A leader has their ear to the ground, and really takes the time to ask others what they need. A leader is a motivator in their committee, they help organizers turn anger into action. And they really remind the membership, the broader base, that all of us have a role in creating our own future. Organizationally, we do our best, we really strive to invest deeply in our member-leaders, so that when the opportunity comes to fill, say, a staff position, whether that's an organizer position, or an advocate position, we work hard to try and fill those roles from within our base. I think that in our work, I think one mistake we maybe make too often is kind of conflating leadership with the loudest person in the room, or the loudest person in the group. And in fact, we believe it's the opposite, right? Like our best leaders are those who listened patiently, are those who respond with questions, and are those who remind all of us to speak with one voice? Ángeles and our team of leads have been spending a lot of the last few weeks really thinking about effective distributive leadership models. And so I don't know if you want to add anything here Ángeles, but I'll pass the mic.

Ángeles Solis

I'll quickly say that those closest to the problem, know what they need, know what they need, and that's part of designing that solution together. It's a real honor and it is quite rare for many community-building organizations across for the country to have the ability to work so closely with policy designers and movement lawyers to take on a case in our backyard or at our state and say, "Okay, how can we write a policy that meets the needs of our, our membership and of our community?" In the same house, that's often that's, that's a big privilege, and has led to some really beautiful work at make the road. So I'll say that's something that we have uniquely been able to do over the last few years and member-leaders are very actively engaged in our policymaking in and then how we carry it out. Meaning to add,

Deepak Bhargava

Love that. So Ángeles, let's transport ourselves back in time, to the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was super hard here in New York City. And many of us New Yorkers remember the eerie silence streets, hearing the sirens. I would love for you to share with us what was happening for Make the Road New York members and immigrant communities in New York City at that time.

Ángeles Solis

March of 2020. And a few days before the shutdown and the stay-at-home orders. This very vivid memory of waking up at 6am and riding my bike to the Grove office and putting up handwritten signs that I had made in my kitchen that said OSHA classes are canceled today. I remember we had made this decision as other organizations had started to sort of take account, hey, maybe we should start moving our folks remotely. We were one of the last organizations to do so just because our members rely on our offices, sometimes for meals, childcare, we have critical services that are needed to be done in person. And there hadn't been a formal declaration from the state. Right? There was pushback, we had OSHA classes that day was one of the last ones before our members that also rely on their cards in order to get employment meet.. So I think José was with us on those calls, called a lot of people that night. And folks were confused and frustrated. "Oh, let's just have this class. It's okay. It'll be nothing." No, no, we're gonna cancel it. And we're gonna stay safe for now until we know more. We were so in the dark, literally about what was going to happen and, and then the call started coming in that the first step positive cases had been in our office and our community members. I share this often, but I think it was for six weeks now José, first six weeks or so, we lost 90 members of our organization, folks that we had shared birthdays with folks, we had gone to Albany with, people that I have memories of, you know, speaking outside of really powerful press conferences and outside of detention centers. We had to say goodbye to. And as we all know, COVID pulled back the covers on on broken systems and exacerbated what was already there: no access to health care and limited, limited access to resources, living in food deserts, fear of going to authorities, our community members are often denied sick pay labor protections and more. But that was just exacerbated under COVID. And then the second disaster to really hit our community was unemployment, mass unemployment. And that's when we started putting the numbers together, one in four of our members could not pay rent, one in four of our members could not pay put food on the table. Almost the majority of our membership was excluded from unemployment insurance. So stay at home was not an option. You have one option, you go out and find work where there is none or you take a life . . . you take work that puts your life at risk, especially where you are

denied often the protections that you need, PPE and those things that I mentioned. And that think at the same time and this is important to mention. The same time that our people were dying. Billionaires and multimillionaires were cashing in on the pandemic, where our social safety net and our public hospitals were starved for resources. The elite were hoarding massive amounts of wealth. And this is happening at the same time that thousands of people are struggling to put food on the table, provide for themselves or their family. We saw the divisions of have wealth and who has access to what life-critical resources very clearly display.

Deepak Bhargava

It's such a powerful story and immigrant New York was hit so hard by the pandemic. And we're so so much of the essential workers that the city and communities relied on day to day for food for care for, for really essential work. One of the best campaigns that I have ever seen in 30 years of organizing was the campaign to win the Excluded Worker Fund, which is really a path-breaking policy that provided \$15,000 on average, to undocumented immigrant workers who were excluded from federal assistance. And as somebody who's worked on income support policy, for, you know, my whole career, it's really no exaggeration to say that nothing like this had ever been done before in the United States. It made history in US Social Policy. And I guess I want to start by asking you, Ángeles, how did you come up with such a bold demand?

Ángeles Solis

As I said before, the people closest to the problem know what they need. Community building mutual aid, creative ingenuity has always been at the heart of immigrant cultures of our values of our resilience of our survival. And amid this pandemic, we proved that paternalistic Band Aid solutions were unacceptable. And then we went on to secure the largest ever economic assistance package in the history of this country for excluded workers like undocumented workers. And in that fight, we centered the leadership and the experiences of of undocumented workers fighting for that transformative change. So to answer your question about how we came up to that demand, the conditions were right, and I can speak to those conditions later on, and how we were able to navigate the right components to pull this one across the finish line. Stimulus checks, unemployment insurance, gift cards, from foundations to some community organizations in the city, all in the range of \$300, to \$1,000. And it became very clear what someone is trying to figure out how to just get a bag of beans and rice and toilet paper, there's already barely on the racks at the grocery shelf, who has the money to get that or not, right and \$1,000, all of a sudden becomes a lot of money when you have no income coming in, and rent is still due. And that was a very clear agitator, right, who was getting UI and who is not. So we went for parity, we went for parity we did not go for we need some a relief fund, or we need some, you know, economic support for our communities. And whatever the state can dish together, we came out with a bold demand that said, those that pay into the social safety net, those that pay into unemployment insurance, should at the very least have returned to them, what they have earned, and even those that cannot prove that they pay, or even those that do not pay should still have access to life-saving support in order to make it through this pandemic. A lot of folks don't know this. But unemployment insurance actually came out of the Great Depression, one of the worst crises in our country. And it was because it showed that at the end of the day, what we need in order to keep our economy afloat is people's ability to to pay into the economy. And they cannot do that they do not have the resources to do so. So we did the numbers, we did the math, we sat down and we said, we're going to demand unemployment insurance for excluded workers who, at that time, and still to this day continue to be undocumented workers, cash economy, workers, and people leaving incarceration. So we put the policy together, it was a over \$4 billion ask. And we were very strategic and said, we're also going to tie it to a billionaires tax. We're going to tie it to a tax that is going to bring in so much money for the state. And we're just going to ask for a smaller piece of that pie. Because we already know we're underestimated. Because we already know that when everything is in crisis, the last when nurses and firefighters and frontline responders don't even have the resources of what they need. How are we going to how are we going to make sure that the state also takes care of the people that patient pick up trash in the parks to survive? So we had to make sure that we also were bringing a solution to the hardest question which is how you're gonna pay for it. And then we're going to start tackling all of the racist and xenophobic and, and all the sorts of other barriers that we're going to make it hard to push this across the finish line, but I can speak to that as well. That's how we came up with the debate.

Deepak Bhargava

Beautiful and such it speaks so powerfully to the importance of being rooted in people's everyday experiences in their suffering in their pain, and not starting with just what's realistic or what will the governor give you out of the goodness of his heart. So tell us about how how was this campaign won? What were some of the pivotal moments that you remember? How did community members just participate in and lead the campaign just kind of bring this to life for us?

Ángeles Solís

If it's okay for me to quote Lenin, I have seen this around. But it really speaks to the story that we're still continuing to tell three years later, right. He said "there are decades where nothing happens. And there are weeks where decades happen." And that was very indicative of what happened in those six to 12 weeks of that weird legislative session and 2020. When legislators got to say, well, I'll get to work and stay at home. But the people that they represent, were out there pushing elevator doors to deliver food, cleaning up in the streets, picking the food that everyone was, you know, needing to survive, domestic workers are taking care of people's children so that they can work from zoom, again, the class divide was more visible and at the same time, more invisible than other than ever because people could stay at home. And in the meantime, we were seeing our people struggling to survive in the streets. So I'll get to the components of what it took to win the Fund Excluded Workers campaign in 2020. But I will say having organized for almost a decade now, one of the biggest challenges for organizers that has always persisted is not just being able to name the obvious factors that break apart movements before they even begin union-busting firms, deregulation, divide and conquer tactics, increased surveillance in the workplace, etc. One of the hardest fights for an organizer and for community members amongst themselves, is undoing the deeply conditioned and internalized beliefs that they are, they have to earn their value that they have to earn basic protections. Most governments outside of the US agree that basic protections are not privileges. So we had to start with with tackling that. And we did that in pantry lines. We started in pantry lines. When thousands of people and hundreds of folks are lined up around the block and Queens and Brooklyn, the Bronx, we went to pendulums. And as folks were waiting in line, the perfect organizing moment. "How do you feel that you've been in this country for 10, 15 years, that you've worked tirelessly, that you've paid your taxes, and you see that the multimillionaires are gaining all these tax breaks and making billions a day and you're here, figuring out how you're going to keep your home." It was a perfect agitating opportunity, they had nowhere to go. So they had to listen to us. But that's how we got folks agitated, you know what I did think, you know, because this country treats me as a second-class citizen that I don't deserve UI, or you know, I don't have my status, green card. Uh uh, you've paid into it. All those little numbers at the bottom of your check, or even if you're working cash, you still contribute. And this is still your home. So you should be able to survive and not be in this position. So it was a perfect agitating moment to be able to build on on the politicization of of our folks. So number one, we politicized our people. And we put the onus of responsibility on the state. How do we do that? With number two, our narrative, the conditions were right, for a narrative that broke through again, we can have the same campaign message for 10 years. And then the moment comes along when it finally reounds. That was "essential and excluded." We didn't call it the undocumented workers fine. We knew that politically that was never gonna make it through. We call it the Excluded Workers Fund, because it put the onus of responsibility on the state that was excluding the people that are supposed to protect rather than including them. And those same people were the essential workers that were getting applause at 6pm every day, that Governor Cuomo was putting statues of. Those statues did not help our people survival, such as you're not put food on the table. So what that breakthrough narrative essential and excluded, "¿Y nosotros qué?" primarily led by NDLO [National Day Laborer Organizing Network] at that time — "what about us?" — started to pull back the cover the covers on who's responsible, who's benefiting, and who's losing. And that narrative along with the public sympathy for essential workers at the time, helped gain the moral high ground to put power behind what some folks wanted to say or demand was unrealistic. And then what the majority started to agree, actually, you know, what they do deserve, at minimum, something to be able to provide for their families if they're risking their lives, etc. So politicizing our folks, really, really starting with tackling those beliefs that unemployment is a right, an added benefit just to those that are eligible. Number two, the narrative. Number three principles and values and really bold,

direct action. We started bringing folks together, that were already saying to us, either I can keep making calls to my legislators from home. But if something doesn't happen, I'm going to die at home anyway. Right? So we started taking to the streets, I remember as an organizer this is a big responsibility. This is before the vaccine. This is before we really knew what COVID the intensity of how the virus could develop. But we knew that we had to visiblize, the workers that many people at home behind their doors were not seeing. So we started with fasts outside of Jeff Bezos's penthouse apartment and then started thinking, Alright, we'll get 10, 15 A bunch of immigrant workers together, and we'll sleep outside we won't eat, to show what's happening in our homes. And then it became 50. Then it became 70 became 100, over 100 immigrant workers fasting outside of Jeff Bezos, penthouse apartment. Tax of billionaires in order to fund the poor. That message started breaking through, we started doing major mobilization, taking all the protections we could to keep our people safe. And then we move to shutting down bridges, talking about a largely undocumented, or even for those in reentry, high-risk population of doing direct actions during a pandemic, not just for their individual safety, but also you're risking deportation, you're risking arrest. But because people were so desperate, and so angry, we were asking the question, what are you willing to do to win, and they were willing to shut down bridges, they were willing to put down, put their bodies on the line for a 23-day hunger strike, in order to prove to demonstrate the urgency that our communities were facing. So bold, direct action. And lastly, a really smart inside-outside strategy. We had legislators on the inside the halls of Albany that are deeply connected to the struggle of those taking these actions across the city and the state in order to, to bring this demand to the governor's table and say you need to do something. New York was getting national attention. We had to do something that prove that we were also leading the way for immigrant and excluded communities. So that inside-outside strategy coupled with the narrative coupled with direct action, there was so much pressure on the legislature to do something that eventually they had to. And when I saw that \$2.1 billion headline, I remember literally dropping the lunch I had in front of me and just running to the members and, and feeling this joy. And also, "We did this? We we were able to do this?" We had to believe that it was possible, we could not give up it was already such a wild demand that if we didn't think that it was possible, then our community members taking these risks wouldn't either. And the same day that we celebrated our victory, the same day that we ended our hunger strike, excluded workers in New Jersey started their hunger strike on the steps of their capital. And since this, when we've seen 11 other states, take on the banner of essential and excluded, take on excluded worker and safety net campaigns and demand unemployment insurance for excluded workers across their state. Some have already won permanent funds. And we're still in the fight to do the same for us as well.

Deepak Bhargava

It's a really incredible story. And I remember when the victory was won, and that 2.1 billion was achieved, and I was about to go into a class and a couple of my students had volunteered in the campaign and were incredibly excited about it. And I broke out in tears. And I don't cry for nobody, just to be clear. So this was incredible piece of history that you all you all made. So you met this moment in history, but it didn't come out of nowhere, right. There had been sort of a power base built here over many, many years that could be leveraged and deployed to meet the moment. So José, I'd love for you to talk about that. Like why was it so important to have this kind of organized base in order to be able to capitalize when this crisis hit and to meet the moment in the way that you did?

José Lopez

During the the early pandemic, much of our much of our city was on lockdown. Our operations that makes a row in New York went virtual to some degree. But I think as you said, because of our relationship building and leadership tracking, we were able to devise an operation to stay in daily contact with our membership. I think I think COVID-19 is the case for proving that relational organizing matters. And I'll give you two examples. And I think Angeles just named one of them. We run a food pantry. We serve hundreds of New Yorkers every single week. When COVID hit, we had to call an audible, we had to figure out how to get food to our people. It was staff, it was members, and it was volunteers who pulled lessons from other mutual aid groups, and who had coordinated a drop-off pantry service. Our staff and leaders used their cars, their bikes their feet, to bring groceries to the doorstep of the neediest New Yorkers in the safest and most secure way that we could devise given the circumstance. Now Ángeles, credit to her, she was critical to pulling that operation off. And I think she will tell you, people stepped up in such a beautiful way to take

care of other people. And this is this is testament not just to relational organizing, but also to the politicization of our members who understood that this was a moment where government wasn't gonna step up for people. And so we so we had to, right? We had to be that alternative. The second example is this work that was just named to pass the Excluded Worker Fund. Again, during the height of COVID, our tios and our tias decided to go on hunger strike, for 23 days. This is the longest hunger strike that we have ever participated in as an organization. And probably during the hardest moment in our lives. Again, the the willingness to carry out such a demonstration was was rooted not just in the need, right members articulated that they already couldn't afford to put food on the table. But it was also rooted in relationship and it was rooted in solidarity, I am, I am willing to put my body on the line, because my friend, neighbor, community, comrade is willing to do the same. And we're willing to do that in the interest of our entire community, who is under so much pain and suffering in this moment. And none of that, none of that would have been possible, absent, laying that ground game for so many years, building those relationships for so many years, creating space, where people could lean on each other, and laugh together, and cry together, and organize together and eat together for so many years. And so, you know, again, like, just just just the reminder that organizing in its basic form, is really just about community. It's about building those relationships, so that when these hard moments present themselves, it's, it's much easier to kind of knit that fabric of community and care. Where we were, we really do in fact, as we did during COVID take care of each other.

Deepak Bhargava

Beautiful. So you both and make the road are kind of upholding this tradition of organizing. And a lot of people are saying well, you know, people don't have time to be part of organizations or they're saying the craft of organizing is in decline. And you know, why do we need organizing, we just have social media we can mobilize people anytime we want to. What to you is the future of organizing as you contemplate it as a craft. What's important to preserve to sustain to teach for all the generations to come. Angeles, I might start with you.

Ángeles Solis

We are seeing masses. have incredible momentum-based organizing right now we're where we see people are willing to take to the streets in numbers. Our challenge as organizers is to be able to move that energy and shift the conditions of power at every level of government and even within our own community.

Unknown Speaker

Fantastic. José?

José Lopez

Every, every night of the week, 30,40 50 members gather in our community spaces. And to do that, to, to hug, to laugh, to listen to strategize, to break bread together. Each of them have their own reasons, right, some maybe left everyone and everything that they know back in their home country and, and they're in search of community. Some may need access to a hot meal that maybe we can provide. Some bask in the care, laughter, and warmth felt by their neighbors, other members, our staff. Some maybe appreciate the service that they receive and feel an obligation to help their neighbor as their neighbor help them. But I think all of them all of us want to see everyone in space everyone in the community be treated with with respect and dignity. And I want the listener to remember that, right? Think about that. 40 to 50 people every single night are coming into our offices. Times are hard, right? Like people have kids, people work two jobs. TV is probably better than it's ever been. Right? Like our communities can be doing so many other things. But they choose to be with each other. Right? They choose to be with us. And knowing that we have to think about the sanctity of time and space. Time, right? Like we all have that, that relative who calls when they need something, but they won't call otherwise. Right? At some point, what do you do you just stop answering that phone call. Don't be that, right? Like don't be that person in the community. Our neighbors and members are worthy of so much more. Deb Axt, my predecessor dear friend, used to always say to us "relationship before task, relationship before task." And anyone listening should remember that, like write that shit on your arm, "relationship before task," because it is important. And also space, like, you know, when people dedicate two hours of their time to us in a weekly

meeting. It has to be worth their while, right? You have to use that space to honor them, you have to use that space to celebrate them. You have to use that space to teach each other. Right, not teach them. Have everyone in that space teach each other and use that space to move people to action. And so if nothing else, right, I'm pretty basic when it comes to organizing principles. I believe that organizing is about relationships. I believe that we have to meet people where they are not where we want them to be. And I think we have to remind people that the reason we're bonding together in this moment is because we understand that the status quo sucks, right? And in order to improve the status quo, we have to offer our communities hope, and an alternative, and the only path forward is the path that we walk together.

Deepak Bhargava

Ángeles and José, it was really a gift to start the week with the two of you, that was amazing. You were great. Thank you so much for it. You're stars. Really appreciate the work you do and how you showed up today.

Ángeles

Thank you!

José Lopez

Thanks for having us. Deepak. We appreciate it.

[MUSIC]

Stephanie Luce

Base-building organizations like Make the Road have won incredible gains for their members and the broader population. They can make a real impact in people's lives, sometimes even the difference between life and death. The base-building model is a pillar for underdogs to make social change. We need to reclaim much of the lineage that's emphasized the slow and steady work and the patient efforts to build relationships with neighbors and co-workers. Especially in this age of social media, people have lost sight of the importance of this deep relationship-based work, much of which has to happen face-to-face.

Deepak Bhargava

But this work can be slow and plodding. And by itself, it doesn't usually rise to the scale we need for transformative change on big national or global issues. Base-building organizations can sometimes have a tendency to focus narrowly on the interests of existing members or on small local issues they can win. So a big question is how can we take the best of the base building model and pair it with other strategies that might be able to reach many more people and win bigger demands.

Stephanie Luce

At the end of our book practical radicals, we offer 36 strategy tools, one that relates to base building in particular as tool 11, the leadership identification tool. This helps organizers find people who are really able to move others in their community and workplaces.

Deepak Bhargava

And a second tool, tool 35, is one we borrowed from the Maine People's Alliance. This is known as the leadership ladder, which organizers use to help create paths for volunteer members to take on more and more responsibility in their organizations. Groups like make the road use tools like this to build powerful, membership-driven organizations.

Stephanie Luce

In the next episode of practical radicals, we'll talk about the second strategy model, disruptive movements. We'll be joined by Frances Fox Piven, the legendary scholar-activist who has taught so many of us about the power of disruption

Frances Fox Piven:

The propertied classes want to stomp on people at the bottom. And people at the bottom have to rise up again and again and again.

Deepak Bhargava

Practical radicals is made possible with support from the Roosevelt Institute. Harry Hanbury and Peter Coccoma produced the series and Peter Coccoma is the series editor. Our theme music was composed by Christian Paris Yeates and performed by trio gafas with additional music by Peter Coccoma and Christian Perez Yeates. If you enjoy the show, please follow and rate it on your podcast app and share it with friends. And join us next time for more practical and radical strategies to change the world