4 Activist scenarios featuring middle-class activist dilemmas
From interviews conducted by Betsy Leondar-Wright for Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance-Building for Middle-Class Activists (available from the author)

Facilitator instructions: This exercise can be done with 4 small groups each discussing a different scenario, or one scenario at a time in the whole group or small groups.
Give out each scenario as a handout, with the discussion question at the bottom. After group discussion of what participants would do in the situation, read aloud or pass out what actually happened.

1. When the Fischer meat packing workers went on strike, some of us in a gay rights group, the Fairness Campaign, proposed that the group back them up. It was a mostly white, middle-class group, and there was a volatile conversation, with some members saying it was off the point, not our issue, it would detract from what we were doing. But we said that you can't separate discrimination from workplace safety and wage protection. You need to back your natural allies and have their backing. We are not enough in numbers to go it alone, and you can't get there just on good will. Some members of the Fairness Campaign had awful stereotypes of unions.

If you were a member of the Fairness Campaign, what would you do?

What actually happened

Even without the whole group's support, a few of us participated on picket lines with the strikers. It made queer people real to the union members. We brought up class analysis in Fairness Campaign trainings, how it's connected.

And when our anti-discrimination proposal came up for a vote, the union stepped forward, they came to City Hall and spoke up, and that helped us. We didn't win right away, but eventually our legislation passed. And we had union support all along the way. And we continued to be on the front line with them.

2. Once when I was on the board of a low-income group, I was one of only three out of 15 board members who had been to college. There had been tensions between two factions in the group, a mostly black faction and a mostly white faction.

A foundation had just awarded a grant big enough for a full-time position. Because there had been fights in the past over which members got stipends and grant-funded positions, usually divvied up informally, the board decided to create a hiring committee to take applications more formally. Two of the three hiring committee members were college graduates. The two finalists for the job were both white women, one an insider member beloved to the mostly white faction, the other an outside college-educated candidate. The hiring committee chose the outside candidate for reasons that seemed solid to us, like better people skills and more experience with anti-racism and community organizing. We told the candidates our decision.

That evening I walked into a kitchen full of white, low-income board members, friends of the rejected woman, who were fuming about the decision. They all started yelling at me at once, saying I had no loyalty to long-time members, that I'd betrayed the organization, that they never should have let middle-class people into the organization in the first place. It was really hard to hear.

First, what would you have done if you were on that Hiring Committee?
Second, what would you have done if you'd been the one yelled at?

What actually happened

I feel ok about how I handled the situation. I sat and listened for two hours. One guy started swearing and calling me insult words, and I said it wasn't ok with me to be abused, and he backed off. I couldn't really process what they were saying or my reactions, so I filed them away in my mind to think about later.

The full board did ultimately ratify our initial hiring choice.

Over the following months and years I thought a lot about insider and outsider hiring, formal and informal hiring processes, and the pros and cons of each. I did start to see some strengths of informal decisions and insider hires; previously I had only seen the positive side of formal, criteria-based hiring. I learned about the centrality of personal loyalty in working-class culture, and the centrality of "objective" standards and rules in professional middle-class culture.

But the hard feelings between me and those low-income board members never completely dissolved. One was my friend, and we were less close after that day. Others remained wary around me. I never again felt safe with the guy who swore at me. The incident highlighted our class differences and drove a wedge between us.

3. I'll tell you a story that has to do with class, education, and preparedness.

We had a time-sensitive opportunity in the Figueroa Corridor neighborhood. One of the biggest developers in the world was planning a huge project in the neighborhood, and they needed approvals from the city. There was an election coming up, and the mayor and city council wanted to approve this project before the election. They knew that our coalition, the Figueroa Corridor Coalition, could slow things down with community opposition, so we had some temporary clout. We had a chance to negotiate benefits for our community in exchange for our support, but only if we moved fast.

The members of the coalition include both organizations *and* individuals who are mostly Latinos working in service and garment industries, some working-class African Americans. The organizations are represented by their staff, who are mostly college-educated.

So we had to decide who would sit at the bargaining table. Would it be the people who ideally, in our vision of our organization, *should* be there – neighborhood residents? Or would it be people who because of their experience might get us a better deal? (The negotiations would be very technical, with many legal and financial details involved.) We came up with criteria: Have you negotiated with a big company before? Do you have knowledge of the content of issues on the table, such as financing affordable housing?

And when we applied those criteria, it was all college-educated professionals (lawyers and non-profit developer), not neighborhood residents.

Who would you send to the negotiating table?
What if you could only send two people? Only one person?

What actually happened

We started by saying, well, that's the breaks. But then we changed our minds. We chose people by expertise, but we *also* made sure that there were community activists in the room. We had a rotating group of four local residents at the negotiations. We had Spanish translation at all times, and we called for frequent caucuses. The caucuses were to touch base with the neighborhood folks, and to discuss how to react to new proposals.

And we won a lot of stuff! Including neighborhood people didn't slow us down too much, and it made us better able to prioritize what to push for.

What happened next also involved innovative ways to be more inclusive. One victory was that half the jobs will go to local residents, with a job-training program to prepare them. We could have hired a bunch of consultants to set up the program, but instead we created a course through a community college for local residents to learn how to plan a jobs program. Our group provided the students *and* the teachers. Forty people met for 15 weeks and got college credit. They went to other cities to see how they did development without displacement of local residents, and they got all fired up.

The students were a mix of Latino and African American working-class people, and the course was a chance to struggle through some cross-cultural issues. There was very high-quality Spanish/English translation that allowed people to really get into discussions.

After the class, they did presentations first to the coalition, and then to the developer and the president of the community college, about how we want to do the jobs program.

So the planning itself happened in a way that developed new leaders. If we had asked people to come to meetings every week for 15 weeks, we might have had 4 people, but since we were offering college credit, all these people who had never gone to college before got involved. We used the teacher pay to pay for translation, childcare and transportation. We have a long-term commitment to developing people, and to creating situations where all kinds of knowledge are used. We're never going to have enough power to make change unless different kinds of people learn to work together.

4. At one point, there was an organization that certainly needed some resources in the very immediate term. I said, 'What if I were able to provide the resources that are needed here in the very short term?" Suddenly the group of people said, 'Are you sure? Are you sure you want to give us that money? How do you feel about that? Are you okay? Are we okay? Do we really want to be taking money from you?' Which I thought was very bizarre since fifteen minutes before we'd just been having a conversation that went along the lines of, 'We don't care where we get the money from, we just gotta get it from somebody. And all we want is to know some rich person, and they give us their money, then we'll be fine.'

As soon as the personal relationship entered the scene the people who were sitting around the table all of a sudden had a whole different set of criteria about whether or not they even wanted to accept the money. They weren't really sure, and did they want to have somebody so close to the organization who would also be a major donor, and as a major donor might exert some demands for accountability that might result in agenda setting? If that person paid for the organization's rent for three months, did that mean that the next meeting when we have our brainstorming ideas we're just going to be expected to go with that person's ideas because they paid for that organization to exist?

If you were in that group, what would you decide about this offer?

<u>What actually happened</u>

I did donate the money.

But to find an activist in their midst who was suddenly crossing the line toward major donorism, and having these extremely inconsistent rule books for how you treat volunteers in your organization and how you treat major donors, left some of my colleagues who are organizers in this funny place, like 'Hm, how do we treat you? Do we treat you like a major donor, do we treat you like an activist?'