TRAINING FOR Transformation
A REPORT ON THE FIRST STRATEGY COLLEGE
In June 2019, the Grassroots Policy Project (GPP) and People’s Action teamed up to co-host an inaugural Strategy College for some of the nation’s leading social justice organizers. We aimed to build a bench of long-term strategists equipped to move big ideas and deep structural change.

The Strategy College convened more than 40 leaders representing a broad cross-section of social movement sectors. College participants included executive directors who devoted a week of their busy schedules along with frontline leaders committed to moving strategic analysis and practice within their organizations. We invited organizations that are often forced to emphasize their differences as they compete for funding and public recognition, knowing that space to develop long-term strategy together could help transcend manufactured divisions.

Surrounded by the beauty of summer in rural Minnesota, Strategy College participants stepped out of their everyday lives and into an immersive seven-day experience intentionally designed to forge new communities of practice.

### Participating Organizations

- AAIs for Civic Empowerment Education Fund (National)
- Center for Popular Democracy (National)
- Central Florida Jobs with Justice (Florida)
- Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en la Lucha (Minnesota)
- Citizen Action of New York (New York)
- Dream Defenders (Florida)
- Florida Immigrant Coalition (Florida)
- Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (National)
- Hometown Action (Alabama)
- Inquilinxs Unidxs Por Justicia (Minnesota)
- Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement (Iowa)
- Jobs With Justice (National)
- Justice is Global (National)
- Land Stewardship Project (Minnesota)
- Maine People’s Alliance (Maine)
- Make the Road New York (New York)
- Organize Florida (Florida)
- Philadelphia Student Union (Pennsylvania)
- Power California (California)
- Reclaim Philadelphia (Pennsylvania)
- TakeAction Minnesota (Minnesota)
- The Carolina Federation (North Carolina)
- The People’s Lobby / Reclaim Chicago (Illinois)
- Working Families Party (National)
STRATEGY COLLEGE GOALS

- Convene organizers from community-based organizations, state alignment tables and national networks to build a deep bench of strategists with the capacity to plan for long-term structural change.
- Support leaders as they shift their organizing models toward practices that support transformational change.
- Contribute to deeper integration of political education in community and labor organizing.
- Develop shared language and strategic frameworks enabling organizers to break out of organizational silos and geographic isolation to build communities of practice united by a shared commitment to long-term structural transformation.

COMING TOGETHER

The Strategy College emerged from a years-long relationship between the Grassroots Policy Project and People’s Action. GPP worked with People’s Action to develop its “Long-Term Agenda,” a comprehensive strategic plan designed to guide the organization as it transforms the structures of power in this country. GPP and People’s Action partnered to develop an intensive political education program that supported staff and member organizations as they shifted organizing practices to make the Long-Term Agenda real. The organizations ran two cycles of this political education program for People’s Action member organizations starting in 2016.

Meanwhile, Grassroots Policy Project was building capacity for more transformational organizing among alignment tables in key states, including California, New York and Florida, and partnering with the Working Families Academy at the national level. It became clear that the intensive political education course GPP had developed with People’s Action would also help organizers in these other alignments and organizations. The Strategy College was born.

DESIGNING A STRATEGY LAB

The Strategy College was designed to be a laboratory for strategic praxis. Building on GPP and People’s Action frameworks, we created a curriculum that integrated rigorous systems analysis with strategic tools for transformational change. We call this approach “strategic education,” which we differentiate from most established models of “organizing skills trainings,” which are crucial for training people on the basics of building power but which often remain limited to the realm of incremental change. We also differentiate strategic education from many kinds of “political education,” which may help people to develop stronger analysis but which do not

Participant Reflection:
“There was so much intentionality about pedagogy that I am so inspired by and appreciative of. I loved that the ‘talk pieces’ were generally brief and almost always appeared in support of dynamic, visual activities, and that the activities were so varied.”
improve people’s ability to move more ambitious kinds of social change work. Strategic education is intended to build on these two toolsets, with the intention of producing more ambitious and effective change agents who can integrate more transformative strategic approaches into their organizing work.

In design and implementation, the Strategy College aimed to produce the continued engagement and mutual support necessary to build a community of practice that could catalyze longer-term change. Leveraging the expertise of our facilitation team (see Who We Are), we included popular-education-style exercises, interactive presentations, embodied practice, panel discussions, Theatre of the Oppressed and small group work.

We used a number of different methodologies to ground our transformational frameworks in concrete organizing practice. We organized participants into “practice cohorts” that met throughout the College, grouping people who worked together or who were engaged in similar organizing. In each training, we worked to highlight “strategic practices,” which is the term we use to describe concrete practices that participants could use to move these frameworks in their organizing. We also used case studies and presentations by veteran organizers to share examples from transformational campaigns that had implemented these frameworks.
The Strategy College curriculum was designed to connect systems analysis (what we are up against and how intertwined systems perpetuate economic, racial, gender and climate injustice) with strategy tools (practices that can advance structural shifts and transformational organizing).

AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF SYSTEMS

Mainstream dialogue about race, class and gender is frustratingly limited. It asks us to choose: Which matters most — racial justice, economic inequality, gendered violence or climate change? This oppositional framework creates issue silos and narrows our political organizing over time. Do we invest in organizing in Black and Latino communities, or should we organize poor white people? Should we emphasize race, or should we emphasize class? These dichotomies sharply limit our political impact.

We set out to develop a more integrative framework that expands political possibilities by clarifying our shared interest in systems change to address race, class, gender and climate.

RACIAL CAPITALISM

We started our systems analysis through the lens of “racial capitalism,” working to understand the way race and class have evolved together and reinforced each other throughout US history.

- To help participants overcome false oppositions between race and class, we helped
them walk through the implications of an either/or approach. We explored how engaging in class analysis without attending to race ignores structural differences between poor and working people from different communities. And we explored how working to end racism without a class analysis just gets people of color access to a piece of the “American Dream” pie, without dealing with the fact that the pie is rapidly shrinking.

We discussed a series of contradictory realities: The richest people in this country are overwhelmingly white. Poverty is disproportionately concentrated in Black, Latino and Native communities. And at the same time, the majority of poor people in this country are white. We challenged participants to grapple with this reality when thinking about big-picture strategy, highlighting the need to fight racial inequality while also speaking to the struggles of poor and working white people as we build deeper unity to challenge the white elite.

We encouraged participants to understand structural racism through multiple lenses, which are often placed in unnecessary opposition: racism as a structuring force in our economy that enables the 1% to extract labor and wealth from communities of color; racism as a force that fundamentally shapes our social and political structure in ways that operate with autonomy from economic interests; and racism as a political project to divide poor and working people from each other and, specifically, to stop white people from building solidarity with people of color.

Participants left these sessions with a stronger analysis of the inextricable relationship between capitalism and structural racism. More importantly, participants left with a deeply grounded sense that we need to build unity between poor and working-class communities of color and poor and working-class white people. It was noted that this is a key difference from other trainings like this that tend to homogenize white people in the interest of demonstrating white privilege. We want a both/and approach.

Participant Reflection:
“This analysis makes clear the necessity of directly challenging structural racism and the importance of building solidarity between poor and working-class communities of color and poor and working-class white people. It was noted that this is a key difference from other trainings like this that tend to homogenize white people in the interest of demonstrating white privilege. We want a both/and approach.”

**GENDER**

Once we established a strong foundation for understanding the relationship between race and class, we examined how gender inequality manifests in the economy. Specifically, we dug into women’s paid and unpaid caring labor, which is often rendered invisible in economic analyses. We examined how caring labor — often called “reproductive labor” — is transferred across racial lines and even across national lines as women from the Global South migrate to...
perform domestic work, long-term care, nursing and other forms of care work.

Looking at gender from a structural stance, rather than just an interpersonal dynamic, opens up expansive possibilities for our organizing. For example, organizing for universal childcare can build power and unity between low-wage childcare workers (most of whom are women of color and immigrant women) and professional women (many of whom are white). This approach challenges organizing in two ways. First, it challenges organizations that already work on issues of women’s equality to expand their work beyond struggles for “representation and recognition” to address struggles for the “redistribution” of labor and wealth across gender and racial lines. Secondly, it challenges organizations that work around class and racial inequality to treat organizing around gender issues as a complementary aspect of their work, rather than a diversion from their focus on race and class.

ENVIRONMENT

We then looked at the ways in which extraction and commodification of the Earth form the foundation of racial capitalism. The drive for constantly expanding profit is upsetting the balance of life on the planet. The crises that result from these growing imbalances impact people across all social divides, creating an imperative for organizers to consider how to build a broad-based movement to counter specific bad corporate actors and to challenge the deeper systemic forces that brought us to the point of climate crisis.

Each step of this systems analysis builds on the previous steps. We presented each of these steps as fundamental building blocks within a larger integrated system — with each system forming a strand in a complex DNA structure that shapes our society. We called this the “Quadruple Helix.”

Participant Reflection:
“The climate and commodification of the earth sessions really hit me. I think because we had spent all this time building a conceptual infrastructure underneath it, it felt REAL in a way I sometimes struggle with, which was both terrifying (this is in our backyard and it’s happening NOW) and encouraging (it’s not some ungraspable mystery, it’s part of this larger system and we can take on the whole thing together).”

Once participants grasped this analysis of integrated systems (which we generally refer to as “racial capitalism,” while making it clear that we use that term in a way that includes analyses of gender and the environment), we looked at impacts through a number of different lenses:

- **Global:** We walked through ways this integrated system manifests on a global scale.

- **Government:** We explored how governmental policies and agencies often maintain and strengthen the inequalities produced by this integrated system.

- **Ideology:** We explored the ideological
aspects of this integrated system, using the framework of “hegemony” to analyze the process by which oppressive ideas have become dominant norms.

**US HISTORY**

We then helped participants understand how this integrated system has manifested in the United States. We drew out key moments of transition in US history, from the Civil War and Westward Expansion to the Great Depression and the New Deal, so that participants could examine how unequal power relations have changed in response to popular movements and how historically established inequalities have been re-asserted in new forms in response to these victories.

These histories helped participants develop an even deeper sense of the profound interactions between capitalism, structural racism, gender oppression and extractivism. Participants also developed a deeper understanding of the construction of whiteness as a political project designed to break multiracial class solidarity throughout US history.

**NEOLIBERALISM**

To understand our present conditions, we took
a closer look at more recent history, digging into the development of the neoliberal project over the last 40 years.

While discussing case studies on different aspects of the neoliberal agenda — globalization, criminal justice and financialization — participants traced changes from the 1960s through today. They examined how these changes have shaped the terrain on which we organize.

To illustrate, we shared an overview of the past four decades — a time when we’ve seen pro-corporate and conservative forces broaden and consolidate their power, while community and labor organizers narrowed our scope to short-term, immediate issue fights.

We spent time digging into the US Right’s theory of change to develop a shared understanding:

- **Building infrastructure:** Willingness among corporate and conservative forces to work across differences and issues to reshape the broader political terrain.

- **Taking advantage of and/or creating crises:** Taking advantage of crises to advance neoliberal policies and increase corporate profits.

- **Advancing a series of structural reforms:** Winning small reforms to lay the groundwork for larger structural change along a series of pathways including privatization, deregulation, financialization and criminalization.

- **Undermining peoples’ movements:** Rolling-back civil rights victories, pro-labor reforms and environmental protections while attacking movement organizations and leaders.

- **Strategic uses of racism:** Pivoting from direct racism toward “dog whistles” and racial coding.

**Participant Reflection:**

“Seeing this whole history of neoliberalism is eye opening. Dynamics that could feel related to only one issue were so closely interconnected and reinforcing with dynamics happening on other issues, which can be overwhelming but at the same time provide a picture useful to organize on various fronts in a more strategic way.”

“We also need to expand the analysis of neoliberalism beyond the U.S., as its dynamics not only affect people in other parts of the world, but a global analysis is critical in order not to fall for simplistic nationalistic solutions to the problems we face.”

- **Prioritizing the battle of ideas:** Advancing conservative ideological themes through narratives that normalize neoliberal ideas as “common sense,” establishing the dominant worldview in our society.
• **Gaining governing power:** Since the early 1970s, the Right has aimed to achieve complete dominance of all aspects of governance in society.

Exploring the Right’s strategies helped participants reach consensus: If we aim to rebuild the structure of our society, we need to move beyond short-term fights, adopt new approaches and develop shared long-term strategic frameworks. We need to move from transactional approaches toward transformational organizing.
During the Strategy College, participants started to transition from outrage against injustice into more strategic thinking, exploring ways to reshape the political terrain and manifest a more just world. To support this shift away from silos and short-term fights toward transformational organizing, we introduced strategic frameworks and tools to help leaders formalize changes in practice.

Beginning with the Three Faces of Power, a framework adapted by GPP, participants explored what it takes to reshape the political terrain.

- **First Face, organizing people and resources for direct political involvement:** This involves targeting lawmakers, legislatures, corporate boards and CEOs, Wall Street and, sometimes, the courts — mostly through direct action, advocacy and lobbying.

- **Second Face, building infrastructure:** Growing movement capacity to work toward a common purpose by shaping a long-term agenda for structural reforms.

- **Third Face, making meaning:** Engaging in “The Battle of Big Ideas,” using cultural beliefs, traditions, histories and practices to shape political meaning and shift the dominant worldview.

**STRUCTURAL REFORMS**

Next, we helped participants conceptualize their campaigns as stepping stones that leverage shorter-term fights to move us toward structural reforms and, eventually, structural change. We refer to this process as the Long-Term Agenda Tool, a strategic plan that can help organizations in an alliance or network align their collective work to achieve transformational goals.
During the Strategy College, we demonstrated what it looks like when each incremental step helps create conditions for communities to build power, set up future steps and win more structural reforms. Sometimes conditions allow us to make a leap forward or quickly advance a major structural reform, like Medicare for All. Having a “North Star” (the long-term structural reforms we want to achieve) can help us navigate our way through the opportunities and setbacks we encounter along the way.

Participants practiced identifying campaigns that could be stepping stones and milestones along a path to structural change. Locating our campaigns within a process of successive reforms, in this way, helps us expand what is politically possible. We also wove in the Three Faces of Power — building our people power, working through strong alliances, and making narrative shifts — to ensure we move bold agendas forward.

**GOVERNING POWER**

With an integrated analysis, greater alignment and a process for developing a long-term agenda, groups began to grapple with what it takes to build Governing Power, the power to design, legislate, implement and enforce a structural reform agenda.

To gain governing power, our movements need aligned infrastructure with a coordinated strategy. With greater alignment, groups can work out a division of labor and move beyond silos as they build the deeper trust needed to navigate differences.

We illustrated how aligned forces can gain and use governing power through two case studies we called *A Tale of Two States*: Wisconsin and New York. The Wisconsin example illustrated how the Right used its
infrastructure to take on public sector unions and advance a strategy to turn the state deep Red — in spite of a formidable popular resistance — for generations to come. The New York example provided lessons for building progressive power in a solidly Blue state with pro-corporate Democratic leadership. We also learned from a panel of leaders from Minnesota (see sidebar on page 14).

Key takeaways emerged: We need alignment and infrastructure to win governing power; and we need inside-outside strategies to get our structural reforms on the table.

**Participant Reflection:**

“Discussing real world examples (FL c4 table, TakeAction MN, etc.) were incredibly helpful and gave me a lot of concrete items to apply to my own work.”

“When we are organizing, communities often have distrust of government and there is a need to explain that the system is what needs to change so that the government can work for everyone.”
Taking It Back Home

Connecting the frameworks to participants’ on-the-ground realities produced a gradual and organic action plan for bringing Strategy College lessons back home. We encouraged this in a few ways:

1. **Building a Bigger We**: The combination of the systems analysis and working with the strategy tools helped clarify what it takes to build a “Bigger We,” an inclusive, multiracial popular movement that unites us around a shared agenda that no one group or sector can achieve on its own. Focusing on the “Bigger We” helped participants synthesize connections from the week. We explored the balance organizations need to strike between a *universalist approach* (e.g., common humanity, working-class status, etc.) and a *particularistic approach*, which honors differences and specific community needs. This attention on common goals and unifying ideas gave everyone a sense that they were better prepared to address differences.

2. **Talking Like a Normal Person**: In this segment, participants developed a game that helped them think creatively about ways to convey complex materials to a wider audience and to connect the ideas to their daily work. Participants appreciated this activity, expressing an eagerness for language, tools and methods that popularize the concepts and analysis.

3. **Organizational Reflection**: Participants also developed plans for bringing lessons back home and putting them into practice. Each participant assessed how their organizations currently set strategic priorities and committed to one transformational practice they could advance in the coming year.
Governing Power in Minnesota

During the Strategy College, we heard from a panel of Minnesota leaders: Elianne Farhat, executive director for TakeAction Minnesota; Dan McGrath, consultant and former executive director for TakeAction Minnesota; and Dave Mann, senior strategist with Grassroots Policy Project. These leaders shared insights into the deep relationship building that enabled labor, community and faith-based groups across the state to coordinate on campaigns and achieve alignment for gaining progressive governing power and reimagining governance in Minnesota.

The current progressive alignment in Minnesota flows from a long-term effort, starting with the Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action back in the 1990s. This work continued with a merger that created TakeAction MN, and the table sponsored by SEIU called Minnesotans for a Fair Economy. More recently, Our Minnesota Future (OMF) aligned 22 organizations to intervene in the 2018 elections. Their efforts helped progressive candidates win a majority in the Minnesota House and helped elect a progressive governor who is consulting with OMF on ideas for restructuring government.

Reflecting on what it took to build this high level of alignment, panelists named four factors: 1) addressing all Three Faces of Power in their work; 2) investing in deep relationship building; 3) engaging both leaders and members in ongoing political education; and 4) strategic use of narrative shifts as part of organizing, alliance building and campaigns.

On this last point, we also heard from Minister JaNaé Bates, communications director for ISA-IAH, where they aligned both tactical and communications work to shift dominant narratives in statewide organizing. “We have shifted from a problem-based model to a value-based model,” Bates explained. “Leading with shared values also helps us build support for bolder proposals because we can demonstrate how those bold proposals are better for everyone. It moves people to act out of hope.”
The extreme dangers and opportunities of our political moment demand a quantum leap in the strategic capacities of community organizers and social movement leaders. Today’s leaders must adapt to rapidly changing conditions and keep an eye on the long view, while stepping up to immediate opportunities. They must be able to articulate an expansive, visionary agenda that centers the communities who are most impacted, while sounding a clarion call for society as a whole. These are not easy tasks.

There is good news: the shift toward transformational organizing and movement building is already happening. New leaders in our movements are bringing fresh perspectives, a hunger for deeper engagement with ideas and a willingness to experiment with new forms of organizing. The Strategy College was designed to support this new generation of leaders — who are predominantly women and people of color from diverse class backgrounds, nationalities and gender expressions — and it did.

With attention to pedagogy and relationship building, the Strategy College gave participants space to interrogate their organizing methods and identify the shifts they need to make toward transformational organizing practices. Again and again, participants reflected that the Strategy College allowed them to take a huge collective step forward toward a stronger movement.

We are already seeing results:

- **Breaking out of silos:** National community federations, including People’s Action, the Center for Popular Democracy, the Working Families Organization, Jobs With Justice and It Takes Roots, stepped out of day-to-day work and discovered deep political and strategic resonance. Often pitted against each other in competition
for funding and public recognition, these organizations transcended manufactured divisions and recognized themselves as part of a shared ecosystem. This forged deeper collaborations. For example, the Center for Popular Democracy and People’s Action are currently exploring joint trainings for their networks.

- **Shifting organizing models back home:** Participants from Florida’s State-Wide Alignment Group ran a tailored “Building a Bigger We” training for their member organizations. This enabled them to develop a clearer assessment of the constituencies they need to engage to build power in the state. Groups began looking beyond “electoral math” to consider an expansive approach that builds from their urban bases in communities of color while also building power in suburban and rural regions.

- **Building capacity for structural change:** The Strategy College helped build the capacity of organizers in California to start running long-term strategic planning processes themselves. For example, POWER California brought the “Long-Term Agenda” framework to their steering committees and initiated a long-term agenda process for structural reform in the state.

- **Expanding political possibilities:** Organizers from different state alignment projects learned from each other’s work in more depth. Organizers from California and Florida benefited from hearing about the long-term investment in narrative work in Minnesota, and from electoral strategies to change the balance of power in New York State.

It was exciting to see these organizations shift from a stance of “receiving” these strategic frameworks to driving them forward themselves. The first Strategy College reflected and reinforced our commitment to investing in this kind of deep strategic leadership development.

“As the Strategy College moved us closer to truly transformational organizing models and the bold vision we need.”

As an experiment in advanced political education and movement building, the Strategy College moved us closer to truly transformational organizing models and the bold vision we need. Strategy College participants formed lasting communities of practice that will allow them to leverage their newly shared understanding of these analytic and strategic frameworks. We are excited to build even deeper alignment in the year to come.
NEXT STEPS

We plan to organize another Strategy College in late 2020. Demand for this intensive level of training is growing, and we expect the next Strategy College to train even more long-term strategists and provide organizers with space to reflect on the outcomes of Election 2020.

Now that organizers understand what capacities they gain by participating in the Strategy College, the Grassroots Policy Project will work with them to make intentional plans to use the next Strategy College to further deepen relationships and shared vision across organizational and state lines. The Strategy College will also enable groups to drive specific pieces of long-term strategic development work in their home organizations and alignments.

2020 will be a year of high stakes for our communities and organizations. We intend to make sure we leverage that momentum to build long-term strategic capacities in our organizations and movements.
ABOUT THE GRASSROOTS POLICY PROJECT

GPP has been engaged in work to support state-level as well as national social justice infrastructure for more than 20 years. Our frameworks and strategic interventions lay the groundwork for deeper political and strategic alignment across organizations by helping groups in states, national networks and new formations develop shared language, analytic frameworks and strategic orientations. To support the process of alignment, we build connective tissue between organizations, networks and alliances. Our political education programs introduce organizers and activists to systems-level analysis that is tied to actual practice. We have developed our frameworks with staff and leaders in the groups and networks, with hands-on support to help them internalize and adapt our frameworks and bring them into organizing, communications, leadership development, campaign development and governance.

ABOUT PEOPLE’S ACTION

Since 2016, People’s Action has been organizing millions of people around a bold agenda for real and lasting change. The agenda is more than a list of policies that can move short-term reforms; it is a vision and a strategy for long-term change that reflects the needs and ideas our communities have shaped. Knowing change starts close to home, People’s Action is building powerful organizations nationwide where people of all races, faiths and genders gather to make change. People’s Action develops local leaders who can power the campaigns, along with progressive policy makers at all levels of government. Together, we advance a national agenda that is worth fighting for.