

# **MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE**

A HISTORY OF LEFTROOTS



*In loving memory of Merle Ratner  
A revolutionary, a singer, and our Communist Auntie*

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# INTRODUCTION

This is the story of LeftRoots, an organization of social movement leftists in the United States that existed between 2013 and 2023. We were a temporary project that brought together hundreds of organizers and activists with the aim of strengthening and renewing the US left. We were a laboratory for learning, experimentation and development – of ourselves as aspiring cadres and of strategies for socialist liberation.

LeftRoots was started by four people in the San Francisco Bay Area and grew at its largest to a national membership of hundreds. Some of our members were seasoned leaders and founders of political organizations and activist campaigns, or staunch leftists who had been active in revolutionary left work as far back as the 1960's, some of us were newly radicalized organizers, new to being part of a revolutionary left organization. We lived mostly in major cities along both US coasts and in the US South and, by intention, most of us were people of color, women and LGBTQ. As LeftRoots members, we worked to develop our capacities and develop strategy, and at the same time, we were independently active in social movements fighting for Black liberation, for housing, environmental and education justice, immigrant rights, in the labor movement, in international solidarity. We were organizers and activists, and we were in LeftRoots, but LeftRoots did not direct or guide our external political work.

Instead, LeftRoots was a response to the movement conditions around us, and to the legacy of struggle we had been formed by. We could look back to the left movements that moved millions in the 1960's and 70's as an inspiration, but most of us had come up in social movement work that was largely disconnected from the organizations, knowledge and experience of the revolutionary left. Many of our members had built vibrant organizations and waged important fights for justice, but in the bigger picture, our forces were not on a path towards winning. People joined LeftRoots because they yearned for a different approach. We yearned to have a strategy for how to win, to have the skills we needed to implement that strategy, and to have a movement ecosystem that was more capable of advancing a strategy for winning, together. We yearned for a left that could win.

One of our early internal slogans was that we were going to 'make new mistakes' in building LeftRoots. We doubtlessly made many mistakes, and we also changed US social movement conditions. Each of us was deeply transformed by LeftRoots and we are proud of what we accomplished.

## Closing LeftRoots

From its founding, LeftRoots was meant to be a temporary intervention, not a permanent institution. We were by no means perfect, and many things we hoped to do were left unfinished. However, we closed our organization largely having accomplished what we set out to do. In 10 years, we developed the capacities of hundreds of US social movement leftists to carry out, formulate, and evaluate liberatory strategy. We built new practices to strengthen the organizational culture that left organizations need and to develop our social-emotional capacities. We advanced the US left's strategic thinking and we developed new frameworks and practices for leftists to use when articulating, evaluating, and

discussing strategy together. We got clearer about what it will take to renew a left in this country that can build on lessons from the past, stay rooted in a sober assessment of the present, and fight to win a liberated future.

LeftRoots closed to make way for new cadre organizations to emerge. We believed cadre organizations to be a crucial, and largely missing, element of the liberatory movement ecosystem needed to win 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism. Our purpose as a strategy development and cadre development project was to make it more possible for this to happen. Our assessment was that many of the necessary ingredients for a qualitatively stronger left were present in the US movement ecosystem, and that specific preparation work was needed. Most of our work focused on two preconditions. First, social movement organizers with left-leaning politics (aka “social movement leftists”) needed to develop their capacities as strategists and cadres, and second, the movement needed at least one strategy for liberation that substantial sectors could align around.

In 2023, we set out on our last task as an organization. We had done almost a decade of work to develop strategy and strategists, but we knew LeftRoots wouldn't be able to build the cadre organizations we needed alone. In our last year we brought together social movement leftists from both inside and outside LeftRoots to explore the possibility of building cadre organization together. The Socialist Organization and Strategy (or SOS) Process succeeded in cohering leadership cores around two strategic tendencies, each one committed to working towards launching a cadre organization. These teams formed independently from LeftRoots, and at the time of writing this document, both are working steadily towards this aim. The SOS Process also engaged hundreds more on questions of strategy, left organization, and socialism, and helped inspire and move many organizers and activists towards more clarity and unity on the role cadre organizations could play in strengthening US movements for liberation.

While the SOS Process resulted in launch processes for two distinct cadre organizations, LeftRoots did not close due to internal political differences. The SOS Process, and LeftRoots itself, were both designed to be multi-tendency. This means that every stage of our work included participants who had reached different conclusions about revolutionary strategy. We prioritized getting clear about our individual and collective strategic alignment and differences, instead of always striving to reach unity among all participants. We consider it a success that we were able to support our comrades to articulate two strategic orientations, clarify their alignment in relation to both, and commit to advancing those strategies. As we look to the future, our hope is that both organizations that emerge from this process will stay in relationship and learn from each other's experiments.

## **Summing up LeftRoots<sup>1</sup>**

We wrote this summation in late 2023 and early 2024. After we wrapped up our work about 30 LeftRoots members who held leadership roles in the organization came together

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<sup>1</sup> We have done our best to capture the depth and breadth of LeftRoots' work in this summation. To the extent that comrades would like to access additional public-facing LeftRoots documents, please visit <https://dusk.leftroots.net/resources.html>.

for a closing retreat where we finalized this document. What's included here reflects the unity this group was able to reach at the time of our closing.

We wrote this summation partly for ourselves, the hundreds of people who were members or close comrades of LeftRoots. For us, we hope this summation provides us with a collective record of our work and helps us make meaning out of our experiences.

We also wrote this summation to share our lessons learned with other comrades. We hope our experiences can be useful to those who are working to build new projects on the left. We hope this document gives you inspiration, hope, ideas and insights that help you do things better than we did.

In this Summation, we strive to be thorough and honest in retelling LeftRoots' history, including our successes as well as our shortcomings, of which there were many. Building LeftRoots was never easy. It required significant struggle and sacrifice from many people. Building LeftRoots was also a deeply transformative experience. We overcame challenges in ways that grew our grounded belief in what a renewed left could make possible for our movements and our people.

We need each other, and we need to learn from each other if we are going to win. We hope that the relationships, the capacities and practices, and the frameworks and ideas that we developed in LeftRoots will contribute to the success of the next stage of left organizational development in the United States.

We are grateful to those who went before us and we hope to make our revolutionary ancestors proud. If you are reading this and you are new to LeftRoots, we hope to meet you soon on the revolutionary road, comrade.

# HISTORY OF LEFTROOTS

The following section is the history of LeftRoots. We divided this history into six time periods.

- LeftRoots is Founded (2011-2013)
- Launch and nationalization (2013-2016)
- Growth Outpaces Clarity and Cohesion (2017-2018)
- Consolidation and Leveling Up (2019-2020)
- Accelerated & Intensified Cadrefication and Strategy Development (2020-2022)
- Homestretch and SOS Process (2022-2023)

Each period includes the story of **what happened** – the major milestones and events in LeftRoots’ organizational trajectory. Each time period also focuses on a few **key decisions** – the choices we made at the time that most shaped or impacted what happened next, why we made the choices we made, and what (if anything) we could have done instead. At the end of each period of our development, we point to a few key **lessons learned**. These are the takeaways or assessments that LeftRoots’ leadership developed at that time, which then shaped what we decided to do next.

# OUR CONTRADICTIONS

These are some of the core contradictions LeftRoots had to navigate throughout our existence.

## **Growth vs. depth**

Like many new organizations, we faced a contradiction between growth and depth. We needed to recruit and integrate many people to become a national organization capable of shifting US movement conditions. We also needed a high degree of depth in our clarity, our unity, and our commitment to accomplish what we were setting out to do. Sometimes we prioritized growth or depth almost exclusively and other times we sought to balance the two. In some ways, LeftRoots itself was a hypothesis about how to navigate the relationship between growth and depth in our movement. We were making the bet that a sustained, temporary focus on our depth – on cadreification and strategy – could make qualitatively different growth possible in the future.

## **Leadership and participation**

Like most movement organizations we needed skilled, politically clear leadership and we also needed active, collective participation. We had a responsibility to model and develop a healthy culture as we were many of our members' first left organization and we knew that anti-leadership and anti-Communist ideas held sway in the movement.

Since we were a time-bound intervention, our orientation to leadership and decision-making needed to prioritize our purpose. Our leaders needed to have high clarity and help hold us accountable to working outside our comfort zones. Due to leadership's approach to leading, and since we were a cadreifying organization, our leaders agreed they needed to lead while developing their own and other's capacities.

To have a chance of shifting movement conditions, and of maintaining a grounded assessment of the forces we were up against, we needed participation from many people who had earned leadership in different sectors, communities and geographies. We also needed participation that could increase our capacity – in both labor and skills – to overcome challenges and do work that the movement needed but had not yet been able to accomplish.

## **Development and cadreification vs. achieving our purpose**

LeftRoots required all of us to work at the edge of our capacities, and throughout our trajectory, we had to make choices about our development and how to achieve our purpose. Many of us came in highly skilled, but none of us had developed strategy for winning socialism in the US and most of us had never been in a cadre organization before. At the same time, we weren't a training institution, so even though cadre development was a part of our purpose, focusing on development alone would not get us where we wanted to go. We needed an approach that could help us navigate our differences in development and experience, as well as our different politics, while holding the line on our political purpose.



## **Building and renewing the left vs. fighting to shift external conditions**

We believed significant work to rebuild the US left was necessary to make our ongoing struggles for liberation more effective, and this would require redirecting some capacity away from social movement work. At the same time, we needed to be rooted in mass struggles to have a chance at building a relevant and effective force.

This contradiction created internal challenges. Most of our members were leaders in social movement struggles and this work drew their energy and attention, especially when crises happened. We were bringing together committed and skilled leftists into a new formation capable of coordinating collective action, and we were doing work oriented to long-term development of our forces while we were all experiencing urgent and escalating political, economic, and climate crises. Throughout our trajectory, we had to struggle for clarity about why we should keep building the left, instead of individually or collectively deciding to only prioritize social movement work.

This contradiction also made our work possible. Many of our members were in close relationship to other key leaders and social movement spaces, and as LeftRoots developed, we shaped each other's work. These relationships laid a foundation for how a future cadre organization could operate in relationship to social movements.

## **The scale of need vs. the scale of our capacity**

We operated during a period of movement upsurge and radicalization, with more social movement organizers becoming open to socialism, and the need for strategy and cadre organization. We were building after several decades when the US left had been weakened and fragmented, in a time when the need for a strong left was as urgent as ever. Like all movement organizations, we had limited capacity.

We did our best to make decisions about what to prioritize, making hypotheses about what we could do today that could make more possible tomorrow. Recognizing how much was needed, many people who joined LeftRoots made significant commitments and sacrifices, out of a strong sense that they had a responsibility to help make this project work.

## **Building towards 21<sup>st</sup> century cadre practice and reconnecting and learning from our left predecessors**

We were operating in the wake of the dismantling of much of the US left, and a historic 'divorce' between the party left and social movement left. We needed to build our familiarity with the revolutionary left, so that we wouldn't end up reinventing the wheel, and to help form and strengthen our identity as leftists, socialists, and revolutionaries. At the same time, we needed to innovate on existing cadre models and apply lessons from the 20<sup>th</sup> century left to strengthen the work going forward. We also needed approaches that were appropriate to our specific conditions. Throughout our trajectory, we sought to learn from our socialist past while also building new left practices to meet our current conditions.

# OUR PURPOSE AND POLITICS

## *ASSESSMENT OF THE US LEFT*

After decades in movement work in the United States, LeftRoots' founders had developed a sober assessment of the conditions of the US left that shaped our purpose as an organization. In the mid-2010s, when LeftRoots was starting up, US social movements were largely lacking a vision for what winning looked like, or a strategy for how to get there. We had insufficient scale and organization and were fragmented by geography and sector. Internal movement culture often reproduced negative dynamics in larger society that would then disrupt the movement's ability to grow. The dominance of nonprofit forms of organization led some to set priorities guided more by funders than by strategy. And for decades, most social movement organizations and party left organizations had operated in isolation from each other. Most US movement organizers lacked the capacities necessary to shift these conditions, and this was due to structural conditions, not personal failings.

Likewise, we found the institutional and party left to be insufficiently rooted in social movements and especially in the struggles of working-class communities of color. This left also lacked a coherent vision and strategy for 21st century socialism rooted in our current conditions of contemporary racial capitalism, patriarchy and empire. The institutional left struggled to effectively bring new generations of organizers into its ranks, and to maintain and grow capacity for strategy development and cadre development over time. This was due to many reasons that could be boiled down to the impact of COINTELPRO and the defeat of the global left by neoliberalism.

In the midst of these challenges, there were also big opportunities. There was an increasing tide of radicalization and openness to socialism in the United States. In the aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crisis, an upsurge of movements challenged the economic and political status quo, in the United States and worldwide. On the global stage, new left projects, including the Bolivarian Revolution, the Pink Tide across Latin America, and Syriza in Greece, were making advances that shifted our sense of what could be possible. In the United States, the Occupy movement and Bernie Sanders' campaign made socialism and economic inequality household words. Left organizers around the country had built dynamic local base building institutions and were willing to make bold, audacious demands.

LeftRoots believed the US social movement left had a special, untapped contribution to make in building the revolutionary left that was needed. There were new generations of committed, hard-working organizers with left politics who were rooted in oppressed and working class communities and struggles, who were reaching a new level of scale and depth. This could be a basis for renewing the left, but we required cadre-fication and strategy to make this potential real.

We saw a new revolutionary cadre organization as something possible in our period of history, that could connect different sectors of the US left into something new, with national strategy and leadership from social movement leftists. We set out to prepare ourselves to be able to help make this possible.

## ***BUILDING TOWARDS CADRE ORGANIZATION***

LeftRoots believed the US left needed but did not yet have a revolutionary cadre organization, rooted in strategic sectors of oppressed & exploited people, that could provide coherent national vision, strategy and leadership within a broader liberatory movement ecosystem. Our study of history showed us that one or more such organization(s) needed to exist alongside other organizational forms in a healthy movement ecosystem for revolutionary change to happen. While there were many crises facing our people and many problems in our movement, we prioritized work towards launching cadre organization because we believed this could qualitatively change movement conditions and transform the terrain on which we fight.

Our assessment was that a new or renewed cadre organization would need to be national in scope, rooted in social movement struggles, especially of working-class people and people of color. It would also need to have a membership that included both social movement organizers and people with party left experience. We took inspiration from the writings of Marta Harnecker<sup>2</sup> to define the functions and roles that were missing in our movement ecosystem, and that we believed cadre organization needed to take on;

### *Roles of political instruments:*

- 1. Design an alternative project for the world we want to build that unifies the struggles of diverse social actors behind a common vision;*
- 2. Eliminate the social and political fragmentation we have inherited and construct a social force willing to fight and capable of achieving that alternative;*
- 3. Continually analyze the global political situation and direct its actions on the basis of that analysis and the vision;*
- 4. Encourage and facilitate the people's protagonistic participation;*
- 5. Transform the people's consciousness by fighting against the harmful cultural heritage of the past.*
- 6. Seek out, and prepare new cadres who can breathe new life into the political instrument by combining popular wisdom with the global analysis of the political situation;*
- 7. Operate on a basis of mutual respect with social movements; and*
- 8. Give early warning of the weaknesses perceived and the mistakes being made in the construction of the alternative project.*

LeftRoots was a cadrefication organization, seeking to make cadre organization more possible in the United States. Although we saw cadre organization as essential, we were not a cadre organization. If we had been, members would have been expected to carry out a common strategy in their social movement work. Although a supermajority of our members engaged in community organizing and campaigning, they were not accountable to a strategy or political line set out by LeftRoots. We did not take an organizational

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<sup>2</sup>This was a synthesis we adapted from the book *A World to Build* by Marta Harnecker, as well as other sources. Harnecker referred to "political instruments" instead of cadre organizations to highlight the fact that the form of organization that takes on these roles would need to be determined by organizers in their specific time, place and conditions.

position on which campaigns members should prioritize, or on how to relate to an upcoming election. Individual LeftRoots members were accountable in their movement work to the organizations they were a part of, and although they might engage in discussions in LeftRoots about these types of questions, they ultimately made independent decisions about which interventions to make in their social movement work.

We were not a pre-cadre organization, meaning that we did not think we would one day “graduate” into becoming a cadre organization. Instead, we thought that if we were successful, it would be likely that LeftRoots cadres, along with many other leftists, would eventually help launch or join different cadre organizations. We also expected that we would likely dissolve after achieving our purpose, since new organizations with a different purpose would be needed.

## **A PROJECT FOR CADREFICATION AND STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT**

After the defeat of global socialist projects in the late 20th century, generations of US leftists had come up without opportunities to gain many of the expert-level skills our movement needed, so a key piece of our work was cadre development. We ran cadrefication and strategy development programs that built on and added to the work in the movement that our members did. This included intensive political education trainings, where we read and discussed revolutionary theory and history together. We experimented with developing strategy, doing both theoretical work and practical work to develop our clarity and test ideas. As we built LeftRoots, we learned together about how to build and run a left organization, and we built our capacities to be accountable to each other, to support each other, to struggle in principled ways, and to engage in left work with protagonism.

LeftRoots sought to develop strategy and strategists. Our first task was to define what we meant by strategy, since this word was used in so many different ways in the movement. We also had to learn to understand the theoretical tools that other revolutionaries had used to develop and evaluate strategy, from political economy, and dialectics, to theories of imperialism, and how to wage revolutionary struggle. Our goal was to develop strategy, and also to develop a critical mass of cadres who had a high level of skills and clarity on strategy, so they could help lead others in the movement to understand, carry out, evaluate, and update strategy.

Articulated in 2020, these Cadrefication Benchmarks synthesized what our main goals for cadre development were in LeftRoots.

### **LEFTRoots'S CADREFICATION BENCHMARKS**

**DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM:** *Cadres need to know how to make grounded assessments and identify contradictions in a variety of contexts. If cadres can make grounded assessments and use the dialectical materialist method to inform their action, they will be able to apply liberatory strategy in real-world conditions and contribute to building effective movement organizations.*

*ABILITY TO EVALUATE STRATEGY: Cadres need to understand and know how to apply the core concepts and methodologies that are the building blocks of liberatory strategy. If we have strategic literacy, we will be able to align around a strategy from an informed basis, and be equipped to contribute effectively to both carrying out and updating liberatory strategy in a future cadre organization.*

*CARRYING OUT STRATEGY COLLECTIVELY: In addition to basic discipline and follow-through on commitments, cadres need to know how to collectively learn lessons from shared experience and align their practice with collectively held political assessments and commitments. If we develop the individual and collective capacities necessary to effectively carry out shared political tasks and test hypotheses together, we will be equipped to carry out strategy as part of a future cadre organization.*

*RESILIENT PROTAGONISM AND DISCIPLINE: Cadres need to be able to advance political goals in difficult conditions without sacrificing their personal well-being or engaging in practices that lead to unnecessary destructive conflict. If we develop our capacity to combat alienation and assess and navigate internal and external contradictions in our lives and movement practice, we will be able to engage in principled struggle, and we will create a basis for shifting US movement culture towards more principled and effective practice.*

*LEFT LEADERSHIP: Cadres need to know how to build left consciousness with the people they organize, popularize a pro-21st century socialism, pro-strategy, pro-cadre orientation with social movement leftists, and participate effectively in left spaces. If we know how to lead as leftists, we will be able to contribute to developing the minimum conditions in the movement ecosystem that are necessary for a cadre organization to emerge.*

## **TESTING A HYPOTHESIS**

In LeftRoots we sought to grow our ability to be materialists and dialecticians. While we worked to build our assessments and thinking about strategy, we also developed a methodology for testing hypotheses in our immediate work. As we went through successive cycles of assessment, planning, practice, and evaluation, we grew our capacity to be scientific about our work. These practices helped us to be audacious and ambitious while also staying grounded in our concrete reality.

In many ways LeftRoots was one big hypothesis about how specific interventions in movement conditions could make a stronger, renewed US left possible. This hypothesis is still being tested, and whether we were correct will be determined in large part by what happens after LeftRoots has come to a close. We wrote this Summation in the spirit of testing hypotheses – sharing the observations and assessments that led to LeftRoots' founding, the hypothesis we set out to test in our organization, the contradictions we were navigating, and the story of the many cycles of experimentation and learning that we went through.

Looking back this is how we might articulate LeftRoots' organizational purpose as a hypothesis:

*If LeftRoots*

- *Develops the collective and individual capacities of a critical mass of US social movement leftists, rooted in struggles of oppressed and exploited people, to formulate, evaluate, and carry out liberatory strategy*
- *Drafts and reaches unity on at least one strategy for socialist liberation in the United States*
- *Builds relationships between organizers nationwide and strengthens the capacity of organizations and movements to connect their work to a liberatory strategy*

*Then we will have contributed significantly to making viable a launch process to form one or more new cadre organizations that could have the basis to play needed political leadership roles in the US movement ecosystem*

LeftRoots also had a broader movement-wide hypothesis about the role of cadre organizations in winning 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism

*If one or more cadre organizations emerges in the United States*

- *with clarity and unity on a liberatory strategy*
- *grounded in the struggles of working class communities and communities of color*
- *with sufficient developed cadres to carry out the strategy and build the organization*

*Then we will have qualitatively shifted US movement conditions in a way that makes winning 21st century socialism more possible.*

## OUR POLITICS

Although we did not have a political line or strategy about how to fight empire, or which issues or communities we should focus on organizing, LeftRoots did have a set of shared politics, or points of unity, as a basis for membership. These points of unity guided how we approached building the organization and shaped all the political interventions we prioritized throughout our trajectory.

### **LeftRoots Points of Unity (2013)**

Socialism Is the Future! Let's Build It Now!

Capitalism must go if humanity is to survive and if liberation is to be achieved. This crisis-ridden system of excess and exploitation lies at the root of all income disparity, environmental degradation, imperialist war and human alienation. It is poisoning our future. We will work to support and strengthen popular struggles that confront and weaken the logic, institutions and very system of capitalism. We will also support experiments that seek to form the foundations of socialist alternatives that foster solidarity, justice and equity. There is a better way.

End All Oppression for Lasting Human Solidarity.

White supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia and other forms of oppression are deeply embedded in modern capitalism and will not simply wither away once we have tossed capitalism into the trash-bin of history. Throughout history, these oppressions have and continue to distort society's development, degrade people's humanity and undermine efforts to create a bloc with revolutionary potential. Any liberatory movement of movements has to reflect the faces, histories and interests of the people who experience the savagery of white supremacy, patriarchy and homophobia first-hand, while we struggle to destroy and dismantle the systems themselves. A commitment to end systematic oppression is necessary if we are to achieve the lasting dignity of human solidarity.

Victory Will Require Both Popular Movements and an Organized Left.

Liberation will only be achieved as a result of the power of the people. Current conditions in the United States, most notably the lack of a unified social bloc who sees revolutionary change as its objective, suggest that reform struggles and survival projects will be two important expressions of popular struggle. It is the task of Leftists to support struggles and help guide them away from reformism and towards strategic challenge and fundamental break from the existing system. This process will require a myriad of organizational forms including mass movements of the popular classes and organized formations of Leftists working together, working collaboratively to unleash the power of the people, to achieve and consolidate revolutionary breakthroughs.

Stewardship, Not Ownership. Interdependence, Not Exploitation.

The planet is not a commodity to be possessed, owned and exploited by humanity for our own purposes. Humans must serve as good stewards, so that our interdependence with nature can be continued by future generations. We are guided by a commitment to build a society that is based on ecological balance.

Liberation Must Cross All Borders.

All peoples around the globe have equal claim to justice and liberation. Wealth and prosperity in the United States grows from the dispossession and subjugation of the peoples and lands in other parts of the world, especially the Global South. A liberatory movement of movements based inside the world's imperialist power must confront the institutions, ideology and legacy of empire, imperialism and U.S. exceptionalism in order to make real ties of global, human solidarity.

Transform Society, Transform Ourselves.

The current order alienates us all from our ourselves, from our labor, from others and from the planet. The struggle for liberation must not only aim to transform society and its institutions; it must aim to transform us as agents of change, empowering us with the opportunity to develop the capacities capitalism has denied us.

Strategy, Not Dogma, Must Be Our Guide.

Revolutionary movements must reflect the unique conditions of the nations in which they operate, which means that all effective movements must innovate. While we will employ the tools of analysis that we inherit from Marxism and other radical traditions, we will not dogmatically mimic the efforts or perspectives that guided other social movements. We will develop strategies to inform and

strengthen struggles for liberation, keeping our focus on both our vision of a liberatory future and on a sober and ongoing assessment of the existing conditions confronting us.

## **Dialectical materialism**

In addition to the points of unity detailed above, our approach was rooted in the methodology of dialectical materialism. We were a multi-tendency organization, meaning our members had different ideas and alignment with revolutionary strategy. One of the ways we approached the contradiction of being a cadre formation and strategy development project that did not have a strategy itself, was to focus on methodology. We focused on learning and applying a dialectical materialist methodology so we could develop strategists who could make their own assessments, choices and evaluations relating to liberatory strategy instead of simply following an organizational political line. This shaped what we studied, how we approached strategy development, and how we approached building LeftRoots itself.

## **Third World Marxism**

From LeftRoots' founding, we also rooted our organizational identity and thinking in the history of Third World Marxism and left national liberation movements in Africa, Latin America and Asia. We read Amilcar Cabral and Mao Tse-Tung as well as Lenin and Marx and in our initial membership training we learned about the history of Black Communists organizing the US South. We looked to Cuba, Vietnam and Venezuela for real-world examples of building socialism. We saw these movements and thinkers as a core part of the Marxist tradition, holding methodological lessons for us on how revolutionaries applied and expanded Marxist ideas to their unique conditions. We also did this for developmental reasons. The readings and historical examples we looked to helped dispel notions of socialism being a predominantly white or European political project, and it gave us examples of Communist, revolutionary leaders and movements who looked like us to draw inspiration from.



# LEFTROOTS IS FOUNDED: 2011-2013

*We are living in the best of times and the worst of times, in times of dangerous reaction and unprecedented possibility, in a period characterized by overlapping and interpenetrating crises which threaten humanity's very existence. While the systemic crises of the economy, the ecology and empire are all manifestations and causes of historic levels of deprivation, strife and alienation, the ruling class seems hell-bent on doubling down on a program of ever-intensifying neoliberal austerity and militarized crackdowns.*

*In response, all around the world, people are rising up in search of genuine solutions. Though historic and inspiring, alone none of these mobilizations will be enough. What is needed is a weaving together of these struggles into a social force capable of igniting a radical transformation of the existing social, economic and political order. The nature of these times makes fundamental change possible, though not inevitable. - Why LeftRoots (2013)*

LeftRoots launched publicly in 2013, but the initial work of founding the organization began as early as 2011. We were founded by four community organizers from the Bay Area (San Francisco and Oakland, California), who had worked together for over a decade in local coalitions and campaigns. Their many shared experiences in movement work set a foundation for their relationships and shared trust, and informed and grounded the assessments that led to LeftRoots's founding. All four were leaders of base building groups organizing working-class communities of color fighting for economic, racial and environmental justice. All four had experience with party left organizations, and with movement work that spanned the relationship between social movement and party left forces. Two of LeftRoots' founders had also been members of STORM (Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement), a cadre organization that operated in the Bay Area between 1994-2002.<sup>3</sup> LeftRoots' founders had also joined international delegations to Cuba, the Philippines, and South Africa, which showed them what a mass left movement could look like, and ignited their hopes for what might be possible in the US.

Although the Bay Area had a constellation of base building and activist groups with an informal political mesh between them, the local as well as national left had been in a long period of retreat since the 1980s. The region had many progressive organizations and individual leftists, but few explicitly left organizations. This created a relatively open field for experimentation with new left work, where there were few gatekeepers but also few existing models to draw from.

## Starting LeftRoots

The idea for LeftRoots started as a series of informal discussions after shared study sessions (which went by the name Activist Study Circles) and coalition meetings among its

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<sup>3</sup> To learn more about STORM, you can review their summation document, which is linked here: <https://www.capitalresearch.org/app/uploads/2009/08/stormsummation.pdf>.

four founders. Over time these discussions became more focused and an idea for a project began to take shape.

In this same period, two members of the group left their paid work as organizational leaders and began the Ear to the Ground Project, meeting hundreds of social movement leaders nationwide and interviewing them about what they were seeing and what they were yearning for, to create a report<sup>4</sup> assessing the state of left-leaning social movements in the US. Over the course of 2012 and 2013, the founding core decided to build a new organization, and established many key elements of the organization's purpose, principles, and structure.

In 2013, LeftRoots held its first public events, a series of online panel discussions that were meant to test interest in the project and start building a national presence. These hangouts covered ideas and movements that would become foundational to the organization, including Marta Harnecker's writings on Political Instruments, Michael Liebowitz on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism, the Black Lives Matter movement, and Politicized Somatics.

After many 1on1 conversations with Bay Area leftists and activists, LeftRoots officially launched in the Bay Area in August of 2013, inviting local organizers to participate in a 6-week training as a first step before potentially joining a local hub of LeftRoots members. This training, which was run by the founding core and two other comrades, would later be named the "Membership Bootcamp", and would become a prerequisite for all new members and a common point of reference for clarifying our politics.

## **KEY DECISIONS**

### **Starting a new organization**

The first key decision that shaped LeftRoots was the decision to start a new organization. The alternative would have been to keep building left infrastructure inside existing movement organizations. LeftRoots' founders had made attempts before to do this in their base building organizations. While some of these experiences were successful, and showed what could be possible, they also significantly strained capacity and challenged existing organizations to hold too many roles simultaneously. This ultimately made it clear that instead of stretching existing organizations and already busy organizers in more directions, new capacity and infrastructure would need to be built.

### **Building a national organization, but starting in the Bay Area**

From the start, LeftRoots was envisioned as a national organization. It was clear that making a serious contribution to rebuilding the US left and developing strategy would require work on a national scale. There was also interest for such a project across the country. The Ear to The Ground Project, and many informal conversations with comrades

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<sup>4</sup> To learn more about this report, you can review the Ear to the Ground Project's report, linked here: <https://roadmapconsulting.org/resource/ear-to-the-ground-activists-assessments-on-the-moment-and-the-way-forward/>

at movement convenings showed LeftRoots' founders that there were leftists and organizers across the country who wanted to try something new. This was confirmed when LeftRoots' first hangouts garnered high attendance and excitement from a national audience of social movement leftists.

LeftRoots' founders chose to start in the Bay Area instead of recruiting a national membership immediately. They were respected and rooted organizers in the Bay Area, with strong reputations and relationships to build from, so they chose to do the organization's initial experimentation and building where they already had the strongest basis of trust. Also, the founders recognized that we did not have the capacity necessary to support national infrastructure. The idea was that starting well locally would give us the best chance to launch a national organization. Many of LeftRoots' initial members in the Bay Area came from movement organizations the LeftRoots' founders had built, led, or worked with closely on shared campaigns and initiatives.

### **Building a cadre organization with a membership**

LeftRoots was built as an organization dedicated to developing cadres and developing strategy that also had a membership component. The organization's primary goal was the development of membership. Our work was not to generally change the material conditions or the balance of forces in the conjuncture, but to specifically change the material conditions of the US Left. External work did not always have the same depth as internal work; this meant LeftRoots did not do campaign work or organizing, and when we did take on externally facing collective work, we focused on time-limited and relatively short-term experiments.

LeftRoots' target membership were organizers already grinding on mass work, and we wanted to avoid replicating or conflicting with other organizations. We also could have developed as a training intermediary instead of as a membership organization, but we assessed that sustained collective work would be needed to accomplish our purpose. And that sustained collective work would only be possible in a membership container that required and could support ongoing engagement.

LeftRoots wanted to recruit organizers who knew we needed strategy, leadership, and coordination, but who were also less familiar with the left and with cadre organizations. We would need strategy and strategic unity to make a future cadre organization possible, and we needed to build trust and cohesion with each other first. We were fragmented by geography, movement sector, and generation. We also knew that we all needed cadre organization, and this included the founders and core leaders of the organization. We had no template for how to do many of the things we were trying to do, so we needed to be able to experiment together as we also worked to develop new skills and capacities. All of this meant we needed a participatory and collective process that brought organizers into shared work and relationship with each other around our specific purpose.

## LAUNCH AND NATIONALIZATION: 2013-2016

This was the period when LeftRoots became real. What started as an idea in the minds of a handful of people grew rapidly into a national organization with over 100 members. Two of LeftRoots' founders took on a full time, initially unpaid commitment to leading and building the organization, serving as the core leadership of the fledgling project. Dozens of organizers around the country made the commitment to join, recruited their comrades to become members, and led our first experiments in strategy, training, and organization building. By 2016, the organization had built the core structures envisioned in its first Constitution – several branches, an elected National Coordinating Committee, an active membership that met monthly, and several committees tasked with advancing the work. We were a fledgling organization of people coming from disparate corners of the movement, who recognized a common need and purpose in this new organization, and who inspired each other to transcend pessimism about what could be possible for the US left.

*That's Why I'm A Socialist*

*[call and response]*

*My mother- my mother was a school teacher*

*My brother- my brother's locked away inside*

*That's why- that's why I'm a socialist*

*I'm a feminist, I'm a socialist*

*That's why- that's why I'm a socialist*

*That's why- that's why I'm a feminist*

*That's why- that's why I'm a socialist*

*I'm a feminist, I'm a socialist*

*- LeftRoots' anthem, which we sang together at each member meeting. This was an adaptation of a South African movement song*

## **WHAT HAPPENED**

In 2013 and 2014, LeftRoots recruited its first members, formed a Bay Area branch, and began establishing its initial organizational practices, culture, and infrastructure. Over the next year, over 50 Bay Area members would join the organization after two successive Bootcamps. Members met at monthly meetings which took place over four hours on Sundays and included a potluck meal, childcare and Spanish interpretation. Branch members elected the organization's first Coordinating Committee and formed a Strategy Commission, a Security Commission, a Cadre Care Committee, and a Political Training Committee. LeftRoots invited Marxist writers Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin to lead a political education intensive with members focused on their article "Transcending Pessimism", which was one of the first texts prospective members would read together in the Membership Bootcamp.

While we were building in the Bay, LeftRoots also maintained a national presence. Members of our first Coordinating Committee traveled to movement convenings and conferences and met formally and informally with social movement leftists interested in LeftRoots. We started building a list of interested potential members, and of where future locally based branches might emerge. As a first activity, we asked groups of social movement leftists who were already connected to each other to come together and share their assessments of movement conditions in their region or sector. We held national online conversations, or "hangouts", discussing topics like the Bolivarian Revolution, grassroots feminism, and leadership development. In the fall of 2014, we sent a delegation to Ferguson, Missouri to support the protests and connect with local organizers following the killing of Black resident Mike Brown by local police.

At the end of 2014, after celebrating and evaluating its first year, the CC of LeftRoots formally decided to begin pursuing a national expansion. Over the next two years, LeftRoots rapidly recruited members around the country, formed new branches and elected new leadership, beginning to operate as a national organization in earnest.

By mid-2015, the organization doubled its membership by recruiting its first nationwide cohort of new members. In addition to the Bay Area branch, LeftRoots formed two online "seedling" branches that would eventually grow other local branches; leadership engaged in outreach and 1on1s with LeftRoots' original movement assessment tool to build these first branches. We formed an interim National Coordinating Committee, anticipating national elections once our membership was more established, and branches also elected their own leadership. The next year, we held our second national Membership Bootcamp, with comrades in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston forming LeftRoots' first locally based branches outside the Bay Area, and 85 new members joining. By mid-2016, LeftRoots had six branches, almost 200 members, and an elected national leadership.

While we were growing and building, we were also seeking to advance our purpose and engage with political developments happening around us. Now that we had a national membership, we formed our first national strategy and political training committees and set out to start defining how we'd do this work together. We organized a political education tour with stops in the Bay Area, Boston and New York City with Michael

Lebowitz and Marta Harnecker. In addition to being the only time Marta Harnecker ever traveled to the United States, that experience inspired us and clarified our thinking about 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism and building a new left that centered protagonism and human development. While the 2016 presidential elections were underway, we studied right-wing populism and the long-term strategy of the US Right together, and we came together to make meaning after Donald Trump was elected President of the US.

We built infrastructure at a rapid pace in this period. In these first years we relied heavily on our two founders who made a full-time-plus commitment, plus a third cadre member who joined staff in 2016, all of whom were either partially paid or unpaid for their labor. We incorporated as a Class C corporation, and decided early on that our fundraising approach would deprioritize grants and prioritize membership dues, member led fundraising campaigns, and individual major donor organizing. This was a time when video conferencing was in its infancy, and we worked to establish best practices for holding effective online containers and experimented with video conferencing platforms. We set up highly secure email and file sharing systems to facilitate member's work. We were creating new teams, branches, roles, and operating practices almost every month.

## ***KEY DECISIONS***

### **Building a national membership and leadership**

After a year of initial experimentation in the Bay Area, LeftRoots grew rapidly over the next several years. While LeftRoots was always intended as a national organization, the pace and nature of our expansion was not a given. LeftRoots could have decided to spend longer building in the Bay, or it could also have decided to keep leadership of the organization in the Bay Area, where there already was a strong basis of relationships, trust and unity. Indeed, when LeftRoots decided to go national, some members in the Bay Area branch had doubts about whether the organization was ready.

Our approach to expansion was shaped by a few key considerations. If LeftRoots was perceived as a Bay Area-dominated process, this could undermine potential for growing and building new unity with comrades across the country. Beyond perceptions, we also needed to operate from a more complete assessment of US social movement conditions, which meant we needed geographic diversity. Also, since parochialism and regionalism were both dynamics we saw as contributing to the weakness of the US left, we needed an approach that could help us overcome those tendencies.

When we grew, we relied heavily on the assessments of our first nationwide members about their city or region, who else should be recruited, and the current dynamics or movement history that needed to be taken into account. This approach made it possible for LeftRoots to recruit beyond the immediate circles of the founders or Bay Area branch members. This in turn created the basis for LeftRoots to be more multi-tendency, multi-sectoral, and national in character. Most of the people who would later become LeftRoots' core leadership did not know each other prior to joining the organization, and our process helped create new collaborations and relationships across the social movement left.

In addition to this strength, our approach also created challenges. Unlike in the Bay Area, LeftRoots leadership had not spent years working closely with all the people who became LeftRoots' initial leadership and membership across the country. This meant LeftRoots members had to build trust, relationships, and unity with each other while they were also building a new organization together. Members came in with different levels of clarity about LeftRoots' purpose, different levels of political development, and different political and ideological traditions, and then quickly were responsible for leading and recruiting others. A small but at times vocal group also had substantial differences about how LeftRoots should be carrying out its work. In the next period we would experience both the potential and the challenges created by our growth and national expansion.

## **Embedding LeftRoots in Black organizing spaces and supporting Black cadres' leadership**

LeftRoots was launching and building while the Black Lives Matter movement was first emerging, with actions in the Bay Area and across the country sparking a period of explosive growth. Many LeftRoots members were involved in this work, and some also resigned to focus on Black Lives Matter. In this context, our early leadership decided to make an intentional effort to have a presence in Black movement spaces, recruit Black members, and support the leadership of Black cadres inside LeftRoots.

While this was generally in line with the organization's politics, it was also a response to specific movement conditions and hard-won lessons from past moments of uprising. People across the country were being brought into action and radicalized at a scale many had never experienced before. After living through other periods of movement uprising, LeftRoots' early leadership had learned the hard way that when the uprising had passed, our movements would continue to lack the strategy, the capacities, and the level of organization we needed to decisively end the capitalist, white supremacist system at the root of police violence against Black people. Absent intentional intervention, the momentum of Black Lives Matter, happening at the same time as LeftRoots was first being launched, could have created a situation where LeftRoots was built with very few active Black members.

We prioritized connecting with Black-led movement work, recruiting Black social movement leftists to join LeftRoots, and supporting their development and leadership in the organization. For example, in 2016 LeftRoots held a series of public-facing online discussions for Black organizers about the growing Movement for Black Lives that connected us with many who were being radicalized by this movement, and some who went on to become members. And in 2017, a number of Black LeftRoots members convened a strategy dialogue called Black Organizing for Black Liberation, which brought together leaders of the Black social movement left, and was an important milestone in the organization's development of its strategy frameworks. LeftRoots' two Black founders, who were also staff, made it a point to build relationships and mentor younger Black organizers, both inside and outside LeftRoots. This approach meant LeftRoots was built with a substantial Black membership and leadership and with strong connections to Black leftists outside the organization. Many of these people went on to lead the process of

building the two fledgling cadre organizations emerging out of LeftRoots' organizational process.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### **We would need significant cadrefication to achieve our purpose.**

In this period, we learned major lessons about the nature and extent of the cadrefication that we would need to make possible among LeftRoots' members. For example, rather than being ready to discuss and debate different strategic questions, many of the organization's members looked to leadership to do this, assessing that they were not yet ready to develop strategy. Additionally, many members had no experience of a movement ecosystem where leftists or left organizations worked alongside social movements, so they struggled to grasp the types of interventions LeftRoots was trying to make in our movement conditions. We realized that members were not blank slates, and that rather than being underdeveloped, they (and we) were mal-developed. An unlearning process was therefore necessary in conjunction with a learning process. These lessons led us to expand our focus on cadrefication in the next period of work and begin to build out new practices and programs that supported our internal development.

### **Culturally, many of us were shaped in ways that hindered our work**

As we grew, we got clearer on what our members were bringing in with them as they joined LeftRoots. Even though all of us were self-avowed socialists seeking revolution, many held ideas and cultural norms that ran directly against the type of organization and political project we were trying to build. Some of these challenges were the product of the prevailing culture around us in capitalism, others stemmed from movement conditions. We started to see how individualism, alienation, anti-intellectualism and pessimism had shaped our members. We also began to see that many members held prejudices against leadership and authority in general, or against Communists and Marxists as being too top-down or commandist, too theoretical and intellectual, or too elitist. Some of these prejudices were responses to experiences our members had in other organizations. Additionally, few of us had direct experience with positive (or any) revolutionary left organizational work to draw on. All this deepened our understanding of how, in addition to doing skill development, we would need to intentionally foster an organizational culture that could support new ways of relating to one another and to our movement work, and model what Marxist methodology and cadre organization could make possible.



## GROWTH OUTPACES CLARITY & COHESION: 2017-2018

This was a period of intense activity and intense contradiction. At the start of 2017, we had built a national organization, Trump had just been elected, and we set out to develop strategy, assessing growing urgency in the political moment. We grew to our largest size, bringing on 100 new members in 2017 alone, and reaching almost 300 active members by 2018. At times, we experienced internal conflicts that brought other work to a standstill. We also made big advances in strategy development and cadre formation, and we began consolidating and developing a broader leadership layer across the organization. In the forming-storming-norming-performing model of organization development,<sup>5</sup> this period was our storm.

LeftRoots had brought together committed leftists, revolutionaries, and organizers from around the country who were united in their eagerness for a renewed, more powerful left. As we set out to do our work in earnest in this period, we had no blueprint and we needed to experiment, learn and make new mistakes to further our purpose. As we did this, we found that we were not all united on what interventions or contributions LeftRoots should be making, or on how we should carry those out. Differences over our organizational purpose and practice overlapped with interpersonal conflicts and movement beefs in challenging ways. Through it all we got clearer on what challenges we would need to overcome, and what basis of unity we would need to build.

*I feel real proud that I was able to live in a period where I saw people rise up. And that makes all the difference. Because this is not a theoretical question to me no more... And I always pride myself with a couple of quotes by Frederick Engels that've helped me so much. "We can and must begin to build socialism, not with abstract human material, not with human material created by us, but with the human material that has been bequeathed to us by capitalism." So I can't make no people, I can't make no movement. We gotta take this—what we got, and we gotta work with this thing to build a movement out of it for our future.*  
- General Baker, 2009 interview

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<sup>5</sup> This is a model of group dynamics that we found useful for understanding our own development as an organization [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuckman%27s\\_stages\\_of\\_group\\_development](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuckman%27s_stages_of_group_development)

## WHAT HAPPENED

At the start of 2017 we decided to expedite LeftRoots' strategy development process, while seeking to also attend to our continuing need for cadre-fication. We made this decision in response to Trump's election, assessing a need for clarity and grounding on how the movement should respond. We formed a small team of politically and ideologically developed cadres and tasked them with drafting a strategy for socialist liberation in the United States. The idea was that this would give us an example of what strategy for liberation could look like, and be a starting point for collective learning and debate over the next several years.

We also continued to expand our strategy development and cadre-fication work. We launched LeftRoots Labs, an opt-in structure through which members could receive support for time-bound experiments in shared action or investigation for the sake of shaping strategy. Some cadres formed a strategy lab to engage in experimentation during the 2018 midterm elections. We reorganized our internal committees so all cadres were now required to participate in Praxis Circles – small groups organized by the movement sector that met regularly to discuss strategy and movement work. We started clarifying an internal division of labor across our three major areas of our work – cadre-fication, strategy development, and organization-building, and we expanded staff to include a staff person dedicated to cadre-fication.

We also expanded our organizational infrastructure. In 2017 we approved a new constitution, which updated our internal structure to reflect our growth and put a finer point on how we articulated LeftRoots' purpose, specifying that we were focused on 'developing strategy and strategists.' We raised 100k in 5 days in our most ambitious fundraising campaign to date. We held Membership Bootcamps in 2017 and 2018, and grew to our largest size ever, bringing almost 100 members into the organization in 2017 alone. In response to Trump's election, we revamped the existing Security Team, which was charged with assessing threats and risks and developing grounded practices to address them.

In early 2018, we came together for our first and only all-members in-person Congress in Oakland, California. This was the first time many members had ever met each other in person. Prior to Congress, members started reading and discussing *We Believe That We Can Win*, the document written by the team we had created to help us expedite strategy. At Congress, we attempted to debate this document together, but were unsuccessful. After Congress, cadres formed study and writing teams to deepen the document's analysis or articulate differences with the strategy. We had originally planned to release *We Believe* publicly after the Congress, but responding to concerns raised by some members (including a minority of the NCC), the NCC reversed course and postponed the document's release by one year to include a larger bundle of other documents written by cadre teams in response to it, as the first issue of a new LeftRoots journal called *Out to Win*.

In this period, we planned and built the Little Red School, a year-long political training initiative which all members were expected to complete. When the Little Red School was first proposed, there was pushback from some members and people in leadership. Some

raised concerns that this would be too challenging or intensive for members, or that studying theory would take up time and energy that could be better used in creating or carrying out strategy now. After some struggle and a lot of work, most members successfully completed the program. In small groups, meeting over the course of a year, we studied Marxist tools of analysis like political economy, and theories of hegemony, the state and imperialism, and social oppression. For many, this was their first rigorous study of Marxist theory.

## **KEY DECISIONS**

### **Expediting strategy development by creating the first Strategy Lab Advance Team**

When Donald Trump was elected president of the US, we decided to speed up strategy development. We needed cadre formation to create, debate and align on strategy, but we also needed strategy, and we needed it soon. We knew many of our members would struggle to stay the course on a multi-year process of cadre development if LeftRoots wasn't able to provide meaningful political clarity during this intense and terrifying political moment.

This was our first ambitious organization-wide initiative to move forward our purpose of developing strategy and strategists. We applied approaches that would later become institutionalized across LeftRoots. We created an advance group based on their skills and experience, tasking them with producing new knowledge for the sake of supporting all of our development. Our approach asked members to hold contradictions. We were lending substantial capacity to drafting a strategy, but that strategy was not going to be our organizational line and we did not expect all members to align with it. We needed people to do their best to ground and clarify their alignment with the document produced by this team, even as they also worked to build their understanding of some of the concepts in it. We expected members to proactively work to articulate another strategy if they were not aligned, and to independently experiment with the strategy if they were aligned and positioned to do so in their movement work.

Through this work, we got clearer on what it took to develop strategy, and many cadres independently took up *We Believe* as a guidepost for their movement work. We began to articulate a framework for what questions a liberatory strategy would need to answer, which became the seed of *LeftRoots' Liberatory Strategy Toolkit*, a framework we developed for leftists to use in formulating and evaluating strategy. We got clearer on what Marxist tools of analysis cadres needed to have a grasp of to be protagonist strategists.

*We Believe* and its uses also became key points of contention among our members. The differences that emerged in relation to this process helped make clear where we still needed to build unity, cadre formation and strengthen our organization. Some cadres approached the process by othering leadership, as if it was being done to members by "the national leadership" instead of something we were doing together. For some, this was rooted in a lack of trust in the organization's ability to hold the contradiction that *We Believe* was not LeftRoots's political line. There was also discomfort or disagreement with the assessment that we were all underdeveloped as strategists. And some were not aligned with LeftRoots'

approach to strategy development, asserting that we would need to engage in more social movement work together before we could develop strategy.

## **Taking responsibility for mediating conflicts between cadre members**

During this period, conflicts or tensions began to emerge inside the organization. Some centered around the purpose of LeftRoots itself, others were antagonistic conflicts between members who worked together outside the organization, and sometimes these overlapped. We decided to take responsibility to mediate conflicts because we understood intra-movement conflict to be a major threat to our ability to strengthen the left. We also knew many people were looking to LeftRoots for leadership in this area. Like many things in LeftRoots, we had skilled and experienced comrades to draw on, and we also had very limited capacity and no clear roadmap.

We were mostly successful at helping groups resolve and clarify conflicts that were non-antagonistic in nature. Members sometimes had doubts, differences, or concerns about the organization's work, and some members were not fully aligned with LeftRoots' purpose. This led to conflicts when members did not practice unity in action or engage in direct, principled communication, or when they organized internally to advocate for LeftRoots to have a different purpose or even undermine other comrades. While these conflicts were ultimately rooted in political differences, they often took the form of interpersonal struggles and intersected with other local movement beefs. This made clarity challenging, but we were able to create opportunities for direct, transparent struggle to happen, for example by facilitating two branch-wide re-grounding processes where all members of a branch engaged together to clarify differences and struggle for unity.

We were not as successful at navigating or resolving conflicts that were more antagonistic in nature. These mostly originated as antagonistic conflicts between employers and employees in the same movement organization and included accusations of harassment or unprincipled behavior against individuals or their organizations. While we were clear politically on why LeftRoots should take responsibility in these situations, our desire for a new left culture ultimately led us to make ungrounded assessments of our capacity to provide the leadership needed for successful resolution. The most common outcome of our attempts to mediate these types of conflicts was for individuals to resign from the organization, and we made errors that led some dear, committed comrades to choose to no longer work with LeftRoots.

We learned some hard-won lessons from these experiences. We needed practices that could help us prevent conflict and identify potential antagonisms as early as possible, instead of calling on leadership to resolve situations that had already reached a crisis point. We needed to clarify our parameters of accountability to each other as aspiring cadres who engaged in movement work together that was not accountable to LeftRoots. We also needed to intentionally develop our skills for principled struggle. While we made errors in our early attempts to mediate organizational conflict, we were able to apply these lessons in practice after this period, and we were much better able to prevent antagonistic conflict and engage in principled struggle with each other in LeftRoots' later years.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### **We were building protagonism without clarity**

In this period many people were highly disciplined and committed members, exerting leadership and doing hard work to coordinate branches, strategy workgroups, Praxis Circles, and other containers. But not everyone who was stepping up was clear about the organization's purpose, which meant that in the day-to-day work of running LeftRoots, the parameters for what could be up for debate were not always clear. This created situations where some cadres advocated for work that was not aligned with the organization's purpose, some cadres struggled to advance containers without sufficient clarity or capacities, and others were unclear about where to assert leadership or make a contribution.

Part of this was due to limited capacity and the need to sustain momentum while building a new organization. It was by no means guaranteed that LeftRoots would successfully launch or be able to move forward its work, so we did not want to stifle initiative. We were also still developing effective methodologies for cadre formation and strategy development, and we were learning about our members and their level of development and clarity.

After the experiences of this period, we assessed that we had leaned too heavily towards creating opportunities for members to self-direct projects, without sufficient support for their clarity or a grounded assessment of whether they had the capacities to do so. We learned that we would need to assert LeftRoots' purpose more clearly in the next period and develop a different culture and set of practices for how we approached leadership roles in the organization.

### **We were not yet ready to collectively debate or align on a liberatory strategy**

Our experience in LeftRoots' strategy development process showed us we had many challenges to overcome if we were going to develop the types of strategists we needed. We had produced a draft strategy and studied it together, but our members did not have the analytical tools they needed to assess the strategy's merits and deficiencies in a grounded way. Since some people were still building their clarity about the organization's purpose, and others were not aligned, our strategy discussions became confused with other organizational questions about LeftRoots' purpose and whether this was our organizational line.

When we debated *We Believe* together at Congress, and asked people to describe why they were or were not aligned with the strategy, the reasons many people gave were based on details and not on the totality of the strategy's internal logic. Much internal discussion of the document hinged on whether it gave 'enough' attention to a particular issue, tactic, or community, instead of asking if the conclusions about how socialists should approach their organizing made sense. This basis of alignment with a strategy was not going to be sufficient if we were going to develop cadres who could exert leadership in the movement ecosystem's various sectors and regions to craft, carry out, evaluate, and update strategy. These lessons led to the process of developing *LeftRoots' Liberatory Strategy Toolkit*, as a framework through which to craft and evaluate strategy. They also

shaped how we approached strategy development going forward, with a much greater emphasis on cadreification.

## **Alignment with LeftRoots' purpose was the make-or-break factor shaping whether we could move forward**

The experiences of the past few years had shown many people in leadership of LeftRoots, including its founders, that many members were not fully clear about the organization's purpose and intended political intervention. There was also a small but vocal group of members who were not fully aligned, mostly arguing LeftRoots should be engaging in political work to shift external conditions. This combination created a situation where many of our meetings became tennis matches between two factions, and although a majority of members were aligned with the organization's founding purpose, few felt comfortable advocating for this position, and instead looked to established leadership for direction. This dynamic, along with other conflicts or tensions that sometimes overlapped with differences over the organization's direction, became a major threat to the viability of the project. On the surface we were a functioning organization doing lots of work, but we kept going in circles when it came to advancing our purpose.

As we built the organization, we were learning about what made it possible for people to be effective members and leaders in LeftRoots. As an organization dedicated to cadreification, it seemed obvious at first that the most highly developed cadres would always be those who could best advance the project. But we saw again and again how those who were most aligned with our cadreification purpose were most able to commit and contribute to advancing our work, whether they were experienced, developed cadres or younger, greener organizers.

We also were seeing how our lack of alignment kept stalling us. For example, we dedicated a large amount of capacity to "cadre care" work, seeking to build an organizational culture where high rigor in our participation was expected and where we also worked hard to support each other to overcome challenges. But when our members were not aligned with the idea that they needed cadreification, they also were not likely to shift their practice to be more accountable to attendance or participation expectations, no matter how much support we offered. We also had seen how lack of internal alignment hindered our process of strategy development.

In practical terms, our mutual need for cadreification was a key basis of unity on which to advance the organization's work. It was not enough to agree that cadreification of social movement leftists was a good idea, LeftRoots' members needed to be willing to put in work to develop their own capacities and to help develop their comrade's capacities. We also needed our members to be aligned with the idea that building a cadre organization should be one of the movement's top priorities and understand what this meant and what it would require.

Although LeftRoots' leadership core assessed that a majority of our members were aligned with the organization's purpose, we had not yet translated that majority alignment into a collective capacity to move in unity across the organization. In this period, we got clear that this needed to become our top priority.

# CONSOLIDATION & LEVELING UP: 2019 - 2020

In this period, we invested in structures, practices and programs meant to increase our member's collective clarity about LeftRoots' purpose, and we "leveled up" expectations for how all of us should engage in the daily work of the organization. We began to establish many of our core methodologies, and we strengthened and supported LeftRoots' leadership teams.

In 2019 we set out to "Keep it 100", seeking to become an organization where 100% of members were highly clear and aligned with our purpose or willing to practice unity in action where not fully aligned. Every member was required to explore their clarity on LeftRoots' purpose and affirm their alignment and commitment or lack thereof. This was a challenging but successful fight for LeftRoots' purpose, where many cadres stepped up their leadership to engage in principled struggle with peers. Some chose to leave the organization after clarifying their lack of alignment, and many more recommitted with renewed clarity. This process made it possible for us to articulate and start moving forward with an organization-wide plan for how we could ultimately achieve our organization's purpose.

Organize, organize, organize

[everyone sings]

*Organize, organize, organize (4x)*

*Cause we want peace for our children; Free education and the right to dream  
Cause we want justice for our people; We want clean water and clean air to breathe  
Cause we want justice for our people; Land liberation and housing for free  
Cause we need food justice for our neighbors; the right to migrate and move freely*

*That's why we... organize, organize, organize (4x)*

*Cause we want a future for our planet, a global socialist economy  
Cause we want freedom from exploitation and to live with full dignity*

*That's why we... strategize, strategize, strategize (4x)*

*Cause we want liberation for our people and no more war on our communities  
Cause we need left leadership for our movement, cadre development is the key  
That's why we... cadrefy, cadrefy, cadrefy (4x)*

*- From the LeftRoots Choir Songbook*

## WHAT HAPPENED

In 2019 we started the year with a plan to ‘level up’ our participation, our rigor, and our cadre development. This started with leveling up the NCC, to better position them to lead our membership and our organizational planning. All NCC members now began specializing as part of a work team overseeing either strategy development, cadrefication, or organization building. We also reorganized staff, with three director-level staff focusing on each of those three core areas of work. To clarify our goals as a cadrefication project, we adopted a Cadrefication Framework as an organizational document outlining the Ideological, Political, Organizational, and Social-Emotional capacities required of cadres.

Building off our lessons about the importance of organizational alignment, we dedicated most of our organizational capacity in the summer and fall of 2019 to the *Keep it 100* Initiative, in which every member was asked to clarify their alignment with LeftRoots’ purpose and either recommit to the organization or make a principled exit. As part of this initiative, we held a series of residential Leadership Institutes to support cadre’s clarity and readiness to engage in struggle with peers.

We also reorganized our internal committees to help us prioritize and collectivize cadrefication. After a year of study, a supermajority of our membership were graduating from the first round of the Little Red School. In addition to being many members’ first systematic exposure to Marxist theory, the LRS was the first time every member helped hold collectively run containers together. We had worked in small, self-directed groups to complete a challenging course of study over almost a year. Building off the success of this experience, we phased out Praxis Circles, because most of them had been struggling to clarify a direction for their work and we created a new basic unit of membership called Cadre Circles. Cadre circles also brought small groups of LeftRoots members together, but instead of being organized by movement sector as Praxis Circle had been, they brought cadres together who were doing different movement work for the purpose of supporting each other’s cadrefication. In these new groups members started making individual cadrefication plans based on their own and their peer’s assessments of their level of development.

After the *Keep it 100* initiative we held a Membership Bootcamp with a more targeted approach to recruitment. We also held LeftRoots’ biggest fundraising campaign, raising 200k over 5 days. In 2020 and every year until our sunset, we decided to no longer recruit new members, and we revamped our fundraising approach to consolidate individual donors as our primary source of income. As a time-bound organization, we made these decisions so we could free up as much capacity as possible to work on achieving our organization’s specific purpose.

A small group of cadres completed the first draft of the Liberatory Strategy Toolkit, a framework to support leftists to formulate, discuss, and evaluate strategy. In the spring of 2020, we held our first introductory training on the Strategy Toolkit for all members. We also produced two editions of LeftRoots’ journal, *Out to Win*. The first one released *We Believe* along with response articles, the second edition included articles about base



building and youth organizing praxis, reflections from international delegations, and responses to issue 1.

Keep it 100 was successful but emotionally difficult, and we entered 2020 seeking ways to re-energize ourselves. We worked towards a second in-person Congress scheduled for March 2020. We moved forward a plan to expand Strategy Workgroups so that all members would be involved in collective investigation and experimentation. Both of these plans would need to be completely restructured because of the Coronavirus pandemic. While these new conditions led to many hardships and challenges for our members, the pandemic also increased our sense of urgency and our feeling that we needed each other. Our prior work had positioned us to have the clarity and the leadership we needed to be able to effectively pivot in ways that strengthened us.

In the spring of 2020, the NCC used the newly drafted Liberatory Strategy Toolkit to write an updated assessment of the conjuncture called *LeftRoots and the COVID-19 Moment*, which helped ground how we approached the tumultuous events of 2020 and early 2021. To further support our consolidation, and meet pandemic health requirements, we transitioned to monthly online all-members meetings, instead of separate monthly meetings by branch. For the first time, all members were having the same conversation, and we could ensure that politically clear, skilled comrades were leading every organization-wide discussion. Throughout the spring and summer of 2020, the NCC worked at an intense pace to create a new set of program plans laying out how LeftRoots could achieve its purpose and sunset by 2023.

## **KEY DECISIONS**

### **Building clarity and alignment on LeftRoots' purpose in the "Keep it 100" Initiative**

LeftRoots intentionally recruited a wide range of social movement leftists with varying degrees of experience with the left. Some people joined because they wanted training and development, or because they wanted to strengthen our movements, or simply because they respected the person who asked them to join. Others came in with prior experience on the left and developed thinking about strategy, vanguard parties, or what type of left organization we needed to build. This meant that when leadership said words like "cadre organization" or "political instrument" or "leadership", our members heard different things. Some people were not fully clear about what a cadre organization was. Others had developed ideas about what type of organization needed to be built, and an assumption that they would be able to win over other members and shift the organization's approach.

After the Membership Bootcamp, which we all went through before joining, we didn't have another systematic program for building internal clarity about our purpose. Throughout LeftRoots' first years, elected leadership positions were difficult to fill, so whoever was willing to volunteer would usually be elected. This meant our elected leadership did not share a baseline of capacities, clarity, or even unity about the organization's purpose. We also were balancing our need for internal clarity with our need to keep organizing. To connect new people to the organization, we needed to speak to how our work was seeking to achieve what we all wanted – a stronger, more effective movement that could

ultimately win. While this was an effective message, it also sometimes led to confusion about LeftRoots' specific purpose.

We were acutely aware of our responsibility as a left organization to not repeat past errors of purging dissenting factions. We also knew we needed to strengthen internal clarity about our purpose. The goal of Keep it 100 was to give every member an honest, dignified, and supported opportunity to explore their alignment, struggle through any doubts or questions, and make a decision regarding their continued commitment to LeftRoots.

Further, leadership had to accept that our participation percentage was never going to be 100%. There would always be some degree of difference inside the organization, but this did not have to prevent the organization from functioning, or work from being completed.

The NCC, on the request of staff, designated a small team to lead the Keep it 100 Initiative. This team sought to build members' clarity and develop more collective capacity for principled struggle. We recruited several dozen cadres from all branches to lead the initiative, based on an assessment of individual's clarity and capacity for principled struggle. All Keep it 100 Team members were expected to attend a weekend-long residential Leadership Institute facilitated by LeftRoots founders and early leaders and then hold recommitment 1on1's with each other. After that, the team members helped lead their branch to engage the Keep it 100 process and then held recommitment 1on1's with at least 3 of their peers. Each member of LeftRoots was asked to self-assess their own clarity and alignment with key assertions relating to LeftRoots' purpose, as well as their past practice and their intended future commitment to the organization. The outcomes of all 1on1's were reported to the NCC, and cadres could appeal directly to the NCC if they did not reach unity in their recommitment conversation.

About 80% of cadre members recommitted to the organization and created recommitment plans. From the 20% that did not recommit, some were clear and theoretically aligned with the organization and its purpose, but unable or unwilling to recommit, identifying lack of bandwidth or capacity as their primary barrier. Others from that 20% were able to get clear about our purpose, and that clarity allowed them to recognize that they were not sufficiently aligned. Also from that 20%, the majority engaged in respectful principled struggle with another member of the organization, and while their exits caused sadness, we experienced them as dignified and grounded and were able to stay in relationship with them. A small minority opted for open-letter-style resignation emails sent to all members, despite having access to the choice to engage in principled struggle. Some of these letters included ungrounded assessments with kernels of truth, which, in another period of the organization, might have been disruptive or disorganizing for our members. However, these open letters didn't have much impact, which we interpreted as an indicator that Keep It 100 had been successful in consolidating a supermajority of members around our purpose and approach to building the organization.

### **Consolidating a pro-leadership and pro-cadrefication approach to building LeftRoots**

Our experience so far had taught us that we would not advance without exerting strong leadership and fighting for LeftRoots' purpose and approach. It also taught us that we

needed significant cadrefication. These lessons became the basis for how we developed our internal culture going forward.

We intentionally set out to clarify and consolidate around our cadrefication purpose. We built clarity on what our goals were, and what capacities we needed to develop, and we studied cadre organizations and the role of cadres in a broader movement. We also built a culture around our shared identity as aspiring cadres, affirming that all of us were in a process of development, and encouraging individuals to name their strengths and growth edges, and make visible, celebrate and support each other's journey of cadrefication<sup>6</sup>.

This pro-cadrefication approach had significant implications for how we approached leadership. From Keep it 100 onward, we began to include assessments of capacities as a criteria for who should hold a leadership role. We needed to rely on our comrades who were the most developed in a particular capacity to support the development of others. We worked to get specific about this. For example, one comrade might be called on to lead strategy development work, but a different comrade would be asked to coordinate a cadre circle. This approach also informed who we called on to lead all-member meetings, who joined the NCC, and who led our trainings.

Building LeftRoots took unapologetic leadership from politically clear, emotionally intelligent, skilled individuals. In this period, we asserted LeftRoots had a specific purpose, and that we had developmental criteria for each leadership role, and that neither was negotiable. We expanded leadership roles and containers, more clearly specified the function of each one, and focused on supporting more people to assert leadership. We were able to apply this lesson in our work going forward, solidifying a culture where leadership was supported and valued, with rigorous expectations and shared goals.

## **Expanding our organization-building infrastructure**

Alongside our consolidation, we also prioritized increasing our capacity to hold and move the organization. While we always had political leadership that was clear and skilled, we also severely lacked resources and capacity.

In our early years, a small staff held key political leadership and also had to keep the lights on, fundraise, and make sure we were tracking and supporting our membership. When we tried to build capacity among members, we often found that we didn't have the leadership capacity necessary to carry out training and ongoing support in the way we knew was needed, and this kept us from growing our ability to move more work together effectively. For our first five years, we had a maximum of one staff person dedicated to both operations and membership support. By 2021 we had expanded our staff in these areas to four full-time people. This expansion meant we could provide more consistent support and uphold expectations around member participation, leaves, attendance and dues payments. It also freed up more capacity for those best positioned to exert political leadership to be able to do so. This increased capacity made rigorous tracking of membership and

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<sup>6</sup> More on how we built a pro-cadrefication, pro-leadership culture can be found in LeftRoots' Case Study on Organizational Culture (<https://dusk.leftroots.net/resources/LeftRoots%20Org%20Culture%20Case%20Study.pdf>).

members' capacities more feasible. In turn, the increased available data allowed for regular pivots, changes of team membership, and other necessary strategic moves.

Staff was an important element of how we increased organization-building capacity, but it was by no means the only one. Starting in 2020, we dramatically increased organizational support for LeftRoots' mid-level leaders, the people who were responsible for coordinating cadre circles. In addition to facilitating monthly cadre circle meetings, these coordinators, or "Membership Organizers" attended twice-a-month trainings together and submitted monthly reports on their cadre circle's conditions. We also expanded operations teams, with increased numbers of cadres dedicating capacity to fundraising, maintaining our tech infrastructure, and organizational security.

## **Creating an organization-wide plan towards our endgame**

Shortly after we consolidated through Keep it 100, the COVID-19 Pandemic upended all our plans. We quickly worked to update our assessment of the conjuncture, identifying that this was a period of increased political volatility and risk which in turn made LeftRoots' political intervention even more urgent. These assessments were borne out when a few months later the George Floyd uprising brought millions into the streets, and as we hurtled towards a Presidential election with fears of an attempted Right-wing coup.

Over the summer of 2020 the NCC worked furiously to update our plans, taking into account our internal consolidation and external conditions. We now had experience to inform a methodology. We had made initial attempts at strategy development, we had run successful cadrefication training programs, and we had learned about how to build effective containers that supported cadre's development. All this made it possible for us to set out a detailed plan about how we could achieve our purpose over the next three years. For the first time, we were also able to further integrate our three areas of work by creating a series of "all-cadres initiatives," each dedicated to simultaneously advancing our purpose and cadrefying our membership.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### **Attending to our emotional conditions made our political purpose more possible**

While we knew this as a general rule of good organizing, in Keep it 100 we made advances in our methodologies for how to do this in LeftRoots, and we began to see the results. We had struggled with how to approach this before. We knew our transformation into cadres required us to attend to our health and well-being, but we did not want to replicate the individualistic and consumerist self-care orientation we sometimes saw in social movement spaces. We also knew we needed to increase our capacity to be disciplined and overcome challenges, but we did not want to become grumpy leftist martyrs.

In the Keep it 100 Institutes we began experimenting with new practices meant to increase our self-awareness, build our connections to each other, and support our resilience. By building our social-emotional capacities to extend trust, our political purpose became more possible. We also learned that it was possible to build this capacity in members, too. We checked in with our bodies and practiced naming our moods. We

discussed how we were shaped by our life experiences to relate to movement work. For example, one of us might have a “team fire” movement tendency, and always be ready to fight back with urgency against injustice, and another person might be “team water” and more oriented towards caring for the group. We shared our stories of why we were committed to building the left, we sang movement songs together, and we practiced giving and receiving feedback. We began to build a methodology, informed by scientific knowledge about human development, that made it more possible for us to all change and grow together.

During this period, we learned that politicized operations and dialectical structure were necessary for LeftRoots to effectively consolidate and level up. The method for engaging in operations work is a key political decision, and could not be compromised by delegating responsibility to non-aligned, undeveloped members for the sake of expediency. In this, we recognized that as a cadre organization, we needed leftists who were cadrefied to engage in key operations work. Therefore, the development of LeftRoots as a whole was directly connected to the functioning of operations (and vice versa). Our understanding of the above provided us with a methodological way to wrestle with our conditions, making it possible for us to identify those conditions and pivot as necessary.

### **It was possible to build a culture of principled struggle in LeftRoots**

Our experience in Keep it 100 and in successful branch re-grounding processes showed us that a different culture was possible in LeftRoots. The methodologies we developed, the capacity we dedicated, and the commitments to new practices that dozens of cadres stepped into all helped build a new organizational terrain. Now, all members had experienced struggling with one another to reach political clarity and unity, many people had held challenging conversations and stepped into unfamiliar or uncomfortable practices. Many of us had reflected on how our previous practice had shaped the organization and resolved to ask questions and seek clarity before jumping to conclusions, to bring concerns directly to our comrades instead of gossiping, or to not hang back when we had clarity or leadership to provide. Post-Keep it 100, participants in the all-member meetings shared testimonials about their growth and development. This was one of the ways LeftRoots built the culture of supporting each other's cadrefication; it was a way to build trust. Members shared vulnerable stories, whether about overcoming challenges, doing things that had previously been very scary, or changing how they thought about themselves as leaders. This was a powerful practice that most members appreciated.

After Keep it 100, cadre circles became the place where LeftRoots members engaged most deeply with their own process of transformation, and built relationships of comradeship, mutual support, accountability with each other. Cadre circles were the containers that did tailored 1on1 and group support for members who were struggling to meet their commitments, or working to build new capacities. The circles also served as a home base through which members got clarity about organizational work, and engaged with leadership to share insights or ask questions. Cadre circle leaders would submit monthly membership reports to national leadership. This made it possible for us to maintain a grounded and detailed assessment of membership conditions, and notice trends in real time.

All of the above enabled us to be collectively clearer, more cohered, and more confident in our own capacities.

# ACCELERATED & INTENSIFIED CADREFICATION AND STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT: 2020-2022

This was the period in which we doubled down on producing the outcomes that would get us to our organizational endgame – strategy and strategists. After an intensive focus on internal consolidation, the overlapping crises of 2020 gave us a renewed sense of urgency, and we had developed the internal unity, the leadership, and the experience that allowed us to meet the moment. We engaged in the same activities at the same time across the whole organization, with common goals and expectations. While we intensified our commitments, we also increased our support for one another. We built new practices to help us show up with high rigor and high resilience, and to ask for help and step back when we needed to.

In this period, we integrated all our work into a series of all-cadres initiatives, each dedicated to advancing a set of goals towards our purpose, while also advancing our cadreification. We planned each initiative as a test of a hypothesis, where we prioritized specific outcomes, and created new teams and practices to that end. At the end of each initiative, we evaluated our hypothesis to inform the next one. In the midst of the many challenges we faced in our daily lives, this was when the highest number of LeftRoots members worked at their most intense pace together to further our cadreification and develop strategy.

*"We will only give tenderness if we are tender.*

*We will only give hope if we are brave and persevere.*

*We will only transmit conviction if our praxis has firm convictions.*

*We will only be formadores if we are open to being in a state of constant formation through struggle, organization and study.*

*We will only be cadres if we don't lose the capacity to learn, study and listen to the community and fight alongside it.*

*Let everyone be successful in this difficult but delightful task of organizing the community, of preparing the struggles and forming the cadres to take forward the process of revolution, of the construction of a society of free women and men."*

*- Adelar Joao Pizetta, Coordinating committee member of the Escola Nacional Florestán Fernandes (ENFF) of the Landless Workers Movement*

## **WHAT HAPPENED**

In this period, we continued to grow our leadership teams and we reorganized internally around our all-cadres initiatives. We established the National Leadership Team, a new temporary leadership structure for each initiative that worked under the NCC. The NLT structure allowed us to bring new cadres into national leadership roles and draw on the skills of highly experienced comrades when we needed specific expertise. We created Core Team, a sub-team of the NCC consisting of Director-level staff and NCC members who were making an unpaid staff-like commitment to LeftRoots work. This team coordinated organizational planning and maintained communication across our many increasingly decentralized teams, helping ensure cohesion as the leaders most tightly integrated into all aspects of the organization's work. We brought on 6 new NCC members after our first nationwide NCC election, and we also formalized the new mid-level leadership role of Membership Organizers, who were responsible for coordinating cadre circles.

### **All-cadres Strategy Lab**

Our first all-cadres initiative took place in the months before the 2020 Presidential election. We created our first ever strategy lab that all members were required to participate in. We tested a series of hypotheses about the outcome of the election and any potential contestation of the results, based on an assertion that defeating Trump in the 2020 elections was a key priority for the movement. Members were expected to practice unity in action during the all-cadres strategy lab and engage in the lab's work regardless of their alignment. And some did disagree. While we knew our capacity to mobilize on a short timeline would be limited, we wanted to build our internal capacity to carry out strategy together and learn about the process of testing hypotheses. Cadres participated in voter turnout efforts in swing states, worked on narrative strategy. We also did scenario planning anticipating a contested election, and shared these resources with movement allies, helping many of us to prepare for MAGA's attempt to steal the election. We collaborated with several movement organizations in these efforts, building relationships and familiarity with LeftRoots' organizational contributions.

### **Initiative for the Liberatory Strategy Toolkit (ILST)**

In our next initiative, we all participated in an intensive, deep dive training on how to use LeftRoots' newly finished Liberatory Strategy Toolkit. We studied successful revolutions from China to Russia to the rise of the right-wing in the US, to deepen our understanding of how revolutionaries have applied strategy. Following this training, every member wrote a strategy sketch - a short draft document answering the questions in the Strategy Toolkit. The goal of these sketches was to help us deepen our own thinking about strategy and help us practice engaging strategy from a more protagonist, active standpoint. We also used these sketches as a basis from which to start assessing our internal alignment on strategy, so we could form future strategy writing teams.



## **Initiative for Leadership, Strategy and Principled Struggle (LSPS)**

In the fall of 2021, we set out to engage a broader set of LeftRoots comrades and close comrades to assess their level of alignment with our pro-socialist, pro-strategy, and pro-cadre politics and build clarity about LeftRoots' goals. For some cadres, this was their first time representing LeftRoots to other social movement leftists or engaging others in serious conversations about our ideas. Every member was assigned a small group of comrades they were responsible for engaging in 1on1's with. In addition to developing our capacities for left leadership, this initiative helped us assess who might be potentially interested in participating in a future SOS Process to further the launch of new cadre organizations, and it helped us hone our message. We also began a series of organizational bilaterals with other left organizations that would be ongoing (although not consistently active) throughout the next couple of years.

While we were doing this, we also formed four teams of cadres who worked together over several months to draft new strategy documents. In addition to furthering these cadres' development as strategists, the work of these teams helped sharpen our collective strategic thinking and gave us more grounds to assess our internal strategic alignment and differences and test the Strategy Toolkit

## **Congress Initiative**

In 2022, we set out towards another membership Congress, doing work designed to prepare and test our readiness for our organizational endgame. All members read and discussed the four strategy documents that their comrades had just produced, and we engaged in our second organization-wide debate on strategy. At this second strategy debate, we saw qualitative changes in our understanding of strategy and our ability to engage each other with grounded assessments, curiosity and mutual respect. After many internal conversations, we were able to identify that our members were mostly aligned around two strategic tendencies, which meant we could have the basis for advancing towards launching two potential new cadre organizations.

The NCC engaged in another round of intensive planning for LeftRoots' upcoming shift to our "Homestretch." This upcoming period would be when we would focus on outward-facing work to engage comrades towards potential new cadre organizations, while also beginning to close our organization down. We came together in person in regional gatherings to discuss these plans, deepen our thinking on how our organization would have to change over the next phase, and celebrate the advances we'd made together over several years of hard work. At the end of Congress initiative, each member recommitted once more in a 1on1 with a member of elected leadership, exploring and naming their strategic alignment, as well as their possible roles in a future cadre organization.

## **KEY DECISIONS**

### **Doing the all-cadres 2020 election lab**

In 2020, we faced another moment where significant shifts in external conditions made us feel the contradiction between building the left and fighting to shift external conditions more acutely. In the all-cadres lab, we were able to meet member's grounded sense of urgency in the lead-up to the 2020 Presidential elections, and direct that energy towards work that had the dual outcome of helping shift external conditions while also building our organization. For the first time, we all engaged in the same external political work together as LeftRoots members, and we moved to a truly national shape as an organization. We could now engage in external political work together for the first time with internal clarity and unity that we were in a time-limited experiment, that we were primarily seeking to advance our internal cadrefication, and that we were not going to become a campaigning organization.

This lab was also an application of lessons we had learned about leadership and strategy development. Instead of relying on members to self-organize into strategy labs, we made use of elected leadership and called on members who were best positioned to coordinate the practical work of the strategy lab. With this leadership, we were able to make advances in our methodology for testing hypotheses in practice, which we had struggled to do previously. Our decision to focus our work in this way built our sense of being one organization, accountable to each other, all moving towards the same purpose. It also set the stage for us to structure our subsequent work as "all-cadres initiatives." All of this marked a massive advance in our collective cadrefication.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### **With increased support, increased rigor was possible**

Now that we had consolidated and gotten clear on our ultimate goals, we worked at a furious pace in this period. Knowing this intensified pace would create challenges, we also developed new practices for supporting and holding accountable each individual cadre, and we increased our capacity to do this by collectivizing the responsibility. In cadre circles, each person had a team of cadres who were responsible for supporting them and holding them accountable to the commitments they set to LeftRoots and to their own cadrefication. On a monthly basis, cadres would report to their cadre circle on whether they were meeting their commitments, share what else was happening in their lives, and what challenges they were facing. We created structured practices for how individuals supported each other to overcome challenges to meeting their LeftRoots commitments.<sup>7</sup>

All of this meant that increasingly, no one in the organization went unaccounted for, which raised the collective bar for participation. We also could increase our baseline expectations for members knowing that individuals could decide to take a leave of

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<sup>7</sup> More about our support and accountability practices can be found in LeftRoots' Case Study on Organizational Culture (<https://dusk.leftrroots.net/resources/LeftRoots%20Org%20Culture%20Case%20Study.pdf>)

absence or decrease their commitments with more grounded, effective support along the way. It was key that we worked together in smaller groups in our cadre circles over time. This created conditions where, for each individual, there was a group of cadres who had a robust picture of that person's life conditions, tendencies, and developmental arc. This meant that instead of relying on blanket policies, we could increasingly provide specific, tailored support and accountability. Another key ingredient was the training and developmental support we prioritized for cadre circle coordinators. While this was not perfect and there were many challenges, we learned that we could increase our rigor and intensity when we also increased our level of support.

## **We learned how to assess our strategic alignment and strategic differences**

We would need high unity on strategy to build the type of cadre organization we needed. We also needed protagonist strategists, which meant it wasn't enough for our members to go along with other people's thinking on strategy, they needed to be able to 'show their work' on their own. We also needed to be relatively confident that we could measure alignment accurately. We didn't start out knowing how to do this, but in this period, we learned some major lessons about an approach. We learned in practice, in the process of writing multiple strategy documents, debating these internally, and deciding how many strategic tendencies existed in our organization and how many cadre organization launch processes it was viable for LeftRoots to support.

Some of our major learnings were about defining what strategic unity is not. We got clearer that ideological tradition did not equal strategic orientation. This was key for us as we were bringing together people from disparate parts of the movement. For example, one cadre might say "people of color" and another might say "oppressed nationalities", having come up in different ideological traditions. This might look on the surface like a strategic difference, but more exploration could reveal that these two cadres had strategic unity when it came to questions of which class and social sectors would need to be cohered to win liberation.

Another key learning was that many of us used strategic leanings to inform our movement work, in the absence of clearly defined strategic tendencies. We saw strategic leanings as incomplete strategic orientations that centered a particular approach or tactic, without a comprehensive theory of how that approach might lead to revolutionary change. For example, many members of LeftRoots held a strategic leaning to prioritize base building, growing from an accurate assessment that there is too little base building happening in our movement ecosystem today. Others might have prefigurative or insurrectionist strategic leanings. While a comprehensive strategy for liberation would likely require elements from all three of these leanings, a one-sided approach tended to proliferate in the absence of a liberatory strategy. This helped us to clarify that which tactics or approaches an individual was most familiar with, or most likely to advocate for, did not necessarily define which strategic orientation they might be aligned with.

Ultimately, we settled on an approach to defining strategic unity on the basis of shared experimentation. While we might have read different political theorists, or come up

prioritizing different approaches in our movement work, we could find unity on the basis of what hypotheses we were willing to test together.

This is how we framed a hypothesis in LeftRoots' Strategy Toolkit:

*If a movement deeply connected to a bloc consisting of these class layers and social sectors (name core and key sectors of the socialist bloc) exerts this power (name the basis of the movement's power) in relation to these chokepoints (name the chokepoints), that movement will defeat this opposition (name the oppositional forces) and shift the correlation of power in society in this way (name how the correlation of power will have shifted), paving the way for the construction of socialist liberation.*

# HOMESTRETCH & SOS PROCESS: 2022-2023

This was our last stage of work as an organization when we assessed that we had reached enough collective cadrefication, and we had developed a liberatory strategy sufficiently to move into our endgame. We reorganized ourselves internally from being a cadrefication organization, into an organization working to organize our comrades and each other towards potentially launching new or renewed cadre organizations. We convened the Process for Socialist Organization and Strategy (SOS), a multiphase initiative in which we brought together many comrades from the social movement and party left towards this end. As we were leading this work, we also began to dismantle our organization, closing teams and functions when they had served their purpose.

At the time of our official closing, two teams of comrades were hard at work laying the foundations for potential new cadre organizations, with leadership from LeftRoots members and from other comrades we had engaged through the SOS Process.

*I Believe in Being Ready*

*[everyone sings]*

*I believe in being ready x3*

*For the time is drawing near*

*Oh, we all will have safe housing x3*

*In the world that we prepare*

*Oh, the prisons will be empty x3*

*In the world that we prepare*

*I believe in being ready x3*

*For the time is drawing near*

*Oh, the empire will be falling x3*

*When this world comes to an end*

*Oh, the people will be ruling x3*

*When this world comes to an end*

*We believe in being ready x3*

*For the time is drawing near*

*Oh, comrades, please get ready x3*

*For the time is drawing near*

*We believe in being ready x3*

*For the time is drawing near*

*For the time is drawing near*

*- From the LeftRoots Choir Songbook*

## **WHAT HAPPENED**

### **The start of LeftRoots' Homestretch and the SOS Process**

After our Congress, we reorganized ourselves internally with a plan for a three-phase SOS Process taking place in 2023. This involved SLAT Teams consolidating into two tendencies. We took on a new internal division of labor, with some cadres doing our internal membership and operations work, and others leading our SOS Process programs. Many people moved into new internal leadership roles to free up capacity for some of the organization's best-positioned members to be able to prioritize eventual leadership roles in the cadre formation process that would become independent from LeftRoots' organizational work. We also began to plan for the eventual closing of LeftRoots; the consolidation of the SLAT teams was foundational for the two new formations that would emerge from LeftRoots.

Throughout our organizational life we had stayed in relationship with a constellation of leftists and organizers, both through LeftRoots-sponsored programs, and through our member's many roles in the movement. Over the years we had built a map of who might have the experience, the alignment, and the positioning to potentially lead a cadre organization launch process, and who might be supportive or a potential member. We began reaching out to individuals to assess their interest and making invitations to participate. We also continued holding organizational bilateral meetings with party left and social movement organizations, and invited Liberation Road to co-sponsor the SOS Process with us. After several discussions, Liberation Road agreed and their members began joining the leadership and coordination teams.

The decision in the Homestretch to end cadre formation work and support SOS process made structural reorganization possible and helped us achieve our purpose, but also had consequences for the cohesion of membership at the end of the project in ways that may impact the next phase of the work. Many people felt disconnected from the work of achieving LeftRoots' purpose and thus struggled to understand their role in what would come next. Internally, we referred to this as "bifurcation," and shared this assessment with all members: as we got closer to the end of LeftRoots, we needed to rely on members with the highest clarity and alignment, skills, and familiarity with organizational work to lead external work and our internal closing process. Members who had been participating at a less intense level during the Homestretch had less to do and were less connected to the rapid pace of our work, because we were no longer oriented toward creating an all-member program, and instead were focusing on meeting our SOS goals.

### **SOS Process Phase 1 - Cohere the Initiators**

Our first priority was to cohere at least one leadership core of people who were aligned with one of the strategic tendencies we were supporting, and willing to take responsibility for leading the launch of a new organization. By design, these leadership cores would be independent bodies, not affiliated with either LeftRoots or Liberation Road. Towards this end, we convened 80 people in a multi-month process which included two residential retreats and work in small groups to build clarity and explore our potential for unity. At

the end of this process, we were successful in forming two cores of leaders who took responsibility for moving the cadre organization launch process forward, each aligned with one of the two strategic tendencies LeftRoots had articulated.

### **SOS Process Phase 2 - Pivot to Public**

We knew these new leadership cores would need time to establish themselves, so in Phase 2 we set out to engage a wider array of people to help create more favorable conditions for the eventual launch of new organizations. Our central program was a series of webinars about the SOS Process focused on key LeftRoots ideas about strategy, socialism, cadre organizations, and left organizational culture. We reached out to all our contacts and engaged over 1,000 people with these webinars and in countless one-on-one conversations.

### **SOS Process Phase 3 - LeftRoots' Sunset**

We had originally planned to hold a mass training for potential members of the new cadre organizations before closing LeftRoots, but we reassessed and decided to focus instead on the transition out of LeftRoots. This was both because the fledgling cadre organizations were not yet ready to recruit members, and because substantial work was needed to make sure the transition out of LeftRoots happened smoothly.

In our final months as an organization we evaluated our SOS work, we made a plan for transitioning some of our assets to the new initiating cores, and we moved forward on attending to closing LeftRoots' operations. Throughout the year we had been closing internal LeftRoots teams as their functions came to an end, and in this last phase we designated a group of staff and cadres who took responsibility for finalizing our legal and operational closure. We held a celebration with our members of all that we had accomplished, and our leadership met for a final in-person retreat to close the challenging, audacious, and transformative experience that was LeftRoots.

## **KEY DECISIONS**

### **Staying on our 2023 organizational timeline**

In 2020, we set out an organizational timeline that had us closing at the end of 2023. There were many moments where we could have opted to give ourselves more time, but we decided to stick to our self-imposed deadline. There were several reasons why we made this decision. We had always been navigating the internal contradiction between doing left work and doing work to shift external conditions. LeftRoots had accomplished more than our founders had originally imagined, but it had also taken a long time. The longer we existed, the more people-hours, capacity, and attention was being dedicated to LeftRoots and not to moving a strategy to shift our external conditions. As the conjuncture continued to intensify, the impact of our timeline became a key consideration. Additionally, many of our core leaders were making significant sacrifices to do LeftRoots work, putting in long hours on top of other demanding organizing work, or struggling financially as paid staff. All of this led us to decide to stick to our timeline despite the challenges it created.

This decision helped us to prioritize and make hard decisions about what we could and couldn't do. Ultimately, we had to prioritize what we believed would have the biggest impact, which taught us a lot about crafting and testing hypotheses. This was also not easy. In our last year especially, we worked at an unsustainable pace by design. We assessed that successfully accomplishing the SOS Process would require intentional overstretch on the part of much of our organization, especially our leadership layer, and we were right. Still, we at times over-assessed our capacity, requiring us to pivot and change plans.

We were largely able to meet our political goals in the SOS Process, and although our pace left many exhausted at times, we have no grounds to believe that this pace had any long-term impacts on the resilience, commitment, or well-being of LeftRoots members.

### **Bringing social-emotional as well as political leadership to the SOS Process**

We were very aware going into the SOS Process of the many potential challenges to our cohesion and success as we brought together comrades from across the left. In previous decades, others had made attempts to unify the left and faced significant roadblocks, leading some of the people we were organizing to be pessimistic about our chances this time. We were bringing in our past experiences of left work, including our inspirations as well as our scars. When we brought together potential initiators of new cadre organizations, we were a group that did not already know each other, so we didn't have a basis of shared trust or familiarity to build from. We knew that we had different levels of resilience, different levels of willingness to extend and build trust, and different experiences with principled struggle. We could also predict that some people would face challenges from unexpected life events or movement demands.

We had experienced similar challenges when building LeftRoots, and we also had learned how intentional attention to social-emotional conditions could make a difference. We applied many of the practices we had developed in LeftRoots to our leadership in the SOS Process. First, we prioritized building connections with each other based on our shared



purpose, and making sure we were all clear about the purpose of why we were together. We organized ourselves into small groups that were collectively accountable to each other so each person could share in co-creating the space and have a chance to build trust and connection. When we met together, we adopted somatic practices like body scans and mood check and we sang together, with leadership from the LeftRoots choir. We asked each person to commit to struggling directly with one another if any differences or concerns arose instead of gossiping or holding grudges.

The impact of all this was that we were able to create spaces where people were open to connecting and extending trust. In part, this was because we started with people who were already practice-rich, movement activists. This made people more willing to engage with curiosity and openness when challenges or potential differences arose. We also created an atmosphere of mutual respect, dignity, and rigor, regardless of what decision any individual might make about their ongoing commitments or participation. While it was not perfect, our approach made it possible for us to overcome many subjective barriers to participation, alignment, and support of the SOS Process in a very short time.

### **Convening a multi-tendency launch process**

LeftRoots had always been a multi-tendency organization, and we designed the SOS Process to be multi-tendency as well. We could have instead convened a process of creating only one cadre organization, but this would not have met the needs of the movement ecosystem or been as effective a way of meeting our purpose of strengthening the left.

LeftRoots' approach to being multi-tendency was rooted in our assessment of the US movement ecosystem. Given the state of the US left, many community organizers who we engaged in the SOS Process were not entirely sure what strategic orientation they were most aligned with. Many also were not already familiar with cadre organizations. If we were going to build a broader, stronger left, we assessed that a multi-tendency approach could help bring more people into a relationship with us, to then build their strategic clarity and capacities.

Our approach to being multi-tendency was also rooted in our approach to strategy as a hypothesis and not dogma. During the SOS Process, LeftRoots' leadership began to develop new thinking about the need for a pro-tendency left. In practical terms, being multi-tendency after LeftRoots would mean being willing to support other forces on the left to reach strategic clarity and be able to test hypotheses about liberatory strategy, even if we are not aligned with those strategies as individuals or organizations. Similarly, since we are in a period of rapid, accelerating change and crisis, and in a highly complex society, increasing the number of individuals and movement forces that can test strategy should then increase our chances of being able to navigate the high stakes and rapid change of the road ahead. Our overall assessment of the relative weakness and underdevelopment of the US movement ecosystem and the left overall, meant we saw ourselves as having a responsibility to support the movement's overall strategic clarity, across tendencies.

It is worth noting that as an organization, LeftRoots did not fully build alignment around a "pro-tendency" orientation with members organized during the SOS process. Many of the

individuals and organizations we engaged would agree on the importance of being respectful and comradely with those who have differing strategic orientations, but there was less willingness to support other tendencies in the movement to get clear on their own strategic alignment. Looking ahead to what happens after LeftRoots, we believe the ultimate expression of this approach could be a left where multiple strategies are being tested at the same time, with mutual sharing of lessons learned, and that this should ideally help lead to more collective chances of developing an approach that can win. In LeftRoots' newly forming cadre organizations, leaders and membership will need to further consolidate and clarify what a pro-tendency approach looks like in practice. This is challenging, yet critical work.

# SUMMATION OF LESSONS LEARNED

## CADREIFICATION

LeftRoots spent almost a decade dedicated primarily to furthering the cadre development of a group of US social movement leftists. We supported the clarity and commitment of people who were not yet familiar with cadre organizations and who were building their identities as socialists and revolutionary leftists. We developed new capacities through training programs, and through our collective work in developing strategy, building and running our organization, and engaging other social movement leftists with the aim of strengthening the left. Every single member of our organization was in a process of cadre development, including every single member of our leadership.

### Lessons

We were successful in significantly advancing the capacities of our members, which shows us that it's possible to develop cadres in an organization exclusively dedicated to this purpose, especially if those cadres also engage in social movement work at the same time. At the same time, members had to choose to work to advance their capacities.

We believe that in our specific time, place and conditions, a project exclusively dedicated to cadre development along with strategy development was a necessary intervention. Most US social movement leftists need cadreification to be prepared to be members of a cadre organization. In our present conditions, we are still rebuilding the continuum of development and mentorship between movement generations that we will need to be able to replicate and expand the ranks of cadres as we grow our movement for liberation.

While we made huge advances in cadreification with the members we had, our impact was limited by our size, and there continues to be a great need for cadre development projects that can prepare social movement leftists to become cadres. We believe the US movement ecosystem will continue to need cadreification projects until a more robust left ecosystem has emerged in this country.

We learned again and again that calling ourselves aspiring cadres doesn't make us different from anyone else when it comes to pedagogy. The core elements of effective pedagogy applied to us too. We also had to commit to principled processes of criticism and self-criticism, which was significant and essential work.<sup>8</sup> We needed formal trainings, informal mentorship, opportunities for hands-on practice and repetition, supportive team experiences, assessments and feedback, clear goals, and celebrations of our wins.

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<sup>8</sup> For more on LeftRoots' criticism/self-criticism ("CSC") process, we refer you to [LeftRoots' "Case Study on Left Organizational Culture"](#). This document describes the organization-wide CSC process that LeftRoots conducted across all membership, in 2021 and 2022—it was a practice that helped us solidify an organizational culture that was not liberal, and where principled struggle was the norm. Members gained experience with giving and receiving structured feedback that helped them better support each other. In keeping with our commitment to rigor and silliness, we referred to this process internally as "Pandafest".

Many revolutionary movements have outlined a framework for cadre development specifying ideological, political and organizational capacities. We believe cadres (especially in our present context) need to also develop their social-emotional capacities to be effective. When we intentionally prioritized the development of these capacities and relied on cadres with these strengths, it became more possible to advance our political purpose.

## **STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT**

LeftRoots set out to develop and build alignment around at least one strategy for socialist liberation in the United States. We wanted to clarify our own thinking on strategy and build new practices that could strengthen the strategic capacities of the broader movement. We built our own roadmap for how to do this through trial and error, and we did it with hundreds of comrades nationwide while also developing our capacities as strategists.

We studied the strategies of revolutionary movements in Palestine, South Africa, and the Philippines, and worked to clarify our thinking about what strategy is and isn't. We developed *LeftRoots' Liberatory Strategy Toolkit* as a framework for leftists to use in crafting, evaluating, and discussing strategy.

We convened five teams of LeftRoots comrades who worked together in multi-month processes to draft strategies for socialist liberation, and over 100 of our members wrote shorter 'strategy sketches' using the Strategy Toolkit. At two different times, we convened organization-wide processes to discuss and clarify our strategic alignment.

### **Lessons**

There are a common set of questions all revolutionary movements answer when setting out their strategies for liberation. Even if they have substantial strategic differences, we believe using a common framework for strategy, *like LeftRoot's Liberatory Strategy Toolkit*, can help revolutionaries more easily learn from each other and identify points of unity and difference.

We believe strategy to be a theory or a hypothesis. This means that the basis of strategic unity should be shared experimentation for a shared purpose, not complete unity on every single idea. We believe this approach can help us overcome the fragmentation of our movements along sectoral, geographic, ideological, and other lines.

As a hypothesis, we believe strategy is something that must be articulated in advance and then tested in praxis, not just what we can evaluate as having worked well in hindsight. Ultimately, we should evaluate strategy by whether our actions improve the terrain of struggle and allow the movement to expand its capacities and build power.

We believe that when we have collective clarity and unity on liberatory strategy, this will in turn deepen the impact of and give purpose to other forms of strategy such as "situational strategy," campaign strategy, electoral strategy, etc.

This approach to articulating and testing hypotheses requires protagonism and grounded, critical engagement. Instead of just a few people defining strategy, our conditions require

us to develop the capacities of many people to be able to contribute to the development and updating of strategy.

## **ORGANIZATION-BUILDING**

LeftRoots officially launched in 2013 with no paid staff, \$15k in the bank, and a mighty team of six people. At the time of our closing in 2023 our work was held across 14 teams operated by about 50 members (8 of whom were paid staff), with a general operating budget of \$800k. Our approach to operations infrastructure was shaped by our character as a short-term project. Because longevity was not a key consideration for how we developed our infrastructure, at times we described some of our systems as being built with “sticks and glue.”

Our growth was made possible by the efforts of all the people that built and sustained LeftRoots, mostly in a non-paid capacity, and by how we approached organization building and operations work. We built an openly left organization with a legally incorporated entity and paid staff, where hundreds of people across the country engaged in intensive work together, and dozens held leadership roles at any given time.

### **Lessons**

Our experience showed us that it's possible to build robust, public revolutionary left organizations in the United States in our current conjuncture, and that it takes significant human and financial resources to do this. Building a unified organization capable of carrying out our purpose was only possible when we dedicated enough capacity to infrastructure and organization building. And we found that having more people in membership with a variety of specializations and capacities made more work possible; conversely, there were years during which LeftRoots did not have adequate numbers of people in membership and leadership who were dedicated to organization-building.

At the start of LeftRoots, we had a very small staff that provided political leadership while also holding responsibility for operations. The same people supporting our leadership teams, leading strategy development, or coordinating political training were also doing bookkeeping, fundraising, and tech support. This created a situation where we didn't have enough leadership capacity to train and support new leaders that could keep growing our capacity as our membership grew.

We always knew that building an effective revolutionary organization requires having people who can realign their political and financial commitments to focus on building the organization. We learned that this is especially true in a context like the US where Left infrastructure is so weak.

Our decision to expand organization-building capacity by hiring an org-building director and a membership organizer, creating the Membership Organizer training program, and supporting members to build and lead effective operations teams, was a key part of what made our consolidation possible. This in turn made it possible for us to achieve our political goals.

We also created an experimental alternative to the over-utilized and contradictory nonprofit structure. We operated legally as a corporation, hired almost exclusively from our membership base, and mostly did not fundraise from foundations. Members paid dues. We were able to incorporate some of the strengths of “professionalized” movement work like high accountability and detailed planning, while approaching questions of leadership, decision-making, staffing, and fundraising with our political goals as our number one priority.

## ***PACE AND STYLE OF WORK***

LeftRoots worked at an ambitious and intense pace. Being in LeftRoots pushed many to bring their best, to work at the edge of their capacities and develop new skills, and to continually figure out how to “make the impossible possible” by overcoming challenges.

Many of us approached LeftRoots with a sense that the stakes had never been higher, and that we needed to do everything in our power to make sure this project did not fail. Every day, we were experiencing the effects of capitalism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and empire on our loved ones and communities, and we were living with the impacts of internal contradictions and deficiencies in our movements. Some of us had been part of unsuccessful attempts to build and cohere the left before. All this meant many people were willing to make significant sacrifices and overcome challenges both inside and outside LeftRoots to make their highest contribution to the success of this political project.

## **Lessons**

Getting LeftRoots off the ground required long periods of intentional overstretch from LeftRoots’ two founders who made a full-time commitment. For many years, LeftRoots continued to be precarious, and their dedication was a significant force in making the organization possible. It took longer than we expected to achieve LeftRoots’ purpose, and it likely would have taken even longer without their sacrifice and dedication. Many other people also made significant sacrifices to build LeftRoots, taking on responsibility, and extra meetings on top of demanding movement work. LeftRoots was only possible because of the commitment and hard work of its members.

Support for leadership was an ongoing challenge that we never fully resolved, especially with regard to building leadership capacity. We often faced the contradiction of needing to expand leadership and develop more leaders in the organization while also being reliant on those who previously held leadership (and had the highest clarity) to exert leadership that might develop others. Many times, we reached a limit on how much we could collectivize labor due to limits in capacity and clarity, which required us to lean on the leadership of a developed few for periods of intensive work.

Early on, there was pushback about the amount asked of membership. Further, leadership was inconsistent in upholding those requirements. Before we had developed our approach to organizational culture and collective support and accountability, leadership would at times swing between being more flexible and supportive and being more rigid and prioritizing rigor and accountability. Many members experienced this as confusing, or they gravitated to the orientation they were more comfortable with, and different teams and

pockets of the organization developed different cultures around rigor, discipline, support, and accountability.

We made big asks of membership. A baseline of participation included a monthly four hour call, and at least one more shorter monthly meeting. As we built our work, expectations for members increased. Our experience taught us that we could increase intensity and rigor in our membership expectations as long as we could also increase support for members. After we had successfully consolidated, we were able to create a self-reproducing culture of excellence. People were motivated by their mutual respect for each other and their commitment to the project. Another factor was a sense of wanting to prove ourselves to each other, as a counter to what we internally termed “left-poster syndrome.”

LeftRoots’ approach to pace and intensity was shaped by the short-term nature of our project. Left projects that are more oriented to the long-term need to have the capacity to make decisions about pacing, including choosing periods of lower intensity so members can recover from intense activity.

While organizations must take responsibility for pacing, some responsibility also lies with individuals, because organizations can’t have a full assessment of each person’s conditions. One of the capacities cadres need to develop is resilient protagonism and discipline, which LeftRoots defined as *“the ability to navigate contradictions between our individual needs, and the needs of our political work, based on a grounded and evolving assessment of all relevant conditions and priorities, for the sake of making our best lifetime revolutionary contribution.”*

## **CADRE’S MOVEMENT WORK**

Almost all LeftRoots members were active in social movements in many different sectors and types of roles. LeftRoots did not direct this work, and members made independent decisions about what movement work to do and how to do it. At the same time, we intentionally built an organization of movement activists, primarily from communities of color, because we saw this as a way to help ensure that any future cadre organization would be sufficiently rooted in mass struggles and working class and oppressed communities.

Member’s participation in movement work shaped the work of LeftRoots in many ways. Their assessments of movement dynamics informed how we led and organized our own members. Member’s assessments from campaigns and issue work informed our strategy development. Cadres experimented with applying tools and practices from LeftRoots in their mass organizations, learning lessons about the role of cadres, sharpening our tools, and building their capacities. The principled and effective movement practice of many of our members helped to make the case for the utility of LeftRoots’ intervention to many comrades in the movement ecosystem.

### **Lessons**

Many of our members who made significant contributions to LeftRoots were able to do so because they worked for aligned social movement organizations that supported their

commitment to LeftRoots, including by making time available for them to do LeftRoots work. Many of those members also experimented within their movement organizations and made innovations based on what they'd learned in LeftRoots. Social movement organizations need to support work to build the left because this will ultimately strengthen these individual organizations and the broader movement.

Who the messenger is matters. In many movement spaces, we were able to make the case for cadre and strategy effectively because our members were highly clear and able to provide political leadership about these ideas. We were able to help others overcome ungrounded subjective barriers to unity because we were women, people of color, queer, immigrants, etc instead of the older straight white men some expected when they thought of "leftists." Further, we understood there is a distinction to be made between modeling cadrefication and other forms of leadership versus shaming other organizations, and we insisted on embodying the former approach rather than the latter. This is directly connected to the dialectical relationship between humility and unapologetic leadership.

Liberation requires a healthy movement ecosystem with different organizational forms, working together towards a broader objective of achieving liberation. US social movement leftists need to strengthen their capacities to think, coordinate, and clarify functions across organizational forms, and cadre organization can help us do this.

## **CADRE ORGANIZATION**

We were not a cadre organization, but our purpose was to help make new or renewed cadre organizations more possible. We studied historical cadre organizations to inform our work, and we practiced carrying out some of the functions of a cadre organization in our ongoing work. We also worked to popularize the idea of aspiring to be a cadre and made the case for why cadre organizations are needed to many comrades in the social movement left. We built LeftRoots and led the SOS Process together with leftists who had prior experience in cadre organizations past and present.

### **Lessons**

Our study of history shows us that cadre organizations play an indispensable "keystone species" role in a broader movement ecosystem. Keystone species are species that play a unique role in an ecosystem that makes it possible for many other species in that ecosystem to thrive. For example, otters control the sea urchin population in kelp forests, which allows for many other types of sea life to flourish. Redwoods trap moisture in their canopies and create environments where many animals and plants can live. We used this metaphor to remind ourselves that cadre organizations don't win liberation on their own, they need to support a movement ecosystem of mass struggles and many other organizations.

While cadre organizations can take different specific forms in different contexts, an organization of this type has a distinct function from other organizations, such as base building organizations, political parties, or popular organizations. Cadre organizations have had a role in every successful revolutionary movement.



Most US social movement leftists are unfamiliar with the cadre organization form, the role they could play in a strengthened movement ecosystem, or the roles that cadre organizations have had in successful movements throughout history. More work needs to be done to popularize the need for cadres and cadre organizations among social movement leftists.

At the same time, there is much openness and recognition of the need for cadre organizations and the functions they can play, among many movement leaders coming up in the aftermath of the global defeat of the left. Our experiences organizing other social movement leftists have shown us that many others have drawn similar conclusions as LeftRoots did about what's needed to renew the US left.

It's possible to build containers and processes that draw on the invaluable experiences of comrades with experience in cadre organizations, while also building new left practices for today's conditions.

## **LEADERSHIP**

We were building an organization with a unique purpose, seeking to make a specific set of interventions in the movement ecosystem in a limited time. We were founded by a small group of comrades who spent years building unity with each other on their shared experiences of US movement conditions and what interventions were needed. This meant the project always had a core of leaders with high clarity and unity, and we prioritized an approach to leadership that sought to maintain unity on advancing our specific purpose.

Despite significant challenges, we were ultimately successful in holding the line on our organizational purpose. There was huge pressure – both internal and external – for us to shift towards addressing immediate conditions, especially during moments of movement uprising or emerging crisis. Thanks to the hard-won experience that cadres in LeftRoots leadership had gained in prior cycles of uprising and crisis, we were able to maintain clarity about the continued need to keep strengthening and building left capacity.

In our early years, we relied heavily on a small team of cadres who acted as the core leadership of the organization. Over time, we grew the number of individuals and teams holding leadership roles in LeftRoots. We also expanded staff while remaining member-led. We built a highly disciplined organization of aspiring cadres while operating in a broader movement culture that often defaulted to suspicion of leadership or authority.

## **Lessons**

We were able to exert leadership most effectively in LeftRoots when we built containers facilitated by cadres with high political clarity and skills for emotionally intelligent facilitation. When we asserted unapologetic leadership, we fostered more leadership and more participation.

As a national membership organization, we were able to effectively collectivize leadership when we prioritized clarity about our plans, as well as our purpose and politics. We dedicated a lot of capacity to drafting documents detailing our plans and approach for organizational initiatives because this helped more cadres exert aligned leadership.

Building a culture of principled struggle was key for keeping leadership grounded in the organization's conditions. While we did not practice democratic centralism, we did actively encourage members to seek clarity, raise doubts or differences, and struggle collectively towards clarity and unity on organizational decisions.

Along with developing our ability to lead, we also developed our ability to follow. We built a culture of organizational discipline where members were expected to abide by organizational decisions and carry out commitments assigned to them, and to communicate and struggle when this was not possible.

Each of our members, including those in the highest levels of leadership, was in a process of cadreification. Left organizations can't neglect development for those in leadership and need to make grounded assessments of individuals. Many of our members were experienced leftists and respected movement leaders who also had gaps in their ideological, political, organizational or social-emotional development.

We were able to collectivize and grow leadership most effectively when we normalized giving and receiving feedback about each other's strengths and growth edges, and designating leadership roles based on grounded assessment of an individual's capacities. This approach also supported cadres to lead while also developing their own capacities.

## ***BUILDING UNITY AND COHESION***

LeftRoots brought people together who were coming from different movement experiences, parts of the country, and generations. While our members had a common set of politics, it took significant work to build unity and cohesion. We define unity as the collective capacity of an organization's members to carry out the work with discipline and respect for organizational decisions.

### **Lessons**

Left organizations need a high degree of unity and alignment regarding political purpose. This is especially true in our current context, where the degree of need far outpaces our capacity, making it easy for us to want to do everything and meet every needed function the movement ecosystem is lacking.

We were most effective when we built unity based on shared purpose over shared belonging. At the same time, members needed the opportunity to build connections and find a sense of belonging to be willing to move in unity with the organization. In our early years we built more containers based on cadre's existing shared belongings, such as locally based branches, a Black caucus, and Praxis Circles organized by movement sector. As we built our internal unity and cohesion, teams and containers became increasingly organized around a specific purpose. Instead of meeting together based on geography instead we met in teams dedicated to cadreification, strategy development, or operations.

It's possible to have high unity as revolutionaries and not be in the same organization or political project. Throughout our existence we had many close comrades or 'compas' who engaged regularly with LeftRoots or our members about the project. Some provided

financial support, and others worked with LeftRoots cadres to test strategy or new practices in their movement work.

The higher the degree of internal unity and clarity on overall purpose, the more room there is for generative struggle and holding of difference. For example, once we were able to reach high unity and clarity on our purpose, we were able to hold a multi-tendency process for strategy development with unity and clarity.

Intra-movement conflict is a main threat to building and strengthening the left, and it is possible to develop capacities such as principled struggle and direct communication that can help prevent conflict.

US social movement leftists are shaped by the dominant culture in ways that run counter to our aims, and transformation is possible. We were able to successfully organize US social movement leftists into a broader basis of unity as Marxists, socialists, leftists, and revolutionaries.

# INTERNAL DIFFERENCES

These are some of the major points of difference in relation to LeftRoots' work that came up throughout our organizational trajectory. For brevity's sake, these are characterized in an overly simplified manner, but we think it's important to include them for context, and because, as Marta Harnecker reminds us, minorities can be right. These differences all hold kernels of truth, and some of them were the product of challenges during our organizational growth. Some of these differences or internal struggles led individuals to resign from the organization or decide not to join in the first place. Other people held some of these differences or doubts while also working to help us resolve them.

## **Different assessments of the conjuncture**

Do the risks of being publicly socialist outweigh the benefits?: Especially in our early years, some early members had differences with our decision to build an explicitly socialist organization. This critique was grounded in the history of COINTELPRO and other anti-Communist repression in the US and worldwide. It was also grounded in the immediate experiences of targeting and political repression that some Black activists were having as Black Lives Matter gained momentum. We decided that in our political conjuncture the benefits outweighed the risks, although we did assess the risk of state repression as having increased in the years after LeftRoots was founded. We did our best to mitigate risks with strong internal security practices.

Should building cadre organization be a top priority for US leftists?: While many comrades of ours were aligned with LeftRoots' purpose while choosing personally to make their own movement contributions elsewhere, some comrades and members reached the conclusion that building cadre organization should not be a top priority for the movement in the current period.

Some held this difference based on their assessment of the growing danger of the advance of Right-wing forces. If too much of the left was focused on internal development work, we could deprioritize the work needed to win over people in the middle and lose our window to block the Right from taking decisive state power and qualitatively shifting the terrain of struggle against us.

For others, this difference came from their assessments of the growing strength of Left-wing forces. Bernie Sanders and DSA had put mass socialist politics on the map, millions were in the streets protesting the police murder of George Floyd, and the labor movement was in a period of upsurge. If leftists did not prioritize leading in these struggles, we could miss an opportunity to build mass movements with left politics.

While we continue to believe that building cadre organization in the US should be a key priority for leftists, these assessments of the conjuncture informed our approach to our organizational timeline and the urgency of our intervention.

## **Differences about methodology**

Is it possible to build a cadreification project that's effective? Some people thought that LeftRoots would not be able to cadrefy its members effectively if we did not also engage in mass work together. This was grounded in the fact that most successful left movements have integrated cadre development work into their popular work to some degree. Absent this integration, some argued we would not have enough capacity to do additional cadre work, or that our assessments about strategy would not be grounded, or that we would have no basis to hold each other accountable.

LeftRoots' approach to cadreification did have challenges, and we do not think our approach would be the best one in all circumstances. In our present conjuncture, the underdevelopment of the left meant that effective cadreification was not happening inside other movement organizations. We think a different approach to cadreification could be possible with a stronger movement ecosystem.

Was LeftRoots too theoretical and intellectual? Connected to the critique named above, some members concluded LeftRoots was placing too much emphasis on reading theory, and that we were articulating strategy in a way that was not grounded in movement work. Sometimes this emerged as a critique that LeftRoots was 'too much work' or even that our expectations for study and participation were oppressive. Other times this emerged as a difference about LeftRoots' approach to strategy, with some questioning the utility of articulating strategy in advance.

While we recruited a membership of community organizers, we prioritized ideological and theoretical development in LeftRoots seeking to correct for the relative underdevelopment of social movement leftists in these areas, and our tendencies towards anti-intellectualism that could lead us to overprioritize action and deprioritize reflection.

## **Differences about organizational culture and our approach to leadership**

Was LeftRoots too authoritarian or too liberal? While these are contradictory assessments, they both emerged in the period when our growth outpaced our cohesion. We think they are both a product of experiences cadres had when we had not yet consolidated enough internal unity on our purpose, or on how to practice collective support and accountability together. These experiences were also a product of the uneven nature of LeftRoots before our internal consolidation. We were growing rapidly, and meeting with each other mostly in locally based branches, so an individual's experience of the organization could be radically different depending on which branch, or Praxis Circle, or other teams they were a part of.

Some members concluded the organization was too authoritarian or did not allow enough room for collective decision-making. This assessment might be grounded in their experience of LeftRoots closing a team or container that was benefiting them, because leadership had decided another container would be more effective in helping us all move forward.

Some members concluded the organization was too liberal. This might be because they saw other cadres engage in unprincipled practice or not uphold collective expectations for shared work, without sufficient consequences.

While all these things happened, we tried our best to hone an approach to leadership that was appropriate to our conditions and our political purpose. We believe we were able to resolve most of these internal challenges after our internal consolidation.

## **Differences about our organizational trajectory**

Should LeftRoots have kept operating? Especially in our last years, when the closure of LeftRoots was imminent, some members argued we should become a cadre organization instead of closing down. Given all the tasks the movement needed to do, and our overall lack of organization, they argued it would be a mistake to dismantle existing organizational infrastructure. This way, the capacity it would take to build a new organization could go to other urgent movement tasks.

LeftRoots opted to close so that future cadre organizations would not grow in a way that was lopsided or insular. We have strengths in some areas, and other leftists who have been leading other movement interventions have developed different strengths. We wanted to have the best chance of building new organizations based on the collective strengths of the existing left.

Another question was whether LeftRoots should continue as a cadre organization project, since cadre organization would still be needed in the movement ecosystem. We believe cadre organization projects will continue to be needed until we have a stronger left movement ecosystem. We also believe that building independent cadre organizations is our best chance at making that stronger, more effective left ecosystem possible in the United States. We closed down so our members could dedicate as much capacity as possible to this crucial task.

# CONCLUSION

We hope this document helps you understand LeftRoots' history and politics better, and that it will help you learn from our successes as well as our failures. If you were a part of LeftRoots, we hope this document helps you reflect on and clarify the lessons you're taking with you into your future endeavors.

Most importantly, we hope this document leaves you with more hope for what could be possible. Our experience in LeftRoots has given us a deep and grounded faith in our ability to transform ourselves and each other in the service of building towards 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism.

The stakes have never been higher for revolutionaries, for our movements, for working class and oppressed people, and for the future of the planet that sustains our lives.

May we continue to transform into the audacious, skilled, inspiring left leaders we need.

May we be successful in building a renewed and relevant left in the United States.

May we help millions of people experience and grow their protagonism in struggling for a better world.

May we win.

*For the left, politics must be the art of making the impossible possible.*

*- Marta Harnecker*

# ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

This section describes the organizational structure of LeftRoots, as well as how that structure changed over time.

## Members

Individuals became members of LeftRoots after being invited to apply by a current member of the organization, and successfully completing the Membership Bootcamp. LeftRoots had membership quotas specifying that a supermajority of members needed to be people of color, and a supermajority needed to be gender oppressed (women and/or LGBTQ). LeftRoots members were expected to maintain consistent participation in the organization, pay monthly dues, and abide by the organization's code of conduct and security protocols.

## Compas

Compas were close supporters of LeftRoots, and most compas also made monetary contributions to the organization. This was a cohort of 50-100 people who were around LeftRoots throughout the organization's existence; it included some former members, aligned social movement activists, and veteran leftists.. Compas had the option of attending monthly meetings with LeftRoots members to receive updates about the organization's work.

## National Coordinating Committee (NCC)

The NCC was the elected leadership of LeftRoots, and the second highest decision-making body after the full membership Congress. The NCC met regularly and was expected to oversee all aspects of LeftRoots' work, lead planning and make decisions, and provide leadership to the organization's members. For most of LeftRoots' trajectory, NCC members were elected by their branches, and in our last NCC expansion in 2021, NCC members were elected by the full membership. NCC members took active leadership roles in all aspects of LeftRoots' work.

## Congress

Congress was the space where LeftRoots members met as a full membership once every 1-2 years to take stock of the organization's work, carry out important collective tasks together, and make major decisions about the organization's trajectory. LeftRoots had one all-member Congress that was in person, and the rest of our congresses happened online.

## National Secretary

The National Secretary of LeftRoots was elected by membership, was responsible for coordinating the NCC, and was a voting member of this body. This person acted as a core leader of the organization, taking overall responsibility for setting the organization's direction and for the organization's wellbeing, and holding different responsibilities at



different times. For most of LeftRoots' history this was a paid role. LeftRoots had a total of two National Secretaries, both of whom were founders of the organization.

## **Core**

In our later years, as our work expanded and became more complex, we created this team of Director-level staff and NCC members who were making a staff-like commitment to LeftRoots work. Core was responsible for maintaining communication and coordination across all work areas, identifying and addressing gaps and organizational needs, facilitating decision-making processes, and making time-sensitive operational decisions.

## **Staff**

LeftRoots had both paid and unpaid staff, with 8 paid staff members at its largest. Staff held high level coordination and leadership roles in operations and program work and, except for the National Secretary, were vote-less members of elected leadership bodies. In the early years, a small group of paid and unpaid members provided significant leadership as a "staff team" that met weekly and reported to the NCC. As membership and leadership became more consolidated, coordination roles expanded outside staff, and the staff team became less and less relevant. Our staff was hired almost exclusively from our membership base, and while we had traditional HR policies, our expectations for staff conduct, discipline and accountability were primarily shaped by LeftRoots' membership expectations.

## **Branches**

Until 2020, branches were the basic unit of membership in LeftRoots. Most branches were geographic, meeting in a city where there was a concentration of cadre members. A few branches were at-large, meeting online with members from around the country. Members met once a month in branches for general membership meetings to engage in organizational work, build camaraderie, and interface with leadership. In 2020 we updated our membership structure and no longer had branches. Branches played a crucial role in building LeftRoots and were the core container shaping most member's experience of the organization until 2020. We eventually closed branches in favor of monthly all-member meetings and we built other containers that had more specifically defined purposes.

## **Branch Coordinating Committees (BCCs)**

Each branch of LeftRoots elected a Coordinating Committee. At different times, BCC's took responsibility for leading, or delegating, a wide variety of tasks including meeting facilitation, membership recruitment and support, meeting logistics including childcare and interpretation, conflict mediation, and political education. Each BCC sent two representatives to the National Coordinating Committee.

## **Cadre Circles**

Beginning in 2019, we created a new basic membership unit called Cadre Circles, which were smaller teams of about 5-8 cadres who were responsible for supporting each other

and holding each other accountable to cadre development and meeting their LeftRoots commitments. In cadre circles, members made sure that each of us had clarity about the organization's work, that each of us was engaging in the work to the best of our ability, and that each of us had a chance to ask for support or accountability when we needed it.

## **National Leadership Team**

In 2020 when we began to structure our work around 'all-cadres initiatives', we established the National Leadership Team as a temporary leadership structure for each initiative. The NLT was accountable to the NCC and had the authority to make decisions about the specific initiative it was leading. This structure allowed us to bring new cadres into national leadership roles and draw on highly experienced people when we needed specific expertise. In our last year, the NLT operated as the political leadership of LeftRoots' external work in the SOS Process, while the NCC remained as the leadership of LeftRoots the organization and oversaw our closing.

## **Membership Organizers**

In 2020 and 2021 we formalized Membership Organizers as a mid-level layer of leadership in LeftRoots. Each MO was responsible for coordinating one cadre circle, and MO's took on this responsibility for a defined term of 4-12 months. We ran a training and support program for each cohort of MO's to build their leadership skills and maintain regular communication between MO's and the NCC. In addition to coordinating and strengthening their cadre circle, MO's were responsible for building member's clarity about organizational decisions and reporting to the NCC about their member's conditions, doubts and questions.

## **Program and Operations Teams<sup>9</sup>**

LeftRoots had many different program teams over the years. Initially, we organized ourselves into teams that all members participated in. As we grew larger, these committees became unwieldy, and we shifted in approach, with smaller teams, most of which were led by members of the NCC or staff. Throughout our history we had teams dedicated to our core functions of cadre development, strategy, operations, and membership support. We also formed temporary teams for a specific task such as drafting strategy, leading a training, or planning a Congress.

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<sup>9</sup> For more information regarding this topic, including deeper discussion of operations' work with tech, finance, structure, security, and more, please review "LeftRoots' Organizational Infrastructure Lessons, ([https://dusk.leftroots.net/resources/Org-Infrastructure%20Lessons%20v2%20\(public\).pdf](https://dusk.leftroots.net/resources/Org-Infrastructure%20Lessons%20v2%20(public).pdf))".

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Alienation:** The severance or estrangement of people from aspects of their human nature as a consequence of living in a society where the mode of production responds to the needs of capital and the capitalist class, at the expense of human development (and the planet's sustainability). Alienation is the process through which we become foreign to the world we are living in, under capitalism. Our society is structured in such a way that we're likely to never meet the people who grew the food we eat, or the people getting rich off our mortgage payments. Most of us don't have real decision-making power at work, at school, or in the many other institutions that shape our lives. We become separated from what we produce, our labor, and our own potential, from each other and ourselves, which includes, disconnection from our bodies and our histories. Alienation facilitates economic production while it also weakens possibilities for collective struggle.

**Cadres:** Cadres are individuals with a high level of skills and commitment to revolutionary struggle, who take responsibility for advancing a revolutionary strategy. Cadres earn leadership in mass movements, and they are accountable to advancing a revolutionary strategy through their membership in a cadre organization. Cadres have a commitment to their own continued development and transformation. In other words, they are always willing to learn, grow and change to be more effective. While individuals can embody many of the qualities of cadres on their own, we think what they can accomplish is limited without cadre organization. This concept and practice dates back to the Russian revolution and has been adopted by revolutionary movements throughout history.

LeftRoots Cadres are members of LeftRoots who aspire to become revolutionary cadres through the process of developing as strategists and developing strategy. LeftRoots does not see itself as a fully developed revolutionary cadre organization, instead it is a time bound project that aims to develop a critical mass of social movement leftists as cadre who can create strategy and build the political instrument needed to win 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism.

**Collective support and accountability:** In LeftRoots, this is the term we've used to describe our practices for how we help each other overcome challenges to meeting our organizational commitments. We use this term internally to remind ourselves to place support and accountability in dialectical relationship to one another, and that each of us has a responsibility to collectivize our struggles and our labor in this area, to help combat an alienated approach to our 'personal' challenges and make our collective cadrefication more possible.

**Conjuncture:** Rooted in an analysis of society's structure, conjunctural analysis reveals how the crises and contradictions of capitalism are manifesting and unfolding in this period. Rather than a static picture, a conjunctural analysis offers insights to what is shifting and how, and what those shifts mean for advancing revolutionary struggle. Since it's so much about understanding what's changing, analysis of a conjuncture draws heavily on our skill in using dialectical materialism. Rather than a snapshot of the exact moment, a conjuncture can unfold over years or decades.

**Dialectical materialist method:** Dialectical materialism enables us to understand the world as it really is – and how to change it. And there are in fact two interrelated elements involved here: firstly the need to understand the world as it really is – which is, broadly speaking, a materialist approach, an approach which treats the world as a material force in its own right that exists independently of what we may think it or like it to be; and secondly the need to understand this material world, either in nature or society, as a world of interconnected change and development, a world of universal conflict and contradiction between what is old and dying and what is new and struggling to be born – an approach we call dialectical. Fused together into a single philosophy, dialectics and materialism enable us to increasingly change the world once we have understood the laws of motion which are at work in its development. Dialectics alerts us to the need for change, materialism to the importance of bringing this change into line with the objective circumstances which actually prevail.<sup>10</sup>

**Idealism:** Idealism is a philosophy that understands ideas to be what determines the existence of the world, rather than understanding the world to be determined by material reality. While our ideas and actions can change the world, changing the world requires an understanding of the material realities that exist in a particular situation. There are many different ways idealism can manifest. These are some of the ways that are the most relevant for us:

- *Voluntarism:* Believing that will is the dominant factor in experience or in the world – basically the idea that sheer will power can achieve anything regardless of the conditions.
- *Moralism:* Believing that expressing judgments about others' morality (which is different than having an analysis), or the moral rightness of an action or issue, creates social change.
- *Purism:* Believing the purity or correctness of an action determines its impact despite the time, place, or conditions.

**Ideological tradition:** For our purposes, a set of ideas or theories by which one can organize social, economic, political and cultural life. Ideological traditions exist from the reactionary right to the revolutionary left. Anarchism, Marxism, Trotskyism and Maoism are examples of left ideological traditions.

**Individualism:** Individualism is a moral philosophy that gives primacy to personal interests over the interests of a group or social movement. It promotes self-reliance and independence over interdependence and solidarity. We live in a social order that makes us individually responsible for securing the things we need in order to live, often in competition with each other. Capitalists have to compete against each other to expand their capital (capital must grow or die), while workers compete against each other to be able to keep /get a job, or just for mere survival. This forced competition for survival shapes humans to be individualistic. Individualism is a prevalent characteristic of our current society which means that it influences the organizational culture of our movement organizations as well.

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<sup>10</sup> Taken from the South African Communist Party pamphlet, "Why Revolutionaries Need Marxism," by Dialego

**Liberalism:** Liberalism is a political philosophy that emphasizes personal and economic freedom, and it's a term that used to mean different things in different contexts. Economic liberalism refers to an economic regime that allows property owners free reign to assert their power, sometimes referred to as neoliberalism. Civic liberalism is a philosophy emphasizing an individual's autonomy from governments, institutions, or other entrenched power relations. In the United States, liberal can also refer to a set of political beliefs centered around doing good for people without challenging the status quo.

In our context, we use liberalism to describe what happens when we don't engage in principled struggle, inspired by Mao's famous text, "*Combat Liberalism*". Liberalism undermines our movements because it rejects struggle and promotes opportunism, selfishness, apathy, and conformity with the status quo. In our movement organizations, liberalism undermines our ability to build and maintain unity, or to improve our practice by learning from our successes and our failures. Liberalism might look like gossiping instead of bringing our concerns directly to each other or making assumptions about an organizational decision instead of investigating with curiosity, or letting things slide when we don't do something we said we would do, instead of naming it and seeking clarity on how to move forward.

**Liberatory strategy:** A hypothesis of how political forces can build capacities and shift the balance of power on ever-changing terrain to defeat opposing forces so that they can carry out revolutionary change. We also use the term "strategic orientation" to describe a single, comprehensive strategy because it helps us to avoid varied, and often non-specific, uses of the word "strategy."

**Protagonism:** This is a term that LeftRoots first came across in the work of Marta Harnecker who noted its usage amongst social movement activists throughout Latin America. We have adopted the use of the term even though there is no direct translation in English because, like no other term we've come across, 'protagonism' names an approach that has the potential to strengthen social movements inside the United States. The concept builds from the literary term 'protagonist' which refers to a character who takes ownership over her destiny and drives the narrative forward by taking action. In a similar vein, we understand protagonism to be the democratic engagement which builds our individual and collective capacities for transformative change and, in doing so, combats our fundamental alienation from the means of production, from the products of our labor, from each other, and from ourselves.

**Principled struggle:** The process of addressing potential and actual disagreements, for the sake of reaching collective clarity and supporting collective unity, in the context of already-existing shared political commitments. Principled struggle can happen informally, or through intentionally created processes, and it can be used to address many different types of potential disagreements, large or small. The elements of principled struggle include seeking clarity before declaring a disagreement, assessing the need and urgency for the disagreement to be resolved, and what conditions may be required for its resolution, naming our intention in raising a disagreement, naming the kernels of truth in the other person's position, listening actively, offering each other grounds, or evidence to

support our position, stating the resolution or lack of resolution reached, and following up in a timely and prompt manner when necessary.

**Resilient protagonism and discipline:** A capacity LeftRoots articulated as one of the necessary capacities for cadres to develop, defined as the ability to navigate contradictions between our individual needs, and the needs of our political work, based on a grounded and evolving assessment of all relevant conditions and priorities, for the sake of making our best lifetime revolutionary contribution. Resilience means the capacity to generate a sense of hope, possibility, joy and connection even in challenging conditions, and the ability to recover from hardship, challenges or even trauma. Protagonism means having a sense of our individual and collective agency in shaping our circumstances, overcoming challenges, and making history. Discipline means having the capacity to maintain accountability to our commitments, especially when it's challenging.

**Strategic leaning:** An incomplete strategic orientation that centers a particular and important approach or tactic but makes less comprehensive assertions about how that approach might lead to revolutionary change.

**Strategic tendency:** A group of strategic orientations that are largely aligned around common ideas about what the logic of a liberated society would be, the class layers and social sectors that, if united, could defeat the opposition, the makeup of the opposition and the core contradictions that drive it, the choke points in how the opposition stays cohered and maintains its power, and the current situational objective that, if achieved, would enable the movement to resolve a core contradiction in such a way that expands capacities, shifts the correlation of power, and enables us to advance to a new phase of struggle.

Some individuals or organizations may be highly conscious of their strategic tendency, while others may be carrying out the tendency's approach in practice due to their positioning in the movement ecosystem. A strategic tendency can also include organizations that are not affiliated with each other, or that are advancing slightly different immediate objectives.