

THE
POWER
WE NEED

IMAGINING AND BUILDING
PRO-TRANS
MAJORITIES

JESS ST. LOUIS



WEYMOUTH & SONS
ESTABLISHED 1849
WATERTOWN, CONN.
QUALITY SOCKS

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SMOOTH
&
STRONG



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IMAGINING AND BUILDING
**PRO-TRANS
MAJORITIES**

JESS ST. LOUIS

KIMMIE DEAREST
2026



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Publisher

Cayden Mak

Editors

Akin Olla

Marcy Rein

Cover and interior art and design

Kimie Dearest/kimmiedearest.com

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The Yeses that Surprise You: Organizing Across the Lines of Cis and Trans

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Reprinted with permission from Autostraddle*

*dear fellow trans girl/woman/femme,
say yes and join.
no, really. do it.
you might be one of the few like us in the room,
but building power is an alchemy like no other
that fashions solidarity out of fragile unions.
and also, it is the only way to freedom.*

Sometimes, the things you say yes to surprise you. The flicker of something that feels like hope and desire that dances from your stomach to your throat, as you gaze into the mirror and weave earrings through your earlobes. A galaxy that expands with a strength and pride underneath and across your collarbone, draping on and buttoning up a shirt that fills out a gender that is your own with a nod to what has come before. The

words that come tumbling out, messy and undone, sorting out who we are alongside to who we were, making room for whatever is to come.

When I said yes to becoming a part of an organizing project that intentionally works across the lines of race, class, and gender, I knew that it was going to be mostly made up of cis people because that's who mostly makes up the population of the county I call home. What I didn't expect—what continues to surprise me—is that choosing to build power in a way that feels riskier than just being in exclusively queer and trans spaces has allowed me to cultivate a grounded hope in the face of fear by teaching me that there are far more cis people who choose care and solidarity than I once believed.

Solidarity is not forever; it shatters on the rocks of difference, on the fear of exile.

— Joan Nestle

I came out as queer and trans in 2010 as a 19-year-old after my first year of college in Greensboro, North Carolina after moving there from Atlanta, Georgia. Despite most of my friends and the people I did social justice work being queer or queer-affirming, it took a while for me to take the risk of coming more fully into myself, surprising myself with the joy that came on the other side. That same year, in the state that would become the place I would call home, the North Carolina GOP captured majorities in both houses of the state legislature for the first time in more than 20 years, as a

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result of Tea Party mobilizing anti-Black racism in the wake of President Obama's victory in the 2008 US Presidential election.

At the time, I didn't really pay much attention to that seismic shift in power. I didn't believe in voting as a way to make change and because what felt most pressing were the anti-LGBTQ thoughts, actions, and behaviors that I bumped against far too often. From anti-trans rhetoric online, mindless misgendering from strangers and close friends, and a family member telling me that I was fundamentally undesirable to other queer women due to the sex I was assigned at birth, the world felt like a painful place to exist in. At the same time, I had many friends, family, and comrades who loved and affirmed me, reminding me of my inherent dignity and worthiness, even as I struggled to internalize their care.

While I was learning to feel for my resilience and belonging amidst these intimate hurts and heartbreaks, the North Carolina GOP used their newfound power to push through Amendment One in late 2011, leading up to the elections in 2012. Amendment One was a constitutional amendment ballot measure that stated that the only relationship that the state would recognize would be a heterosexual marriage, removing any benefits for LGBTQ couples in civil unions and domestic partnerships in counties in North Carolina such as Guilford County, the one I lived in and now call home. In response, LGBTQ and allied organizers and activists began forming coalitions to defeat this attack on our communities—including queer people like myself who didn't believe in marriage.

After years of doing activist work and then organizing where I intentionally stayed away from doing anything electoral, this time it felt different. Part of that was that my politics and approach to strategy had matured and developed; but more importantly, it felt more personal as an attack on me as a queer trans woman and on people in my community that I loved.

We ended up losing that campaign and that victory set the stage for their right-wing to capture not only a supermajority in the legislature but the governor's seat as well. But that organizing project contained many lessons. Here are the three that stick out to me. First, organizing out of a belief that we don't have to cede the places we love but haven't always loved us back to the right is a great way to find home, family, and stay in the work as a queer Southerner. Second, contending for power across big cities and small towns is transformative, life giving, and is a necessary source of hope, as we meet more people who also want a different world, even when we lose. And third, despite practicing solidarity across the lines of my own race and class privilege, I left that campaign not trusting straight and cis allies to actually show up for queer and trans people.

It felt true, and why wouldn't it? The cis people I saw working to combat transphobia were queer, and the straight people seemed to feel more alliance to cis lesbian and gay people rather than trans people. Amidst all of this, Black trans women were, and continue to be, murdered at an alarming rate, creating a sense of

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persistent unease and a fear of hate violence. I could see how anti-trans “feminists” were operating in the queer women’s communities I was beginning to find home in as a dyke. This would lead me to always keep my eye out for the moment when cis comrades would inevitably mess up, and they often did.

When they did mess up, it felt like a violation of trust and shared values. I wanted people to know not just that their actions were wrong, but why their actions were wrong, in the hope that it would prove the worthiness of my humanity. At best, those conversations were generative, caring, and deepened solidarity. But often, I ended up practicing some of the harmful trends that Maurice Mitchell has brought up in his incredible piece *Building Resilient Organizations*; namely neoliberal identity (‘I’m trans, therefore I know what’s best’) and choosing to take a maximalist approach to my beliefs and values (‘it’s either perfectly pro-trans or it’s a threat to my well-being’).

These experiences led me to engage in amazing abolitionist organizing led by trans people of color and formerly incarcerated people back home in Atlanta, Georgia and exclusively worked to organize people from those constituencies. This organization ran powerful issue campaigns that not only stopped a proposed city ordinance that would have racist, sexist, and transphobic impacts on communities in Atlanta, but also won city funding for a program that would divert people away from incarceration and towards critical, life-saving services.

It felt safer to be in an organization led for and by trans people. I dealt with less anti-trans behaviors and actions than I would otherwise. I got to learn from older trans folks with incredible life experiences to share, but who were full of their own contradictions around race, class, gender, and sexuality. As a result of the organization's founders believing in a model of organizing that supports personal transformation alongside systemic change, I learned skills that made me feel like multi-racial organizing was truly possible in a container that I knew affirmed trans people. Those skills included the ability to feel for my own dignity in connection to other people's dignity too, rather than just being deferential to other people across lines of difference in a true belief that I had a stake in our collective freedom. That skill then grew my confidence in my ability to make requests and hold boundaries and receive support in addition to offering it across the lines of race, class, and gender.

However, choosing a more affirming place to organize that primarily built power in a few core constituencies and called on already aligned allies out of a fear that our trans-specific needs and demands would get sidelined comes with its own cost. The fears weren't coming from an ungrounded place, either. The leaders of color I was organizing with—both cis and trans—had lived experiences of people with more power and privilege believing that a rising tide of positive change for some would lift all boats, and as such throwing our needs and our people under the bus in the name of progress. But the cost of those individual and collective decisions was that the important and necessary power we built wasn't

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able to fully defeat the power of money or allow us to capture the power of governing, particularly in a city as large as Atlanta. It meant that our wins hinged on whipping the votes of council members that were hopefully able to cobble together tenuous majorities rather than generating the power of tens or hundreds of thousands of people who would have the power to elect or unelect leaders based on their actions.

In the meantime, I was watching from my front porch in Georgia as the right wing in North Carolina and the US continued to seize power. After capturing both houses of the legislature and the governor's office in 2012, the North Carolina GOP advanced an aggressively destructive policy agenda. They used their governing power to attack reproductive freedom, healthcare, undocumented people, public education, environmental activists, labor rights advocates, voting rights, the growing Black Lives Matter movement, and—in the wake of the Supreme Court's 2014 ruling affirming marriage equality that overturned Amendment One—trans people. Responding to the city council in Charlotte voting for an anti-discrimination law in public accommodations that included gender identity, the North Carolina GOP advanced what was known as HB2, or “the Bathroom Bill” before the upcoming presidential election in November. While HB2 declared that people must use public accommodations like restrooms based on their sex assigned at birth, opening trans and gender non-conforming people to increasing levels of violence, the bill also restricted the ability for local governments to pass any new anti-discrimination ordinances until

December 2020 as well as from raising the minimum wage on the municipal level. On the federal level, the right wing was able to usher the Trump administration into the presidency, embolden and empower the far-right, and harm millions of people in their pursuit of power and profit. They were coming for our throats.

You don't go into coalition because you just like it. The only reason why you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way to stay alive.

— Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon

It would be a lie to say that one of the lessons from 2016 is that state-sanctioned transphobia is undefeatable. It wasn't. It isn't. Persistent protest from LGBTQ communities combined with economic pressure from other states with progressive governments, corporations, and cultural performers cost the state \$400 million in revenue, which generated the ability for a coalition of centrists, liberals, and progressives to un-elect Republican Pat McCrory from the governor's office and place a corporate Democrat, Roy Cooper, into that seat. Cooper's victory led to the repeal of the bathroom restriction in HB2, the most intimately anti-trans aspect of the bill. However, that compromise cemented the provisions barring local municipalities from enacting any new anti-discrimination laws for five years and that only the state government could raise the minimum wage

instead of local governments.

The fight against HB2 in North Carolina and the following gubernatorial election was a stark reminder that trans people alone did not have the power to defeat the most explicit of the bill's attempts to erase trans people from public life. And adding the entire larger LGBTQ community was also not enough. But trans people and the wider LGBTQ community, alongside hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of cis and straight people? Together, we did have that power.

Despite knowing this, deep in my bones, being a part of a power-building organization that worked across multiple lines of difference and hoped to have hundreds if not thousands of members engaged in the work felt like a minefield waiting to explode. It wasn't just that I was scared of experiencing hurtful anti-trans thoughts and actions from cis people as I canvassed on the doors or inside of member meetings. I worried about messing up and hurting people too, due to the way white supremacy and capitalism have worked to shape my thinking and actions in service of domination as a queer trans woman with race and class privilege. But in late 2019, three years after HB2 passed and Trump took power, I was pretty certain that not taking this risk was a losing game. I had moved back to North Carolina and was ready to make the place I called home love me back.

A group of us launched what became Guilford for All in early 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic swept through our communities, hoping to make an impact in one of

the most consequential elections of our lives—and we did. We organized around issues of public education and housing, and supported local organizers as millions of people rose up in defense of Black lives in 2020. As electoral justice groups mobilized voters and unelected President Trump from power nationally, we were able to successfully flip the balance of power of our county commission.

After the 2020 election and in the early part of 2021, we decided we needed to build a platform, a set of policy priorities that would guide our organizing strategies. Our members talked to more than 500 people in our county outside of grocery stores, at bus stations, and online. Most of the people we talked to were Black or other people of color and were working class. Those conversations informed the platform that our working groups drafted, and eventually voted on.

One of the working groups was focused on the issues of health and wellness for all. In that group, a cis member-leader drafted and pushed for a transgender healthcare and wellness policy for the platform. There was some fear about this policy becoming part of the ballot, from trans people and allies alike, not because we didn't agree but because we were in the beginning waves of the attacks on trans healthcare in 2021 and 2022. We knew that, like the county we lived and organized in, our organization was only made up of a small percentage of trans people. We worried that the vote might feel like a referendum on whether or not the organization supported trans people, as it wasn't clear or certain that

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we had enough support to win.

In the end, the vast supermajority—84%—of members and platform survey participants who voted were in favor of being a part of an organization that clearly and directly affirmed the human rights of trans people. To know that a vast majority of people connected to an organization that I am a part of—people who I know and that I don't know—have affirmed a pro-trans agenda alongside a range of other policy visions for the world has provided me with a sense of collective power to rest into in the face of what feels like rising and intensifying transphobia in this country and across the world.

It's not like the potential minefield hasn't exploded at times, but it hasn't destroyed my belief in organizing across lines of difference. Yes, I have been misgendered by people we organize and build power with. But frankly, it's less than I would have expected. When I operate from a place of mutual dignity and a trust in our shared vision for the world, it's easier to remind myself that individual cis people are not my enemy. Instead, our shared enemies are the ones who benefit from hurting all of us, and I've been able to enter into those conversations, finding more care and solidarity on the other side.

One time, I was on the phone calling one of our member-leaders, a cis woman who lived in the majority Black and working-class neighborhood we've been organizing in, to see if she was going to attend our event the following weekend. There was a bad storm that

knocked out power in the neighborhood for a few days, so she was staying at a hotel with her family when I reached her. On that call, she called me “sir” a few times. It hurt to feel unseen and called out of the gender I am, but it wasn’t the right time to bring it up. The next time I saw her, we were at a member meeting in her neighborhood, the sounds of a DJ and kids playing on a bouncy house in the playground. We started catching up about life since we last spoke, and I brought up our last conversation.

“Remember the last time we talked? On that call, you called me ‘sir’ a few times. That hurt, because I’m a woman and not a man,” I said. “I don’t think you intended to hurt me, but I just wanted to bring it up because you’re important to me and the organization.”

“Oh yeah,” she said as she looked me in the eye. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know. I won’t do that again.”

“Thank you,” I responded, smiling. “Are we good?”

“Yeah, we’re good.”

Another time at a recent statewide convention, a younger Black cis man who is part of our organization called to me saying, “Hey what’s up brother,” outside our motel room.

I winced, and responded, “Hey man, good to see you. I’m not your brother though, I’m a woman.”

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He had a look of surprise and a smile on his face, and quickly corrected himself as he dapped me up. “Oh that’s what’s up. How you doing, sis?”

But it’s not just other folks having growing edges, I do too. In another situation, I found myself avoiding entering into and speaking up in a conflict between leaders of color in an attempt to be a “good white woman.” Two of our values around multi-racial organizing is believing that building power together is more important than trying to be a perfect individual ally; and another is remembering nobody is above accountability and nobody is below deep reverence. A comrade and close friend in the organization reminded me that my inaction was not in alignment with our values, and that it was hurtful. That pushed me to enter into the conflict and take on the responsibility for caring for the organization and our strategy and see that as more important than my own discomfort. It helped rebuild some trust and I grew in my own confidence as a leader in an organization working across lines of difference.

In these situations, we’re not just navigating the power dynamics of gender, we’re navigating race and class, too. There is a way where my legitimate hurt could be more believed or taken seriously as a white trans woman and lead people to face—or fear facing—uneven consequences as working class and Black members of the organization due to the ways white supremacy works to undermine multi-racial power-building through betraying our comrades of color. But to shy

away from this complexity weakens our movements rather than strengthening them. Bluntly naming the hurt and correcting folks when they make mistakes and choosing connection has generated the possibility to be met in solidarity without having to put my own dignity up for question. Oppression hopes to rob us of these moments: the joy of connecting with each other in ways we might not have expected as we work to build another world.

Our responsibility as leftists is to begin to arm people with the concepts and information they need to take control of their own lives...Wherever we demanded of ourselves and our audience a confrontation around sexual and economic issues, ultimately we won, even if that didn't show up in the vote, because we laid the groundwork for the kind of connecting we need to do to build a movement.

– Amber Hollibaugh,
on defeating the Briggs Amendment in 1978

Most of the people who are in Guilford for All are cis, but not all. Quite a few of us are a part of the broader LGBTQ community. In our county, we have a handful of trans and gender non-conforming people as important member-leaders. When we include the statewide

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organization we are a chapter of, the Carolina Federation, there are even more trans and gender non-conforming people in all levels of leadership.

In 2020, a group of people in the statewide organization held a political study and relationship-building group called the Feminist Solidarity school, and part of that process included convening a meeting of a multiracial caucus of trans and gender non-conforming folks. In that caucus, I met another trans femme organizer who worked in one of our affiliated organizations a few counties over from mine.

Over the next two years, we chatted about what it was like to be trans femmes as we intentionally work in power-building organizations that are mostly cis. We supported and cheered each other on as we shared what it was like to risk talking to hundreds of strangers as we are embodied in our genders, sent each other photos of manicures and pedicures and dresses and floral jumpsuits, a reminder that, “I see you and the risk you/we are taking to be more free and powerful. We are not in this alone.”

This sort of trans-for-trans support feels different from other trans autonomous spaces I have been a part of. It feels like a practice of refuge and resource that we return to and exit, entering back into the broader project of collective struggle.

Across the country, I have a few other comrades—trans women, trans men, nonbinary and gender non-

conforming people—who are taking these same risks for the sake of building power for a bigger we, working to be strong and powerful in our rightful place in the movement, as one in the number alongside others working to get free. I believe there is more hope there than we are led to believe, and that only our enemies benefit from us being alone as they try to pick off our possible allies to their side.

And cis comrades, do not get it twisted. It is not just a matter of trans people choosing to be brave and enter into spaces to build collective power where we may be one of the only ones like us in the room, on the doors and phones, or in the strategy sessions. Ignoring the right-wing's use of anti-trans hatred and strategies is a losing game, and it weakens our collective power if you don't trust that cis people like yourself could also be in solidarity with trans and gender non-conforming people. Anti-trans narratives and policy fights from the Christian Right are wedges that aim to get people who may otherwise join the freedom side join our opposition or abstain from the freedom struggles of our time, and our task as liberation workers is to craft the bridges for folks to join us.

To those who insist on denying us our full humanity, we will insist on the sacred humanity of all people. A bridge, not a wedge. A bridge, not a wedge. It has a nice ring to it. We can say it like a mantra when we feel the Right getting too hot.

— Mab Segrest

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dear fellow trans girl/woman/femme,
i see you
your painted nails on your hands and feet
dangly earrings and bright skirt
t-shirt and jeans and lipstick
dressed up and dressed down
deep breath as your heart races
full of nervousness and hope and love for the people
remembering your last good one-on-one
the eighty-four percent who voted yes
the quick shift he made from bro to sis
the younger you who would doubt all this
this you, this we, this us
here, now.
fist up, knuckle on door
open to possibility

If Solidarity Is Possible, So Is a Pro-Trans Majority

I'm no stranger to hard mornings. Wake up, scroll the news, get a pulse on the moment, experience increasingly authoritarian and fascist GOP-controlled state governments and the Trump administration. Those mornings, I struggle to get out of bed—let alone feel hope, vision, or strategy. I doubt you are a stranger to hard mornings, even as you muster whatever energy reserves you have to get through the work day, show up for your young kids and/or aging parents, respond to an ICE watch shift, make another five calls to your elected officials, and check in on your friends and neighbors. It's a lot.

What helps me make sense of those hard days is remembering that, while the communities and movements I'm a part of don't have the power we need to stop the bad and build the good just yet, power and powerlessness are not static. To be clear, when I talk about *power*, I am talking about the ability of a person, group, or coalition to meaningfully influence or shape

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the actions, decisions, and beliefs of individuals, groups, organizations, and society. *Powerlessness* means we don't have that ability yet.

Solidarity is far more possible than I once believed. This lesson, learned through organizing with my political home, Guilford for All, has continued to nourish my belief that we can organize across differences (race, class, gender, etc.) and build power, even when things feel bleak.

When I stay present with my grief over our communities not having the power we need, and as that grief reflects my longing for more freedom, safety, and justice, I am better able to feel the deep sense of possibility that comes from trusting that our relative power and powerlessness is not set in stone. More power is on the table—if we cultivate it and contend for it.

To build this kind of power for trans liberation, as part of a broader vision of democracy that benefits working-class people across race and gender, organizers and strategists need to take responsibility for some critical tasks.

We must counter the regressive narrative central to the Right's anti-trans story. But we can't do that solely on savvy narrative strategy and communications: we have to mesh that tactic with organizing that builds new political majorities, contests for governing power, and offers compelling visions for the future that are only possible if people join us.

Breaking the Right's frame

Last year, I texted two friends of mine to ask if they'd like to collaborate on a conference presentation focused on growing the power of social justice movements to make meaning for millions of people. Specifically, I asked Anna Castro (Principal Narrative Strategist at Transgender Law Center and architect of the Trans Agenda for Liberation Narrative Lab) and Cayden Mak (Publisher at *Convergence Magazine*, and former Executive Director of 18 Million Rising), whether they would collaborate on a proposal about lessons and insights from our work in service of building and cultivating a pro-trans majority. I feel honored that they said yes.

Over a series of video calls, we realized that a major obstacle to building a pro-trans majority is the underlying assumption that only a minority of people will support trans people or trans issues—an assumption seemingly shared by people across competing political ideologies.

It's expressed differently depending on the community. In social justice-oriented trans communities you might hear someone say, "We don't work with cisgender people; only trans-for-trans organizing will keep us safe or free." In progressive communities that focus on racial and/or economic justice, it can emerge as, "I think transphobia is a problem, but I don't think we should take a pro-trans stance. It will alienate the people we need to organize." Our neighbors who claim they're not

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political may say something like, “Why are we talking about trans people? I don’t care. I care about how my eggs are eight dollars a carton now.”

And then: vociferously anti-trans right-wingers, who say things like, “Transgenderism is a threat to our country,” or “Kamala Harris is for ‘they/them’, not for you.” Right-wing politicians and groups have been spending hundreds of millions of dollars to convince us that not only are trans people a problem, but that most people are—or should be—against us.

In 2024, right-wing electeds and conservative PACs spent over \$200 million dollars moving anti-trans messaging across various platforms. As awful as that is, I draw hope from knowing that all that money being used to deploy and disseminate messaging hasn’t cultivated an anti-trans majority.

A recent Voss Research and Strategy poll found that only 35% of people surveyed believe that “there should be policies in place to ensure transgender views and lifestyles do not harm society.” On the other hand, nearly half of the respondents believed that “transgender people should have the freedom to be themselves and live their lives.”

The right-wing’s \$200 million messaging investment did manage to shift some people’s perspectives. It has encouraged people who hold anti-trans beliefs to double down on this strategy out of a belief that more people agree with them than actually do—leading otherwise

centrist or progressive-leaning influencers to back away from supporting trans people, emulating what they perceive as the majority.

The Right has created “social proof” for anti-trans views, playing to people’s tendency to emulate what they perceive to be the most popular beliefs or actions of those around them—especially when they are uncertain or conflicted. This has led people who believe in trans rights to continue to underestimate the level of support they have in our communities, while people who hold anti-trans beliefs overestimate the number of people who agree with them.

If a pro-trans majority is on the table, how might we cultivate it?

Anna, Cayden, and I, along with our friend Nikko Viquiera (Senior Vice President of Programs at Race Forward), identified four pillars necessary for a majoritarian and pro-trans strategic orientation: building majorities, practicing solidarity, contesting for governing power, and offering a vision.

Building majorities

A majority is what wins long-term. In order to achieve durable systemic change, we must act under the imperative of cultivating and wielding the power of a pro-working class, pro-racial justice majority that includes trans people.

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Cultivating majorities is not easy work; ask any organizer or communicator—especially if they’ve done electoral or union-focused work that has demanded their efforts produce a majority. Frankly, any organizer worth trusting has hard-won experience of the importance of enough people power to win change—and in a democracy, a majority is what you can count on to win.

Many of us, myself included, have felt the pain of losing campaigns or efforts for positive change or for stopping harmful actions because our collective efforts did not generate a majority. I’ve been a part of protests with tens of thousands of people in the streets, but the power reflected in those mobilizations hasn’t been strong enough to un-elect warmongering governing leaders. I’ve participated in electoral campaigns where we lost by just over a hundred votes.

Despite these losses, we have to believe that our ideas, visions, and values can become the most popular ones. That we can convince more people to join us, and that we’ll resonate. If we impose our ideas and values from the top down, we can win short-term successes at best, but we run the risk of undermining long-term popular ownership of those ideas and values, and we become susceptible to backlash. At worst, we end up practicing or reinforcing authoritarian ideas, particularly during a period of rising ethnonationalism and authoritarianism in the US and globally.

I've been a part of winning context-specific majorities required for Guilford for All's endorsed candidates to get elected to office. The long-term vision of our statewide parent organization, the Carolina Federation, is to build a new political majority. While this work is very much still in progress, my 20-odd years of participating in and choosing to lead within social justice movements has taught me that solidarity is the practice that makes building majorities possible.

Practicing solidarity

We practice solidarity on principle. Solidarity—taking action against oppression that doesn't seem to directly affect you for the sake of our shared liberation—is a practice we all must engage in no matter our identities.

Solidarity builds the trust in ourselves, in others, and from other people that makes it possible to build power across race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and nationality. If we believe that only some of us have to practice solidarity while others don't, we become less powerful. We become less skilled at the practice of solidarity; we become hardened to other people's pain, and we run the risk of not sustaining the majority we need.

I was not the only person whose social media feeds were flooded with content from *Heated Rivalry*, the Canadian TV show on HBO whose main characters are closeted gay hockey players. Over and over I saw people reference (with sobbing-and-heart-eyed-emojis) the line: "I'm coming to the cottage," a nod to the moment

when the main characters choose to take a trip together to practice partnership, not solely hooking up like they had for years.

There's this understanding in behavioral science that *action* precedes *belief*, especially if the belief that undergirds the action is in tension with another belief we hold. This holds true whether we are taking action or witnessing the actions of others, particularly if we are meaningfully in relationship with the people taking action.

What made the cottage moment possible in *Heated Rivalry* was witnessing the bravery of another player coming out by publicly kissing the man he loved at the Stanley Cup celebration. That action preceded the main characters' belief that more could be possible. Choosing to go to the cottage then reinforced their safety in each other so they could take another brave action: coming out.

When we act together—fight together—to make life tangibly better for ourselves and others, we are more likely to believe that the people we act alongside are worth protecting. We can't wait for people to be perfectly pro-trans or have all the right words and analyses about any of our identities before we act in solidarity and fight for the public institutions and communities that reflect the democracy and economy we deserve.

The truth is, people we organize and communicate with

likely hold conflicting beliefs; for example, believing that there are only two genders and sexes, and also believing that people should be free to be themselves. But if we invite people to act in solidarity and take action to make their lives materially better—in a way that *also* protects trans people—they will be more likely to hold positive beliefs about trans people and be less swayed by anti-trans arguments.

Yes, we still say “ouch” when people say things that hurt us, and it doesn’t mean we can’t hold boundaries or can’t have expectations that people treat us with dignity. What it does mean is knowing that the people we organize with, or who could be a part of the majority we are building, are not our enemies. It means we give grace to become more practiced at solidarity, to build trust and repair harm, and to know that building a majority is the way we are all going to survive.

One of the thinkers I return to often is Amílcar Cabral, an agronomist from Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde who led efforts to free those nations from Portuguese colonialism. Cabral once wrote:

Always remember that the people are not fighting for ideas, nor for what is in men’s minds. The people fight and accept the sacrifices demanded by the struggle in order to gain material advantages, to live better and in peace, to benefit from progress, and for the better future of their children.

While the narrative strategist in me knows ideas and

stories matter, the organizer in me knows that people care most about meaningfully improving their lives. It's not enough to believe a pro-trans majority is possible and to work to make it real by practicing solidarity. We need to actually solve the problems we are facing and meaningfully improve the lives of trans and cis people across race and class. This informs the third pillar: the ability to make those changes, which is *governing power*.

Contesting for power

We aim to win governing power: We believe that government can be the solution to our problems at scale. We aim to win public institutions that care for and liberate all of us, and we have a responsibility to work with and shape the actions of our government.

We are not here to play small: big problems require big solutions. We can fight for universal healthcare so our government provides care no matter how much money we make, where we live, or where we were born. We can fight for fully funded public education that's good no matter your zip code, that reflects the lives of everyone in the school, and that cares for teachers and custodians and bus drivers. We can make sure everyone has access to basic life resources: housing, food, water, community. Winning all of those things requires governing power. The way we win without being authoritarian, and having people buy in and own the victory, is through building a majority.

Governing power isn't marked by elections and what happens in legislative sessions alone. Governing power is also reflected in how people in cities and counties, and states and countries, make administrative decisions. It shows up in the ways judges and juries interpret laws and set consequences when people break those laws—and in whether courts are the only way we can structurally resolve conflict, hold people accountable to shared agreements for collective well-being, and address harm. Governing power is who makes the rules over who controls the things that produce wealth, and who has the power to shape how people get compensated for the work they do. It's in the ideas that seem like common sense that affect millions of everyday actions and non-actions.

It does us no good to act like we do not intend to govern as part of a diverse, democratic majority, especially when the Trump administration and its allies are using governing power to shape the world in an authoritarian, Christian nationalist image that benefits a handful of rich people at the expense of most of us.

We need governing power to turn the fourth pillar into reality: a vibrant political and economic democracy that frees all of us—including trans people.

Offering a vision

We foreshadow a vibrant political and economic democracy that liberates people across race, class, gender, sexuality, and national origin. We're here to get free.

Every one of us who believes in freedom, democracy, and justice has to constantly project a future that working-class people across race, gender, sexuality, and national origin can see themselves reflected in and can see as a path to a tangibly better life. Not only that, it has to be more compelling and clear than whatever delusions and precarious access to human rights that authoritarians like Donald Trump, billionaires like Andrew Cuomo, and white Christian nationalists like Steve Bannon and the Heritage Foundation are offering. The right wing is and has been targeting trans people as a way to undermine this vision of democracy and our economy for a number of reasons:

There was/is a meaning-making void

Lots of people don't really know about trans people or have relationships with them. However, people do think about gender: how men and women act, look, love, and relate to each other and the world. How people think about gender has long been intertwined with race and religion.

Trans people seem to be considered politically expendable across ideology.

It isn't just the right wing that's okay with limiting trans people's freedom and access to the full spectrum of human rights. It's also people who identify as "progressive" who make the decision to remove gender identity protections from employment discrimination legislation for non-trans people who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual. This undermines our beliefs and practices

of solidarity, which can limit our ability to build a durable progressive majority.

Wedge stories and narratives about trans people and gender have been used as a way to grow a multi-racial and multi-gender conservative coalition.

We see examples of this in right-wing leaders organizing Black and Latine evangelical pastors to support the North Carolina “Bathroom Bill” in 2016, and in Mark Robinson using anti-trans narratives in his attempt to become the governor of North Carolina in 2024. The conservative coalition is becoming more diverse, and narratives about gender and trans people are central to that project.

Anti-trans narratives are used to decimate public institutions.

Schools, libraries, Medicaid, and more are decimated through the use of anti-trans narratives, making billionaires richer and re-fashioning American public life to reflect a Christian nationalist and authoritarian society.

To put it bluntly: anti-trans narratives, stories, and policies have become central to the right-wing project in this time. To both build the “NO” coalition against authoritarianism and build the “YES” coalition that can win transformative change, it’s imperative to continually invite in and envision a “bigger we.”

Envisioning a “bigger we” doesn’t mean we weaken our commitments to racial justice, migrant justice, or the working class. On the other hand, it requires us to double down on those commitments, as the people we need to convince to join us aren’t only white cisgender working- or middle-class people. It includes Black and Brown people, folks who’ve migrated to the US, people who are and aren’t formerly incarcerated, and even some trans people—people who the right wing contends for as they try to build a multi-racial, multi-gender coalition. The “bigger we” includes them, too.

To combat these stories and to foreshadow the democracy we want, we need to see wedge issues not as “culture war distractions” but as opportunities to grow our majority and weaken their base of support. Through practicing solidarity on principle, we can model for ourselves and for other people that they too can take action towards what they long for, even as they wrestle with the conflicting ideas in their heads—and that they are less alone in doing so. Defending our public institutions (schools, libraries, the kinds of healthcare we can access) and demanding and envisioning most of them gives people something material and tangible to fight for, not just fight against.

Instead of giving into the fear and isolation that our opposition hopes we feel, let’s bet on each other—and work together to win.

Applying This to Your Own Work

A Few Brainstorming and Strategy Questions

What are you working with other people to achieve?

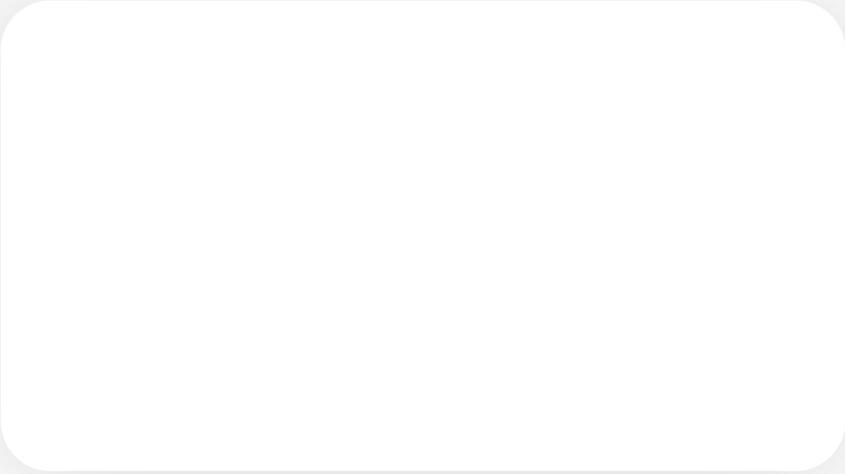
How does that goal **BLOCK harm** or **BUILD positive improvements** in people's lives?

Applying This to Your Own Work

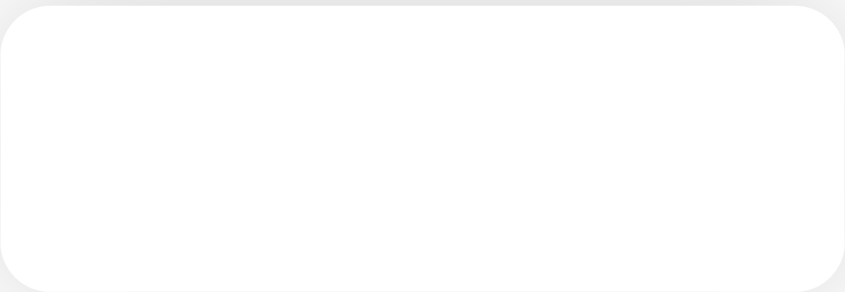
Who are you currently organizing?

Who are they? How many people?

How are they leading or inviting others in?

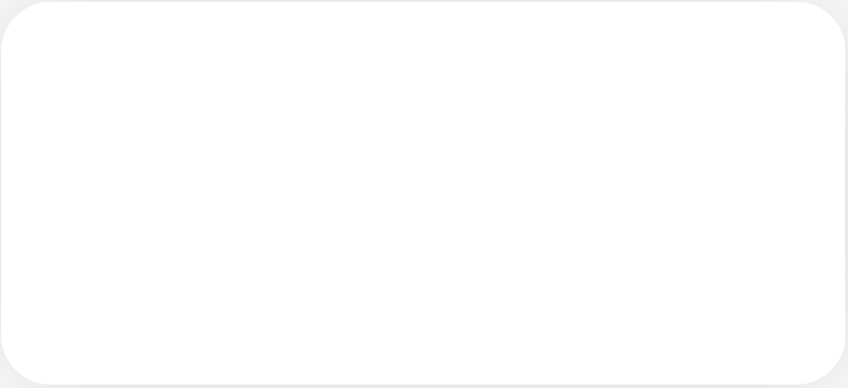


Do the people you've currently organized make up a majority, and do they have enough power by themselves to achieve your goal?



Power is when a person or a group or a coalition can meaningfully influence or shape the actions, decisions, and beliefs of individuals, groups, organizations, and society.

If the answer to the previous question is NO (or NOT YET), which groups of people do you need to communicate with, organize, or activate to join you so your group *does* have the power or the majority you need?

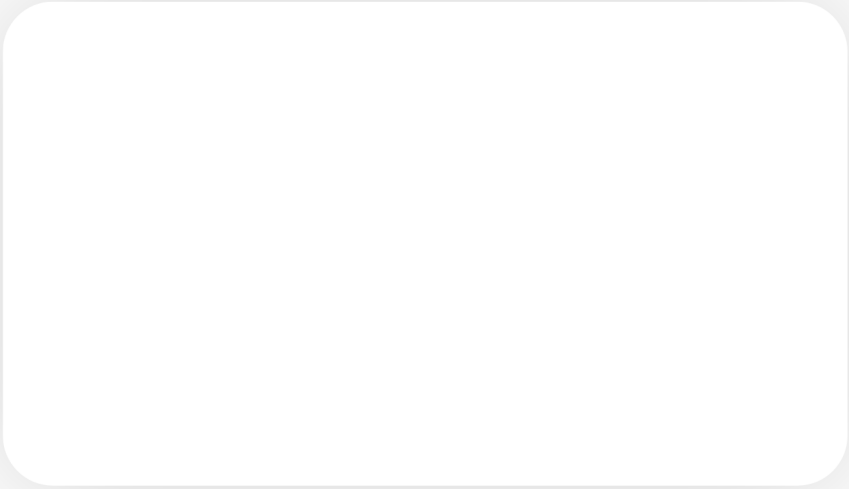


How might you reach, engage, or invite these groups of people in to become involved in your work or take some action in alignment with your efforts?

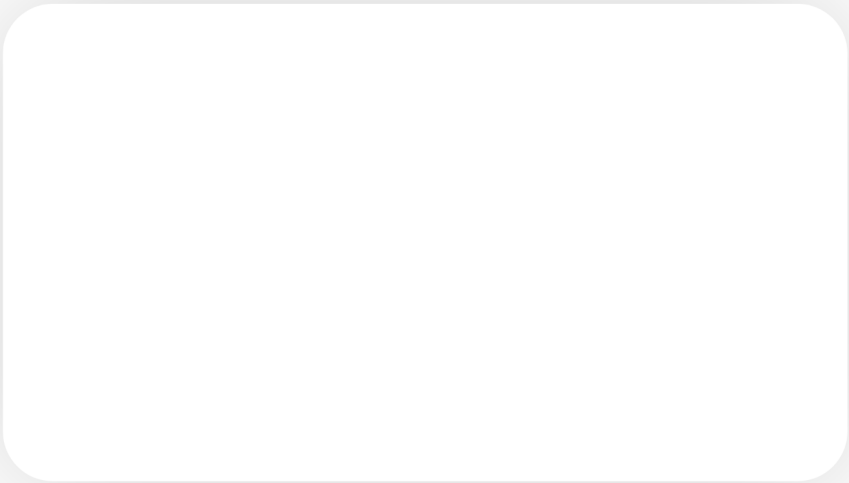


Applying This to Your Own Work

What excites you or has you nervous about reaching out to these groups of people you haven't organized yet?



What's your WHY for doing it even if you are nervous?





Some Ideas for

Cultivating Multi-Racial Cross-Class Pro-Trans Majorities

ORGANIZING FOCUSED ON TRANS ISSUES	ORGANIZING NOT SPECIFICALLY FOCUSED ON TRANS ISSUES
ISSUE: SPORTS BANS, BOOK BANS	
<p>Build relationships with people fighting for fully-funded and equitable public schools.</p> <p>Think: teachers unions or associations, parent and community organizations, folks organizing against the school-to-prison pipeline, and more.</p> <p>Practice solidarity with their efforts.</p>	<p>Explore how anti-trans policies and messaging may undermine your work for fully-funded and equitable schools and libraries, teacher pay, and more.</p> <p>Proactively inoculate your base from anti-trans narratives, collaborate with trans leaders, practice solidarity.</p>

<p>ORGANIZING FOCUSED ON TRANS ISSUES</p>	<p>ORGANIZING NOT SPECIFICALLY FOCUSED ON TRANS ISSUES</p>
<p>ISSUE: HEALTH CARE</p>	
<p>Build relationships with people fighting for universal and affordable healthcare, no matter our race, gender, disability or immigration status.</p> <p>Trans people deserve quality healthcare—not just care related to our transitions.</p> <p>Practice solidarity with their efforts as well.</p>	<p>Explore how policies and narratives restricting trans people's access to care undermines efforts for universal and affordable healthcare.</p> <p>Include trans people's fight for healthcare as one aspect of healthcare for all. Resist zero-sum thinking.</p>
<p>ISSUE: _____</p>	



Resources

Brush up on community and electoral organizing

George Goehl, *The Fundamentals of Community Organizing*

fundamentalsoforganizing.org

Tomás Garduño, *The Fundamentals of Electoral Organizing*

fundamentalsofelectoralorganizing.org

Maurice Mitchell, *Building Resilient Organizations: Toward Joy and Durable Power in a Time of Crisis*

convergencemag.com/convergence-series/building-resilient-organizations/

Build a governing power strategy

Grassroots Power Project, *Governing Power Toolkit*

grassrootspowerproject.org/tool/governing-power-toolkit

Resources

Create organizing and narrative strategies to reach beyond the people you are already organizing with:

Center for Story-based Strategy

storybasedstrategy.org/tools-and-resources

Narrative Initiative

narrativeinitiative.org/resource-library

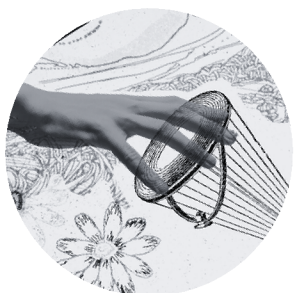
Craft messaging that braids together race, class, and gender, with frameworks from Transgender Law Center:

Race - Class - Gender Narrative Messaging Guidance

tinyurl.com/tlcragn

Trans Agenda for Liberation

transgenderlawcenter.org/trans-agenda-for-liberation



Glossary

governing power The power to control and reshape government in order to make agendas real in the world. Grassroots Power Projects outlines six forms of governing power: the power to win elections (electoral), the power to make laws (legislative), the power to enforce laws and put laws into action (administrative), the power to decide what laws mean and what happens if people break the laws (judicial), the power to shape the economic life (economic), and the power to make meaning at scale (narrative).

majoritarian Someone who believes that decision making is decided by a majority and whose efforts focus on building a majority to support their cause.

Glossary

- narrative** A collection of related stories that are expressed and clarified over time to represent a central idea or belief.
- power** The ability to meaningfully influence or shape the actions, decisions, and beliefs of individuals, groups, organizations, and society.
- powerlessness** The inability or insufficient ability to meaningfully influence or shape the actions, decisions, and beliefs of individuals, groups, organizations, and society.
- public institutions** Places that are supposed to serve everyone who live in that area, such as public schools, libraries, parks, public health departments, etc.
- solidarity** Taking action with others against harm that doesn't appear to directly affect you for the sake of collective freedom.



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Last but certainly not least, thank you, dear reader. I am assuming you are reading this because you are building—or want to build—power for a better world. Thank you for saying yes to your own freedom alongside the liberation of everyone.



Jess St. Louis is a white lesbian trans woman who works as a narrative strategist and somatics practitioner and calls Greensboro, North Carolina home. She has over a decade of experience in organizing, narrative strategy, and leadership development and is currently spending her time collaborating with organizations like the Carolina Federation and the Center for Story-based Strategy, running the Transformative Communicators Embodying Leadership program, and offering 1:1 leadership coaching. She is a contributing co-author to *Liberation Stories: Building Narrative Power for 21st Century Movements* published by The New Press and has had her work published in *Autostraddle*. She has served as a Coordinator with ReFrame, and has also worked with RoadMap Consulting, the US Human Rights Network, the Racial Justice Action Center, and more.



CONVERGENCE

YES