

# GRASSROOTS POLICY PROJECT

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February 2007

## Strategy for Social Change

### Introduction

Most dictionaries define strategy as a game plan or plan of action. In our daily lives, we develop plans of action for all sorts of things—going on a trip, planning for our children’s futures, getting a better job, etc. In political arenas, developing a game plan to win an election or pass legislation takes strategy to another level: combining planning with ongoing analysis and evaluation.

Strategy gives us a broad overview of all the things that affect our ability to achieve our goals: it is the ‘big picture’ that helps us fit all the pieces of the puzzle together. Strategy is an ongoing process, not something we do once and then move on. As a process, strategy development provides an opportunity to engage everyone in the organization—leaders, members, staff and allies—in collective analysis and ‘big picture’ thinking. With a shared plan of action understood by everyone involved, our chances of success are much greater.

### Strategy and Goals

Achieving a defined set of goals is the whole point of strategy. Many social change groups have far-reaching mission statements that embody their long-term vision for social justice. However, a good mission statement does not ensure that daily practices and organizational structures will reflect that mission. Without a plan that defines different levels of goals and steps that build toward each level, the mission statement remains a piece of paper.

In the context of a long-term strategy that reflects the groups’ mission, there are many levels and kinds of goals — for specific campaigns, for organizing, for building the organization, for committees and chapters, for leadership and Board development, etc.

If the goals are complex and far-reaching, such as ‘good health care for all,’ then the strategy will involve many variables and intermediate goals. If the goal is very specific and relatively short-term, such as getting bilingual services at the local hospital, then the analysis will involve

fewer variables. If the short term goal — in this case, bilingual services — is to function also as a way to build toward the longer-term goal of universal healthcare, then the strategy for the short term campaign needs to build in steps that link it to, and create opportunities for, advancing to longer term goal.

### Levels of Strategy

Just as there are levels of goals—for campaigns, for organizing, and for long-term social change—there are corresponding levels of strategy. Our campaign strategies should be developed within the context of long-term strategies for achieving broader social change goals. However, in the heat of the campaign, we can start to lose the connection between the specific campaign and our larger goals. A good campaign can and should create a sense that there are other possibilities—to expand the political ground, broaden the political debate and build critical consciousness. We are more likely to use our campaigns to address these kinds of goals if this is part of our strategy.

Using different levels of goals for health care as an example, if your specific campaign is bilingual services, your campaign strategy should keep in mind that you want to link this issue to a much bigger set of goals—for example quality health care for all. If you lose sight of this larger goal, you may miss an opportunity to use the campaign to build power and support for greater demands. To ensure that we are making the connections, we need a larger sense of strategy that reminds us that no campaign is an ‘end in itself.’ There is a tension here: groups feel the pull toward issue and electoral campaigns that absorb most of their resources and time. It becomes all the more critical to devote a certain percentage of time and resources towards the work that builds toward the long-term, even in the heat of day-to-day campaign work. The tension will always be there: short term demands versus long-term work that is necessary to shift the political terrain. Strategy is a way to live within and navigate these tensions.

## Strategy and Tactics

If strategy refers to a plan of action for a specific goal, tactics are the actions and approaches that we use in order to implement the strategy. When tactics are closely connected to strategy, then the tactics become strategy in motion. Tactics link a long-term strategy to the ‘here and now.’ Tactics usually are targeted in specific ways, focused on specific arenas and carried out at specific times.

There are many types of tactics that social change groups use. Here are a few: direct action, lobbying, media events, advocacy, public hearings and accountability sessions, negotiations, strikes, popular education events, action research, law suits, providing services, such as job training, language classes, health education, etc.

A good strategy requires good tactics. You can have the best analysis of the problems and a great plan, but if you do not have tactics available that fit your strategy, then you cannot act on the strategy. Strategy without tactics is all ‘big picture’ thinking and no action. Likewise, tactics can become too narrowly focused. Using tactics without strategy can lead to decisions that don’t build toward achieving our mission. The tactics become an end in themselves, instead of stepping stones to a larger goal.

The following questions can guide a group in the process of choosing the right tactics for any set of issues and goals. We have adapted these from the Midwest Academy:

1. Clarifying goals. What are the main problems and conditions that you want to address through actions, campaigns and organizing? What are the causes of the problems? What are the solutions you want to push for?
2. Identifying issues that are linked to your goals. If the goal is better access to health care services, what issue or issues can you organize around that will help build toward this goal? To start, the issue might be a modest demand. You need to assess whether you can start with a bigger demand or a more modest one, depending on current political opportunities and conditions.
3. Clarifying who must be involved in the struggle for social change to achieve these goals. Who is the main constituency? Does it include those who are directly affected by the problems you are trying to address? If not, why not? Who are your allies and what role will they play? Are their ‘friendly’ people among the powerful who could be involved, at some level?

4. Assessing your members’ and constituents’ political consciousness. How do they currently understand the issues, the causes, and possible solutions? Is this issue one that resonates with them? What might hold them back from getting involved? What kinds of education and analysis do you need to do with members, constituents and allies?
5. Framing and frame analysis—what are the terms of the debate around these issues and how will you impact the debate? What are your members and constituents currently thinking and how will you develop their capacity to understand the issues differently?
6. Doing an analysis of power—who has the power to block you, or to help you achieve changes, how do they exercise their power and along which dimensions, what kinds of power do you have and how will you use it, etc?
7. Assessment of opportunities and constraints. What resources do you have? How best can you use those resources? What is missing, that you will need to get, in order to advance your goals? What problems exist within your organization that you need to address in order to do this work more effectively?
8. Identifying arenas of struggle. What institutions are involved in the issues you are working on? Where do you need to focus your attention? The City council? The Courts? The property management company? The school Board? Who are the main targets within these arenas? Council president, Mayor, School Board President?
9. Making choices about the tactics you will use. Strategic analysis should help us make choices about which tactics are appropriate to use at any given moment, depending on the levels of goals we have, the arenas of struggle, who needs to be involved in the campaign, and our timeframe. A good practice is to develop criteria for choosing and evaluating tactics. Some questions to ask about a tactic include:  *Does it unify your constituency and involve them in taking action?  *Is it flexible and creative?  *Does it make sense to your members? Will they support the action?

- \*Are you clear about the target(s) of the action?
- \*Does it build on your strengths while exposing your opponents' weaknesses?
- \*How does it build your power as an organization? How does it confront the power of your opponents?
- \*Does it build the political consciousness of your constituents and challenge the dominant frame, or terms of the debate?
- \*Does it involve trade-offs that you may regret later?
- \*Is it consistent with your goals?

10. Evaluating and re-evaluating, as you go along. As part of ongoing analysis, education and evaluation for members and leaders, involve as many people as you can in the process of evaluating actions and readjusting strategy.

While these may look like ten 'steps,' they are not meant to be linear. You may need to start with question 3—who are the constituents, and then go to questions 1 and 2. Or, you may need to start with number 4—your members' political consciousness, and focus your strategy around building critical consciousness and awareness. Each part is interactive with the other parts. Changes in one area will affect all the others. Therefore, the process of analysis, action and reflection is more like a circle than a line.

## Four Components of a Social Change Strategy

Taking into consideration that strategy is about achieving goals and that we have multiple levels of goals that should be connected, we would identify four distinct components of a social change strategy:

1. Goals that are based in our vision and values for a just society.
2. An analysis of current political and social conditions in society.
3. Theories about how social change occurs, and the roles that our constituents and our organization could play in making change happen.
4. Approaches to tactics and organization-building that reflect these first three components.

We have talked about goals that are commensurate with our social change missions in the earlier part of this essay. Here, we will focus on the other three components of long-term strategy development.

## An analysis of current political and social conditions in society.

The process of defining levels of strategy and corresponding tactics is very similar to 'naming the moment,' (or a 'conjunctural analysis) that involves assessing the opportunities in the current social and political climate that will help you advance your broader agenda. A group's choice of tactics depends on a lot of variables—where you are in the campaign, who your targets are, who your allies are, whether the people who are most affected by the issues are comfortable with and ready to engage in the action.

It is obvious that in the world of legislation and elected officials—that is, in the first face of power—conservatives continue their ascendancy. An analysis of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> faces of power is comparable. The 2<sup>nd</sup> face of power is about civil society—who has power there. When we look at the business associations, the think tanks, the media, and other institutions in civil society, we see most of the big institutions are dominated by corporations or by conservatives. Our side is represented by other institutions: labor unions, some religious institutions, civil rights organizations, women's and environmental groups, state coalitions, etc.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> face of power is about worldview, and the dominant worldview is heavily oriented to the status quo—or worse. This is where people's political consciousness is formed. That means that for most people, the kinds of goals represented by progressive state coalition's vision statements are, by and large, not conceivable.

Power in civil society helps determine what issues even get on the political agenda, and what groups are able to make their voices heard. Worldview shapes what people think is in their own interests, what capacity they have to change things, and who their allies might be. For example, one of the key themes in the dominant worldview is racism. Racism as a theme builds on 400 years of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and discrimination. It is probably the single greatest divider of working people, even to this day. And we have seen that other elements of US history and the dominant worldview also divide the people who need to come together to struggle for social and economic justice.

Even from these few comments, we see that there are sharp limitations in the usual way people think about

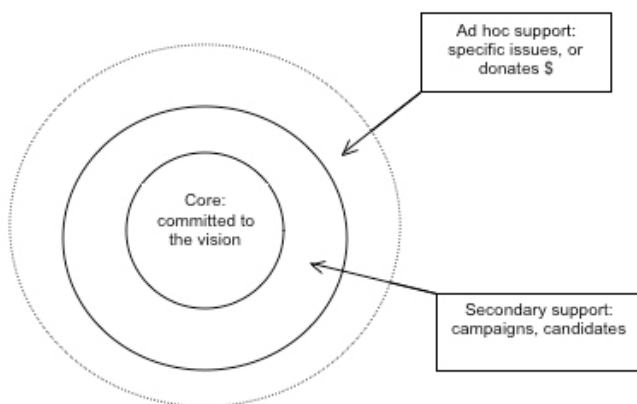
democracy in our country. We can not just focus on legislation and electing people—there are too many barriers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> faces of power for that approach to be sufficient. Our strategy has to be at least as concerned with building power in civil society, with strong institutions and coalitions, and developing a systemic and convincing alternative to the dominant worldview.

## How Social Change Occurs

We think that our society will move toward being a just society only when masses of people see that those goals as something they are willing and able to fight for. That is, we believe a grassroots-oriented strategy makes the most sense in this country, that politicians and elite groups will not take us there.

So developing the political consciousness among masses of people is at the heart of a long-term social change strategy. One might think of this as putting together the ingredients for collective action, directed not just toward one injustice, but toward social justice in our society. The point of any one campaign is not just to win the specific demands, but in the course of the struggle, to develop political consciousness and a sense of solidarity among the people involved, so that you can advance toward bigger demands and broader changes. A key component in this is contesting our opponents' power along the 3<sup>rd</sup> dimension—to challenge the ways that they shape political ideas and control the terms of the debate to keep people from thinking of alternative solutions to social and economic problems.

We can picture this as trying to move people closer to the center of this drawing:



Another key aspect of this strategy is coalition building. Collective action requires a sense of “we,” we who will struggle for the goals. In this country, there can’t be a big

enough “we” unless different groups and organizations and networks are stitched together into broad alliances and coalitions. It is hard to say what such an alliance might look like, the only thing we might point to in the recent past is the Rainbow Coalition along with the unions, community groups, and other organizations such as progressive think tanks, that were allied with it. One critical challenge in such a coalition is how to bring people together at the base, across lines of division and across organizations, so that there can develop a real sense at the base of something new forming.

A third aspect of this strategy is the need for what we might call intermediate goals, ones that are bigger and involve deeper changes in power relations than what we typically work on, but less than our vision. For example, universal health care would be such a goal, or new labor relations laws that stopped corporations from attacking unions and union organizing efforts. We need such intermediate goals to give people a somewhat more concrete sense of what the vision statement is about; we need them for reforms that will give our institutions more power in civil society or more ability to influence the dominant worldview. Giving parents and communities more real power over the public school system, while ensuring that the school system has adequate resources, could be part of such reforms. Reforms that dramatically reduced corporate power over government would both weaken the institutional power of corporations, and make it much easier to argue for democratic government as something real. ■

*Grassroots Policy Project*