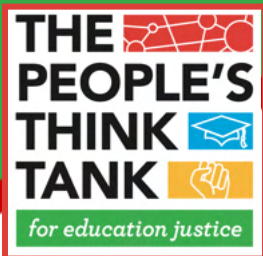


Solidarity as Embodied Practice

Fighting for Liberation and Self-Determination for Black Youth and Communities of Color



By Maria Fernandez
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I was recruited into organizing as a teenager—I was about fifteen or sixteen years old.

Born in the Dominican Republic, I grew up in the Northwest Bronx in New York. There was a local community organization just up the block from my apartment building: Sistas and Brothas United (SBU), the youth organizing arm of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC). My cousin, who was in high school, had started organizing with them and recruited me. I first worked with SBU as a tutor but quickly got into community organizing.



My first organizing campaign with SBU and the NWBCCC was the redevelopment of the Kingsbridge Armory. Young people, like me, had no place to go after school, no place to hang out, and no place to be safe, really. We had no recreational centers and no youth jobs. But near us was the decommissioned and unused Kingsbridge Armory, the largest facility of its kind in the country (and third largest in the world). I could see it from my bedroom window. It's located on what we call Education Mile, a mile long strip of schools and education facilities. At that point there were two elementary schools, three high schools (this was before the small schools initiative that collocated multiple small schools in one large campus), and CUNY Lehman College all located on Education Mile.

The community originally wanted to redevelop the Kingsbridge Armory to alleviate the local school overcrowding. Young people, parents, and community members knew how overcrowded our schools were. We knew how much we needed more space for us. But we couldn't convert the windowless former armory into a school because schools needed windows and the building was a historical landmark, so changing

This essay was produced in collaboration with the People's Think Tank (PTT). Researchers from PTT interviewed organizers (such as the author of this piece) and worked with them to create these essays. We believe that these essays offer important lessons for movement builders seeking to pursue intersectional organizing, connect communities and movements, build solidarity, and achieve education justice. The views expressed in these essays are the author's and not necessarily those of the People's Think Tank.



anything of the outside structure was impossible.

After high school, I attended New York University for a few years and then returned to work as an organizer with SBU. My first big fight as an organizer was to try to stop the Panel for Educational Policy, appointed by Mayor Bloomberg, from shutting down University Heights High School, a local school located in a beautiful building on Bronx Community College's campus. We needed to keep that school in our community. But we lost terribly. The school was relocated from the college campus to the South Bronx, close to a juvenile correctional facility. With decisions like these, what's the story our city tells young people about where they're going and what we expect of them?

That's how I entered into the fight for educational justice. It has been my life ever since.

Channeling the Southern Black Radical Tradition of Organizing

In my career, I've organized across many campaigns, fighting against school closures and privatization and for school safety and transportation. I've worked with various groups like the [Alliance for Educational Justice \(AEJ\)](#), [Urban Youth Collaborative \(UYC\)](#), and [Journey for Justice \(J4J\)](#). I'm now with the Advancement Project

where, with AEJ, I co-lead the National Campaign for Police-Free Schools.

The Kingsbridge Armory campaign is still the organizing I'm the most proud of, even though the fight is still going on twenty years later! Young people like me were literally in the leadership of this campaign, and even though we had to fight to be respected, that felt really, really important in this work. We organized across sectors and constituencies—elderly community members, various religious congregations, local businesses, the labor movement—and our organizing felt

very robust in terms of the people in leadership and the sets of demands that we made as a community. Working with congregations of different faiths was probably the most robust kind of cross-sector organizing that I had experienced.

In my early days of organizing, I very much channeled the Black radical tradition of organizing, especially the militant movements of sixties- and seventies-era New York City. We tried to teach young people to learn from the organizing traditions of the Young Lords and the Black Panther Party.

As I developed as an organizer, I began to draw my organizing specifically from Ella Baker. That means that wherever there's people, we go. We connect with the traditions, the customs, and the soul of the people that we're organizing with, and there's no separation of the organizer from the community. As organizers, we too are directly impacted by the issues that our members face. The community are the leaders, and there's no hierarchy. I learned that specifically from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and how they came into Mississippi in 1964 during Freedom Summer. They blended in with a community that took them in. The people opened up their homes, kitchen tables, churches, and congregations to SNCC organizers. So for me,

that's where I draw my lineage; it's how I organize and move in this work.

Intersectionality: Identities and Issues

I think about intersectionality in two ways. First, there is identity-based intersectionality, which considers the intersection of your physical being: all the ways you identify, how those connect to each other, and your experiences based on the fullness of who you are. You are all of these things simultaneously, with some aspects being more prominent than others depending on your conditions, experiences, and location. You interact with systems based on all of these identities and therefore you organize through that intersectional lens.

I grew up in New York where we had Caribbean and African migrants—the whole gamut. I wasn't siloed in a Dominican-only community because we were all constantly engaging with one another. The

intersection of identities such as race, class, age, and immigration status, along with my diverse experiences, has deeply influenced the way I organize, discuss issues, and analyze them.

As Audre Lorde said, we do not lead single issue struggles because we don't live single issue lives. That's the second part of how I think about intersectionality: where issues intersect. This second part about intersectionality, where issues and sectors intersect, doesn't get discussed as much as identity-based intersection. For example, youth organizing is not only about education. It's an entry point because young people spend eight to ten hours a day in school. But young people are also impacted by housing, employment, police brutality, domestic violence, and intercommunal harm.

Identity-based and issue-based intersectionality are not either-or options, however. Both can be at play at different times or simultaneously.



Intersectional Organizing and Solidarity in the Police-Free Schools Movement

Much of my recent work centers around building the [National Campaign for Police Free Schools](#), one of my favorite things in the world. In this work, we aim to show that policing hurts youth of color in particular ways and that we must fight for one another.

We regularly get challenged by the members of our campaign to be intersectional. Here, we're talking about Black girls, about Black queer young people, and naming all the identities and the ways schools and policing institutions oppress young people based on their unique intersections.

The intersectional aspects of identity are always at play with our efforts. But connecting issues and sectors matters too. When discussing the education sector, unions, and the labor movement, we need to consider how we engage with, support, and build solidarity with one another across issues and movements.

In the police-free schools movement, we worked collaboratively with groups across the country to create a timeline of the [History of School Policing](#). Groups contributed a list of what they considered their “top five” moments in organizing around policing and the school-to-prison pipeline, and we created a visual timeline from all of these events. Its purpose was to highlight the past history of the school-to-prison pipeline movement, help young people place their current organizing in that historic tradition, and encourage strategic thinking about organizing for generations into the future.

We worked with the GSA ([Genders and Sexualities Alliance](#)) Network in this project, and they asked why the experiences and organizing of

trans, queer, and two-spirit youth were missing from the timeline. We took up the challenge and worked with GSA Network and the [People's Think Tank](#) to reach out to trans, queer, and two-spirit activists and youth to record and include their stories. The updated timeline now starts with Native boarding schools and the hurt and trauma experienced by Native communities. It includes the policing of gender and events related to resistance moments like Stonewall and the recent anti-trans bills in Oklahoma. Although we had been aware of these issues before and have tried to center various youth populations, working with the GSA Network showed that we needed to be more intentional about building relationships with, and taking leadership from, queer, trans, and two-spirit youth,

and learning how our intersecting identities impact our work. We needed to put intersectionality into practice in our organizing.

We had to take an intersectional approach and build solidarity in the police-free schools movement in other ways too. Since young people initially took the lead in

calling for police-free schools, we needed to make the connections around policing in schools for parents and community members. We needed to talk about how police in schools also impacts parents, caregivers, and families.

The demand that young people deserve dignity and safety without violence supports parents, because police in schools are also causing violence to parents and families. Making those connections felt really, really important. And that was hard, hard work, and it's not work that's complete. I now live in Washington D.C. where there is a particular rhetoric around Black young people as violent and needing police to stop violence. We have to deconstruct this “bad youth, bad kid” narrative. We connect policing





of students in schools to the policing of families and community members.

We have to be able to see these systems for what they are. That allows us to break down some of the barriers that exist in communities and to see the intersection of people's experiences, identities and how the systems intersect to police them. That has been probably the most exciting and fruitful work.

Centering Antiracism in Organizing

Unapologetically centering race and class is of utmost importance to me. The younger members of my family have organized together and brought this analysis and political perspective to our parents, particularly our mothers, as we were primarily raised by single women. I center this in my organizing work, while also acknowledging the privilege of being light-skinned and being mindful of the spaces I occupy and where I do or do not take up space.

My calling now is to always center Black young people without excluding other racialized youth

groups. This has been the approach that I have taken in our work on police-free schools: being unapologetic about the specific impact of policing on Black youth and other racialized and oppressed young people, while finding a way to center Black youth.

Promoting Black and Brown solidarity—by helping Latinx young people understand why they have to fight for Black young people's safety and dignity as well—can be hard work, especially in predominantly Latinx schools and districts. But it can be beautiful work too. Centering Black young people does not mean we isolate or leave unnamed the explicit ways that policing hurts and harms other young people of color. We help young people see that we're all impacted and that we have to fight for one another, all while recognizing the particular ways certain identities are policed. As a migrant young person, I care about policing because I understand how the cop at my school might arbitrarily put my name into the gang database, which in turn can give law enforcement agencies and ICE the power to deport me. In this movement, we are clear that "a cop is a cop is a cop," regardless of whether their badge is from ICE,

Homeland Security, the city, or the local school district.

Solidarity is Not an Add-On but a Practice

Solidarity is not an “add-on,” but integral to the work itself. For example, the use of land acknowledgments to begin meetings has become routine today; people just add them on. If we want to build solidarity with Indigenous communities, however, we need to be more intentional and meet specific calls to action from those communities.

We must also address the ongoing genocide in Palestine backed by the U.S. and take leadership from Palestinians resisting globally. We must highlight the criminalization and surveillance of Palestinian youth on college campuses today, which mirrors the surveillance faced by Black, queer, trans, and Indigenous liberation movements, as well as the violence inflicted on Atlanta's "Stop Cop City" movement. We can make solidarity integral to our work when we connect our struggles.

Connecting Palestine to local policing campaigns is crucial: the US trains police in Israel. Taking time to discuss these issues is part of our work and true solidarity. An intersectional lens expands the police-free schools conversation beyond ending a single police contract to envisioning a world without policing where we can create safety, win community control, and practice self-governance. It allows us to engage young people, parents, and community members across diverse identities and experiences, understanding how policing impacts them all, from migrant youth in gang databases to Muslim youth facing Islamophobia. Fighting to remove police is about fighting for real safety mechanisms that protect everyone from both policing and intercommunal harm. Having an intersectional lens lets us see these interconnections and work towards a larger vision of the society we want to build, starting with our schools and extending to Palestine. Solidarity is an embodied practice: we show up, even when it's challenging for us to show up.

If young people or families can't make the connection between Palestine and their local campaign around policing, then you have to make it plain like Malcolm said, and make those connections. Taking time from our campaign to talk about Palestine or to talk about whatever the issue is that we're seeing, is actually part of our work, not separate. I think that is what real solidarity is.

The biggest issue with solidarity is that people don't know how to effectively practice it. That involves political education. As N'Tanya Lee says, we have to be constantly politicizing our young people, our members, and our communities. The way nonprofits are funded, to focus on issue-specific or campaign-specific work rather than movement-building, makes it challenging to politicize young people across a broad range of issues and engage in solidarity work. Transformative organizing emphasizes the importance of politicizing members and communities around the interconnectedness of global systems. By understanding these connections, it becomes easier to show up in solidarity when issues affecting particular identities or groups arise. If organizations only focus on narrow issue campaigns, they will struggle to make these connections and operate in silos.

One thing I learned organizing campaigns to free political prisoners like Dr. Mutulu Shakur is that even if you can do nothing else, just add their demand to the list of demands in your campaign. If you're fighting around policing or around mass incarceration, if you have campaigns around reparations, just add the demand around the release of political prisoners so that you continue to say it over and over again and educate people about why you're adding that demand. You can explain how the issues are intricately connected: mass incarceration, policing, political prisoners. The through line is there. Just add the demand.

Practicing solidarity requires humility, a willingness to learn, and not pretending to be an expert. We don't “Columbus organize,” that is, take

over someone's movement. Organizers should engage in study with their members as part of leadership development and seek out those already organizing around a particular issue to learn how to support them. It's important to recognize that every issue is connected and that there are always people organizing for justice and liberation. By being open to learning and asking for guidance from them, organizers can more effectively support various movements and practice true solidarity.

Fighting for Communities' Right to Self-Determination

With Black folks and folks from racialized, oppressed communities, I am fighting for the right to self-determination. That starts small with being able to control our bodies and then on to the larger issue of how we govern ourselves and our communities. We could practice that in schools if we fight for community control. The center line is self-determination and community control.

U.S. public schools, like Native boarding schools, were created originally to assimilate, remove, and destroy people. Why do we think that the function of schools has changed? So for me, that's what I'm fighting for: our human right to be able to self-determine our lives. I'm fighting for our ability to govern our schools, govern our institutions, and govern our neighborhoods.

Schools are a reflection of society, so our work for community control and self-determination starts at school. Our work is winning police-free schools as an experiment to envision a world without police where we can generate safety, have community control, and practice self-governance.

Having an intersectional lens has allowed us to be able to expand the issue beyond just a contract or a police department or an assault. As Jackie Byers from the [Black Organizing Project](#) taught us, it becomes a larger vision for how we want to build the kind of society that we want and a future of liberation. ❖



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She has spent her life organizing for educational justice through many campaigns and with many organizing groups. She sees the fight for police-free schools as an opening into the larger struggle for community control and self-determination for Black communities and other oppressed communities of color.