

Organizing for the Promise of Public Education and a Just, Multiracial Democracy



By James Haslam
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“No way.” That’s what I would have said if you had asked my teenage self if I would ever dedicate my life to organizing for human rights and building a just, multiracial democracy. *Organizing* at the time meant rearranging my closet or bedroom. But given the political dynamics we find ourselves in today, it might be useful to share my story of how a straight white working-class guy from a primarily white-occupied, middle-class suburb outside Boston would choose the unlikely path of committing my life to organizing—helping people get into strategic relationship with each other to take collective action and advance intersectional justice in our society.

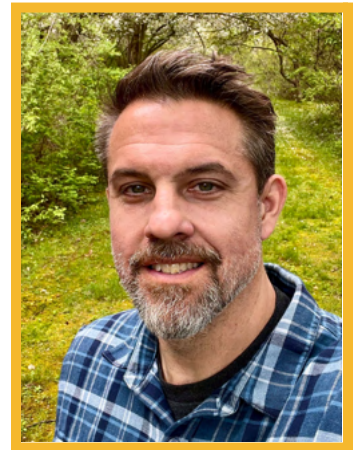
My family didn’t have a history of activism. My parents met working for the newspaper of an extreme Christian religion, which forbade drinking alcohol and even taking medicine. They had voted Republican their whole lives through my childhood, but I remember them making a point to have me understand racism was bad.

As a kid, I was pretty shy and felt different from others because of my family’s religious beliefs. By the time I was seventeen, however, I had gone from a quiet kid to a “troublemaker.” I had already been arrested for a wide range of charges, including underage drinking, vandalism, and larceny. With my dad’s encouragement, I turned to the military and was briefly signed up for basic training the summer after my junior year of high school.

In the end, my mom insisted I go to college. I ended up becoming fascinated with the history of mass media and critical thought, leading to a political transformation. I

remember realizing that if I weren’t a white guy from a middle-class family, I probably would have ended up incarcerated. Feeling a responsibility to change the unjust systems surrounding incarceration, and influenced by my friends joining the military, I sought to understand our country’s numerous conflicts. This led me to learn about the realities of our “criminal justice system” and military policy, both geared to protect a system that enriched elites at the expense of working-class people, especially people of color.

After college, I had a growing passion to do something about the injustices I saw but was



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.

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confused about what to do about it. By the time I was in my mid-twenties, I was ready to stop just talking about what needed to be done and become part of the change I knew was needed. I decided it was time to stay put for a while and help create change somewhere.

Stories that Politicize: The Vermont Workers' Center

In the summer of 1999, I moved into an apartment with a friend in Barre, Vermont, and came across the [Vermont Workers' Center](#) (VWC). The group ran a hotline and maintained a rapid response network to support campaigns for livable wages and workers' rights. I soon became a pretty active volunteer, returning calls on the hotline and phone banking to help mobilize people to come to events, such as rallies supporting striking workers or public legislative hearings on bills to raise the minimum wage. I also delivered a public testimony for the first time in my life about what it was like trying to live on "poverty wages."

Many of the people who were involved in VWC were longtime organizers who had dedicated their lives to helping build the labor movement. I had never really imagined dedicating my life to organizing, but I was passionate and committed to what we were building. When its director left, I was tapped to take their place.

I ended up working there for 15 years. In that time, I helped low-wage health care workers organize unions. I supported existing unions to be stronger by building bottom-up member-run internal organizing campaigns to win strong contracts. I engaged in justice-based community organizing around workers' rights issues in a state that, at the time, didn't have much union infrastructure or organizing activity.

The thousands of calls I fielded over the years and all the stories people shared deeply politicized me. Volunteering at a local homeless shelter, I met whole families living in the shelter with young children, and many veterans struggling with mental

health problems. I wondered how this could happen in the world's richest country, and that fed my desire to fight for deep, systemic change. Many of the hotline callers were individuals who were trying to address their rights individually, but had virtually no power.

Over time, though, I did experience the rarer instances when we were able to support people in reaching out to their co-workers to form a union and take collective action. I saw firsthand how hundreds of low-wage health care workers could together change the standards across the state's whole nursing home industry. I saw how organizing nurses and public educators could dramatically raise the standards of their profession. More and more, I began to see the important role organizers played in communities, the basic principles and strategies of how to organize, and that, if done well, I could support people in winning real change for them and their families.

Solidarity at the Intersections: Healthcare and Migrant Justice

In 2008, the VWC undertook a massive campaign called "[Healthcare is a Human Right](#)" to win universal healthcare in the state and as a way to connect workplace struggles to a broader systems struggle for everyone. We put the healthcare system on trial by telling stories of the crises communities were experiencing. In a few short years, we were able to galvanize a massive, grassroots effort that was instrumental to enacting a single-payer law in 2011.

From the beginning, we trained our folks to infuse racial justice into our organizing and make sure to include undocumented workers, who were nearly all people of color working in the dairy industry. We did an exercise where our leaders would break up into pairs and play different roles. Person A would talk about why we should agree to a universal healthcare bill that excludes undocumented workers, saying, "We can get our 'foot in the door' and bring them in later after we

pass this policy.” Person B would explain why we couldn’t exclude them, arguing that “Universal equals everyone. It’s a moral issue: everybody in, nobody out. We need to unite our communities to win; we can’t let them divide us.”

Three years later, we were on the cusp of passing the country’s first universal healthcare bill. Just two days before the end of the legislative session, however, a bipartisan amendment passed overwhelmingly in the Democratically controlled State Senate to exclude undocumented workers. Our members were prepared for that moment, and we asked for support from every organization we could think of to join us in saying “Universal Equals Everyone” and stand in solidarity with undocumented people.

We already had our annual “Healthcare as a Human Right” rally scheduled for May 1st, and we worked with an emerging farm workers’ rights organization (which would later be called Migrant Justice) to join us; it became the first time undocumented farmworkers marched in the state’s capital. With over 2,000 people, the rally was huge by Vermont standards. Two days later, the amendment to exclude undocumented workers was stripped from the bill, and it passed overwhelmingly. Although years later the governor would ultimately abandon Vermont’s universal healthcare program in the face of immense pressure from the for-profit industry, this is still a powerful example of people staying strong and working hard to win a fight previously deemed “impossible.” The struggle in Vermont inspired thousands of people across the country to push for universal healthcare.

This example of solidarity was also remarkable because it helped demonstrate how immigrant workers could take collective action to create change. Previous to the campaign, many dairy workers lived in hiding on the farms they worked

on, and did not go out in the communities. The 2011 rally was the beginning of immigrant workers taking collective action, finding their own power, and having strong solidarity support from people across Vermont. Just two years later, [Migrant Justice](#) fought for the successful passage of a bill providing access to driver’s licenses. The group went on to help pass legislation to limit racial profiling and protect their members from being targeted for deportation from ICE. They created Milk With Dignity, the first and only worker-driven social responsibility program in the dairy industry, protecting rights and improving conditions for hundreds of farmworkers, and resulting in millions of dollars in redistribution from corporations to farmers and farmworkers.



Solidarity comes from the relationships that people build. It also comes from political education that helps people understand how our various struggles are connected, learn about the history of how elites have maintained power by pitting groups of people against each other, and how previous generations have advanced human rights and the common good through solidarity and collective action.

The Intersections of Rights and Democracy

Reflecting on our defeat in the healthcare fight, I realized that we simply didn’t have enough political power to implement such bold public policy. We began asking ourselves: What if we didn’t just advocate to change the policies but also worked to change the policymakers? What if we had people most impacted by injustices embedded in the system and working-class people from our movements representing us?

In 2015, we [launched](#) a new statewide multi-issue organization in Vermont to unite our communities around a broad agenda and run

people from our movements for local elected offices. Folks joined us from New Hampshire, and our new organization, [Rights and Democracy](#) (RAD), became a bi-state force. We began building a broad agenda pushing to raise the minimum wage, pass paid sick days for all workers, expand voting rights, organize with tenants fighting for housing rights, and advance climate justice.

We quickly learned that elections were great opportunities to organize locally to bring together people who were ready to get involved as volunteer leaders. We built local chapters that could engage the community and develop a local electoral strategy. These local chapters could determine who to recruit for what seats, help let people know what was at stake in the election, and get out the vote. While most of the media attention goes to the top-of-the-ballot candidates, local offices, such as school board seats, are often more connected to people's main issues of concern.

Between elections, though, our advocacy work remained focused on changing state legislative policies. That meant the fight would often focus only on the legislative districts where there was a shot of influencing a legislator's position on the issue. We asked all of our local leaders to help reach out to folks in those areas, and we helped win important victories, like a \$15/hour minimum wage and earned sick days policies in Vermont, and a bill advancing LGBTQ+ rights and stopping proposed school voucher legislation in New Hampshire. While these victories put wind in our sails, most of our chapter leaders were spending their time talking to people in the targeted districts; they weren't reaching out to people in their own community, so they weren't growing their chapters.

I began looking for ways that the majority of people in our communities could be engaged beyond voting every couple of years. At this point, RAD was part of two national organizing networks, [People's Action](#) and [Popular Democracy](#), with grassroots organizing groups in the majority of states in the country. After the 2016 election, our

work was getting pulled away from the local to the national, and most of the opportunities we found to fund our organizing were to be part of federal policy fights, such as the Trump administration's effort to dismantle the Affordable Care Act.

While these fights were important, by the beginning of 2021, I began to reflect on the big picture of what we were trying to accomplish and what it would take to make our democracy truly



resilient to all the attacks it faced from a billionaire class that sees it as a threat to their power. I was convinced that we needed an intersectional approach to join our struggles for economic justice, healthcare justice, housing justice, climate justice, racial justice, and gender justice. Our movement was ultimately about political power, and we were only doing our opponents favors if we kept these fights separate.

Since most people were too far removed from federal and state policymakers to do much more than sign a petition and vote, I kept coming back to the question about how people could become more meaningfully engaged at a local level. Meanwhile, the GOP took control of all state elected bodies in New Hampshire and began moving a conservative

legislative agenda. What stood out was public education. Not only were they bringing back their bill for school vouchers, but they had a new proposal that was essentially an educational “gag order” prohibiting the teaching of “divisive concepts.” This was the first of many state legislative bills that were cooked up by far-right think tanks like the Heritage Foundation as they started a campaign against Critical Race Theory (CRT). New well-resourced anti-public education groups like Moms for Liberty sprouted around the country, targeting school boards, and far-right candidates began running for school boards around the country.

I had an inside view on public education, as my wife is a longtime educator, the 2015 Vermont Teacher of the Year, now a professor of education and equity studies. At the dinner table I had heard countless stories about the transformative impact public education has on preparing future generations for a world where everyone belongs and can thrive together. I began to realize that these attacks were more than just backlash to progress but represented something even more dangerous. In May of 2021, I wrote an [essay](#) about what I saw as a new “war on democracy.” I argued that the manufactured anti-CRT efforts and the gag order bills were about more than maintaining the systemic racism that public education systems were starting to confront in response to the historic racial justice uprisings after the murder of George Floyd. They also served to whip up controversy around public education and undermine confidence in the system so that it could be privatized through vouchers and other means.

To maintain the incredible imbalance of wealth and power, these billionaires and their operatives understood the power of public education even better than many of us activists and organizers. We often take public education for granted and assume it will always be there. But after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawing segregation and the civil rights and labor movements finding common cause, ruling elites began a long-term

strategic campaign to dismantle public education in order to prevent a multiracial democracy.

I became even more determined that our movements needed more resources and focus on organizing for public education at the school district level. A longtime colleague, Cathy Albisa, introduced me to [Race Forward](#), where she worked, a national organization with a mission to advance a just, multiracial democracy. Eventually, I left Rights and Democracy to join Race Forward and pursue work nationally that supported statewide organizing for education justice.

Launching HEAL Together and Public School Strong

At Race Forward, I started HEAL (Honest Education, Action and Leadership) Together, a school district organizing initiative that builds a movement of students, educators, and parents across the United States who believe that an honest, accurate, and fully funded public education is the foundation for a just, multiracial democracy. Just as the labor movement built templates for organizing that spread across whole industries, we try to identify models for public education organizing that can be replicated in school districts around the country. These models bring the various stakeholders of public education together—parents, educators, unions, community leaders, school board members—to build strong public schools as the foundation for strong communities and a just, multiracial democracy.

The first year at [HEAL Together](#), we published an Organizing and Narrative Toolkit that included many examples and case studies of successful efforts. We found many incredible examples of great organizing on a school district level, and many great state coalitions and networks, but we did not find many examples of statewide school district organizing that connected local organizing across a state. In North Carolina, we connected with [Education Justice Alliance NC](#) and [We Are Down Home](#), who both shared our vision for that



kind of statewide organizing; in June 2022, they came together to launch our first state pilot, [HEAL Together NC](#). In the face of aggressive organizing by Moms For Liberty, and after the GOP gained a super majority in the NC legislature and moved a bold agenda to defund public education and finance vouchers, HEAL Together NC worked to expand their efforts all across the state. They brought in the Center for Racial Equity in Education (CREED) as a third anchor organization and launched HEAL Together NC's first campaign called *Public School Strong*.

Public School Strong had a big and broad vision. The goal was to build teams of parents, students, educators, and community members who would be trained to organize their community to support pro-equity and pro-public education school boards—in all 100 counties in the state! HEAL Together NC organizers invited people to come to trainings to commit to building a team in their school district. They then mailed them a Public School Strong t-shirt to wear at their school board meetings. Soon, their social media pages were flooded with photos of people in groups ranging from two to twenty going to their school board meetings in their t-shirts and speaking out in support of strengthening public education for all students. In less than a year, they had already built teams in more than 50 counties, and the stories in the state and local media had shifted from being

about Moms For Liberty to being focused on Public School Strong. We saw this as exactly the kind of organizing that needed to happen in states across the country and started briefing our other state partners on their model, with initiatives launching quickly in Tennessee and Iowa, among others.

HEAL Together is now supporting a national campaign to help people build school district teams all over the country, which could not be more critical. We need to equip communities to defend and strengthen a public education system that is clearly in the crosshairs of the new Trump Administration, as laid out in Project 2025. National and state organizations all over the country, including the National Education Association (NEA), have joined *Public School Strong* to bring the campaign ultimately to all 14,000 school districts in the country.

I used to think about public education as one of many key issues, but over time, I have come to understand it as a foundational piece of democracy. As powerful elites try to divide people up, it is one of the last elements that can hold us together. Public schools serve as the identity and heart of the community, especially in rural areas. I've organized hundreds of public meetings, forums, hearings, candidate debates, and spaghetti suppers in public schools. In many communities, public schools also serve as the polling places where voting and our democracy happen. More than any other institution,

they ground our civic life from school sports and other cultural events to becoming hurricane relief shelters in times of crisis.

The only politicians who seem to understand this enormous role for public education in the potential for a just, multiracial democracy are the ones who are decades into their strategic anti-democracy efforts to dismantle it. But despite the billions they have spent over the last couple of decades, the vast majority of people still support public education, and we see examples of public education systems that are truly helping communities thrive while advancing equity and justice through programs like community schools.

Public education is central to struggles around racial justice. We were the only country on the planet where politicians, to preserve the institution of chattel slavery, had enacted anti-literacy laws. After slavery was abolished, newly freed Black parents fought to build schools for their communities and bring public education to the South for the first time. In other words, the Black Freedom movement in a very literal way built a better, more just, and more democratic country for everyone.

Intersectional Justice and the Responsibility of “Straight White Guys”

I also want to share why, as someone who identifies as a straight white guy, I have dedicated my life to trying to help advance a just, multiracial democracy. I recognize both how I have been granted privileges in a society that rewards people who look like me and how racism and patriarchy have also deeply damaged my own humanity and capacity to love. When I say our country embeds racism and injustice in our systems, that is primarily because too many straight white guys like me have built and continue to support these unjust systems. All of us share the responsibility to fight injustice, but those of us who, like me, have a lot of privilege in this society have a special responsibility.

Organizing for justice is not just a moral responsibility. It also comes from a deep sense of self-interest for me, my family, my communities, and everyone and everything I love. The fight against racism is much more deeply personal now that I think about how my wife and our kids experience the world so differently than I have. Last year, our youngest child told us that he was called a racial slur at a basketball game. It was hard for us because the worst fear is your kid being unsafe, unhappy, or unprotected.

One day last year, I went to drop off my kids at school. As I was leaving, I noticed cop cars parked all around the school. “What’s going on?” I wondered. It turned out that the principal and several educators who worked at the school, which recently passed a policy supporting gender equity and inclusion, were getting death threats from one of the students’ parents because of it. This parent started spouting off about it on Fox & Friends. Cop cars were there because they were worried about those death threats. I remember being hit by how much people are experiencing suffering and fear throughout our country because of this politics of division we are facing.

I haven’t often used the term “intersectional organizing,” but I was excited to learn about how the People’s Think Tank has identified the need for cross-issue organizing and cross-community solidarity. In HEAL Together’s work, we are very focused on helping our communities unite across lines that are used to divide us. This includes helping people understand why and how we are being divided. For example, how could issues like climate change barely be talked about in the election when so many communities are hit by extreme weather events, but controversies about transgender student athletes take center stage even when, in many states, they amount to a handful of students? We built this intersectional framework into our tools around narrative engagement, explaining the reason why people are attacking us, trying to divide our communities, and

using race and gender as weapons to advance their agenda.

When it comes to long-term thinking and strategy in our movements, we're still behind our opponents, whose work started in response to the gains of the Black Power and Civil Rights movements. They started getting serious about squashing multiracial democracy in the early 1970s and began to think long-term. Just as much as we want universal healthcare, our opponents want to dismantle public education, and they're closer to achieving their goal than we are with ours because they've had a long-term strategy to chip away at public education.

We are making strides in the right direction, though. We're beginning to recognize how important school districts are as a base unit of democracy, and we're starting to think long-term about how to build durable infrastructure at the school district level. We're starting to create the infrastructure that's necessary to build a pipeline of new organizers, of new school board members, and of new leaders. We're building democracy, community by community, across one state first, and then across every state. As organizers, we go out and talk to parents, students, and educators about what's important. We work in solidarity with educator unions who increasingly see their struggles for workplace justice as part of an opportunity to advance the common good. We get ready for the next school board race. We try to push our platform of issues in the legislature while we fight on the school district level. We help our communities build their muscles for organizing so that they don't have to start from scratch.

We're fighting for human rights and multiracial democracy, both mechanisms for people to enjoy the right to be happy and healthy. I think about what I want for my kids, and really all kids. Like every parent, I want my kids to be happy and healthy and see smiles on their faces. Powerful forces are trying to keep us divided, but so much is possible when we come together. We have the potential to create policies to ensure everyone has the food, water, healthcare, housing, and education to live happy, fulfilling lives. Dedication my life to the craft of organizing is one way of dedicating myself to humanity and our future. ❖

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