

Maya Wiley and Ai-jen Poo on Strategy and Caring, Criteria For Working Toward Racial Justice

How would you describe your organization and its role in racial and social justice movements?

Maya Wiley: At the Center for Social Inclusion, we support policy strategies that will transform barriers to opportunity for real and meaningful inclusion of communities of color. We have to transform the structural arrangements that have been formed to exclude communities of color historically and continue to be reproduced today. We research, test, train and convene through partnerships to identify and catalyze transformative ideas.



Ai-jen Poo: We organize domestic workers around the country. Domestic workers are mostly immigrant women of color and many are undocumented. We work to build the power of the workforce and raise the level of respect for the work itself, as we work to help build a broader movement for social change. We really see ourselves as playing a connecting role across movements for justice. For example, we do a lot of work to help labor think about what it means to have a 21st century labor movement that is truly inclusive and supportive of organizing and collective bargaining among historically excluded workers. We do a lot of work in the women's movement to bring an immigrant rights or racial justice lens, and we challenge all the movements we're part of to bring a gender lens to their work.



MW: I'd like to add that from a strategy perspective, what Ai-jen and her partners are doing with their Caring Across Generations campaign¹ is extremely important because it elevates a discussion that we have to have in this country about changing demographics and what it means to create a society that works for everyone. The largely White population that is 65 and older is going to be cared for by women of color who are at some of the lowest rungs of the economic ladder, but who also need to support their own families in the process. So there is a huge opportunity for

multiracial, multigenerational organizing and [for] lifting up a very different conversation in this country about what makes up a functional society that meets our needs.

Well, speaking of strategy, how do you determine which campaigns your organizations are going to work on, and what are some of the key factors that go into how you select and ultimately frame campaigns?

AP: We choose campaigns that help us build the power of the workforce, either through helping build protections for the workforce or that build organizing capacity, because there are really compelling demands that will get workers involved. The other criteria are campaigns that will help us connect to and build other issue areas in other sectors of the social justice movement. When we looked at all of that, we tried to craft a campaign that would both help us build the power of our sector and create a passage to citizenship for our members. Hopefully, in the process, we do all these things in such a way that gets at some of the questions and broader issues that are needed in the movement and in the economy as a whole.

MW: We consider ourselves a policy strategy organization that, I hope, supports the movement; but we're not the primary campaign organizer. We play more of a strategic partnership and support role. But in considering campaigns, it has to be something we think has the potential to be transformative at the intersection of structural racial exclusion and poverty. And it has to be something that we think has meaning for communities of color. They should be interested and engaged, and it should fit with the priorities they have. Another criterion is that there is some potential to replicate, and that it can support local strategic innovation that can connect to national strategy. One example is the California Calls Alliance, which is a multiracial alliance organizing on multiple issues while using a structural lens. They have a fiscal policy campaign they have been developing; and there has been an opportunity for us to take our expertise in effectively talking about race to support a communication strategy in their campaign, and help build their capacity and strategic engagement.

Ai-jen, I'd love to hear more about your thinking on building cross-racial alliances in the context of campaign work.

AP: I just think about how important that it is for race to be central in thinking about our strategies and our organizing. For example, Phoenix is a city with the most White people over the age of 65 and the most young people of color under the age of 18 – it's the most racially and generationally polarized city in the country. It became clear that a place like Phoenix is really foreshadowing the demographic changes for the whole country. If we don't figure out [how] to articulate an agenda that actually operates in the interest of diversity, and unites us across race and generation, then we could potentially become a nation where policies like SB 1070 are not just in Arizona but everywhere. So really talking and thinking about race, and leaning into it with a realism about what is to come, is essential to how we're trying to think about our campaigns. Domestic work is a really diverse, multinational, multiracial workforce; so there are African American women in Atlanta and elsewhere, there are undocumented immigrants of all nationalities, and there are refugees – all within our alliance. Some of our meetings have to be conducted in up to seven different languages.

There aren't a lot of models. The multiracial society we live in today is continuing to evolve. It's important to keep learning and innovating policy solutions and the communication strategies that will really articulate that vision for what a healthy democracy for the 21st century looks like.

Maya, how have you seen an explicit race analysis factor into the campaign strategies of other folks, and what are some of the challenges in terms of communications?

MW: I think the best organizers are struggling with these same questions for the same reasons, even if they are working on different issues and campaigns. One example is the South by Southwest Experiment, which is a group of southeast, Black community organizing groups working with Latino/Chicano organizing groups from New Mexico and Texas, and [they are] looking for ways to link those communities in a larger strategic process. They share storytelling, about how people got here and their experiences, and then use that to connect to organizing possibilities – actually thinking about power and how to get people more engaged out of what can be deeply marginalized communities of color. As they are engaging across their different constituencies, most of them are

trying to speak to race directly, though they are still doing the internal relationship and strategy building, and are not at the point where they are developing their formal communication strategies. But race is very much a part of the analysis for strategic development.

You're sharing about a lot of cutting edge multiracial organizing, dealing with race directly. I know you both also work with more traditional organizing networks and unions. Do you feel that this is the direction that most of the field is going? And if not, what are the challenges to advancing a more direct racial justice lens?


AP: I really feel like we are in this moment of opportunity. The more traditional organizing world is changing. There have been changes in leadership, and in organizing strategies and frameworks. A lot of leadership is trying to be more aligned and coordinated with other social justice leaders. I think we are all seeing the scope and scale of crisis in this country, and the fight that we're in – and that none of us can do it alone. Ultimately, the questions that we have to answer are much larger than one sector or one community.

We're also in this really interesting post-Occupy moment. At a meeting recently, Francis Fox Piven said that she thought that we are at the beginning of the next great social protest movement in this country that will fundamentally reshape democracy, and it will be around inequality. She sees it as a maybe 10-15 year arc of a movement that provides a different kind of context for the organizing than what we've been building incrementally over the last few decades. If we can continue to keep race and gender central as we build that movement, we will truly make some leaps forward. I feel optimistic.

MW: I think it is important to recognize possibility and not inevitability, because cynicism is one of the tensions that can arise. If we are cynical, it's easy to say we can't do that because it's not possible. These questions are large and daunting; and there's not a clear road map, and answering them requires a lot of strategic time, relationships and capacity that we don't always have. Sometimes what that produces is a cynicism that actually shuts down potential.

The way we develop strategy is thinking and doing together – and not waiting until we have all the answers – because part of strategic development is the iterative process of trying and failing, and learning from those failures.

I am a student of the civil rights movement, and the daughter of organizing strategists who worked at the



intersections of race, gender and poverty. What I have taken from that history, and the experiences I watched my parents go through, was that nothing strategic and transformative ever happened without some tension. And tension just means we ask or argue about, for example, whether or not it's important to address issues by including a race analysis or not. We act like we are in a kind of gilded age where we can pretend that only class matters in how we address issues, even when they have a real racial impact. There has to be a tension with how we think and talk, or we run the risk of actually missing how race operates today. And this has to happen with different generations of folks, including from people who have a different experience with race. All this means we still need to have more of a strategic conversation about the role race plays, and how to produce the results that we want for all communities, including White communities.

Are there other next-stage questions that you're thinking about in terms of the intersections of community organizing and policy? What kind of research tools and other supports do you think are needed to help address them?

MW: We take for granted that there really needs to be a strategic process that supports the kind of collaboration around some of the strategies we need to create. And obviously we need a lot more work and tools around communicating race, particularly in a way that both builds our alliances, as well as moves a larger public discourse. And then within particular types of opportunity, there's a need for a lot more tool development. For example, we at CSI have identified strategic opportunities in the green economy beyond green jobs and opportunities in infrastructure building, but also in the bricks-and-mortar sense with things like transit and broadband. There's a huge need for additional tools in how we engage in those opportunity areas that aren't traditionally seen as racial justice areas.

AP: I want to link onto Maya's point about communication tools, and the way to talk about strategies and race effectively in the work that we're doing and in our alliance building. For example, we want to be able to effectively talk about the jobs crisis in relationship to both the persistent underemployment of African Americans and the exploitation of immigrant workers. We want to be able to connect the dots between what's happening now to everyone, and what's happening specifically, and what has long happened to communities of color in a way that strengthens the movement as a whole.

Are there particular things that you would like funders to think about when they're looking to support this work?

MW: I can think of three things for funder allies. It is really important to build infrastructure in communities of color to grow the engagement of communities of color – especially in areas where demographics are changing rapidly and the need for capacity building is growing the most. Then I would say, in particular, youth of color engagement, which is greatly under-resourced, because that's where the changing demographics for communities of color are happening the most rapidly in the country. If you think of youth of color, it's a huge

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demographic that is really being fundamentally excluded in some pretty significant ways, and there are very few funders really paying attention to that. The other thing that I would say is it is important to fund some of this tool development around strategy and around different communication strategies. One of the things we are hearing from communities of color is that we are not paying enough attention to how to talk across race among each other in different communities of color. That's pretty significant again because one of the opportunity moments that we have as we move into this next 15-year arc that Ai-jen mentioned, is actually doing multiracial alliance building.

AP: It's also important to support White groups who are figuring out how to organize White communities and craft an agenda with a vision for racial equity. I think about a group like Kentuckians for the Commonwealth. One of their main campaigns is on voting rights for felons. Kentucky is a state that is like 97 percent White and their base is majority White, but they've taken that on as one of their main campaigns. It is really a model for how to move these communities, particularly White working-class communities who are really suffering in this economy, toward a vision for a healthy multiracial democracy and future in this country. These experiments across race, generation, class and gender are beginning to model the type of national policy we need, a policy agenda that really knits our interests together.

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¹ Caring Across Generations (CAG) is a national movement to unite care workers, seniors, members of the disability community, and allies in order to create jobs, win affordable care services, and transform the care industry. CAG is co-directed by Ai-jen Poo and Sarita Gupta, Executive Director of Jobs with Justice.
<http://www.caringacrossgenerations.org/>

MW: One of the mistakes funders often make is that they convene us on their agenda, which means we're constantly putting ourselves into a conversation that we don't necessarily think is the right priority, even if it is a perfectly understandable conversation. I would hope foundations could have a convening, but not necessarily [be] attached to a specific set of grant outcomes. Instead, it would be important to have more of an open collaborative-building process and strategic engagement process. Sometimes it is important to have those conversations without those funders in the room.

AP: There are actually a number of convenings, but they don't always get us to the discussion that we need to be having. We need to be sure we're setting the right stage so our collective conversations are adding impact -- where we are really going to learn from each other and build something together.

Ai-jen Poo is the director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. In 2000, she helped found Domestic Workers United, which she led until 2010. She has been organizing low-income women workers for over 15 years. Her work has paved the way for historic wins for domestic workers rights on both state and international levels. In 2012, Poo was named as one of Time's 100 most influential people in the world and was included among Newsweek's 150 Fearless Women.
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Maya Wiley is the founder and president of the Center for Social Inclusion, a national policy strategy organization, which works to transform structural racial inequity and exclusion into structural fairness and inclusion. A civil rights attorney and policy advocate since 1989, Wiley has worked for the ACLU, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the Open Society Institute. She has contributed to "Growing Smarter: Achieving Livable Communities, Environmental Justice and Regional Equity." She is a member of the PRE Advisory Board.
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