

Organizing the Solidarity Economy:

A Story of Network Building amid COVID-19

by *Steve Dubb*



**“We see our work
as providing as
many opportunities
as possible for
people to practice
everyday activities
that would lead us to
postcapitalism and
a solidarity economy
. . . we are actively
building this
every day.”**

—Nia Evans,
Boston Ujima Project

E

arly in 2020, the board of the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network (USSEN) called on like-minded organizations that were engaged in economic justice and systems change work to gather at a Resist and Build summit at the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, Tennessee. The center, founded in 1932, has played an outsized role as a movement-organizing space, known for helping to train labor organizers in the 1930s and civil rights organizers in the 1950s and 1960s.¹

The call to action in the event invitation read: “This is a critical moment in history. We face multiple crises: environmental, growing social, economic and political divides, and a slide toward fascism, economic instability and war. There is an urgency to both *resist* these trends, and to *build* an alternative system for a just and sustainable future.”²

The goals of the gathering were three-fold:

1. Articulate our collective position on connecting resist and build.
2. Sharpen the analysis of what system change we’re working for: post-capitalism versus reform capitalism. Model a constructive dialogue about differences and aim to identify areas of collaboration/common interest.



In the crucible of COVID-19, a stronger movement emerged.

3. Figure out how to work together by working together, for example, messaging on resist and build, strategizing, and implementing concrete actions.

This was prior to COVID-19 and spoke to long-term trends of wealth and income inequality that long preceded the pandemic, leading to increasing questioning of neoliberalism, as *NPQ* covered at length back in February 2020.³ These trends were publicly visible. Indeed, in late February, Bernie Sanders won a landslide victory in the Democratic Party's caucuses in Nevada.⁴ Yes, soon Joe Biden would dominate the path to the Democratic nomination and, in November, win the presidency; but the world of early 2020 was one in which nominal prosperity was offset by increasing depths of despair, mounting student debt, and growing economic precarity.

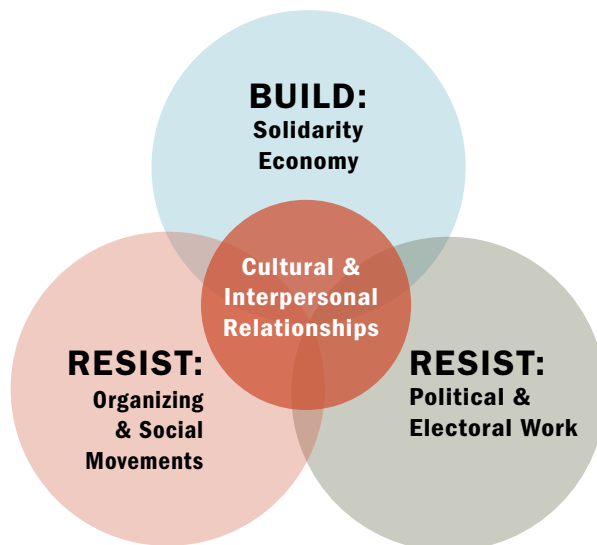
This was the context in which the Resist and Build summit was called. But then came COVID-19, which not only dramatically altered the political and economic context but also made in-person events exceedingly difficult to hold. The three-day solidarity economy summit was expected to be a small gathering that brought together leading national economy justice groups working on system change, including the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network, New Economy Coalition, The Democracy Collaborative, Climate Justice Alliance, Center for Economic Democracy, Common Future, Transition US, Green Eco-Socialist Network, and a smattering of local initiatives on the USSSEN board. Scheduled for March 19–22, it was cancelled on March 13.

What emerged in its place, however, proved to be far more significant. First, in lieu of the in-person conference, a series of two- to three-hour Zoom gatherings were held in March, April, May, and June. There have since been follow-on virtual gatherings, in October 2020 and March 2021, along with the development of an ongoing working-group system.

In the crucible of COVID-19, a stronger movement emerged.

GETTING GROUNDED

The first virtual Resist and Build gathering, held on March 20, 2020, had originally been envisioned as the first full day of the in-person summit. A large part of the meeting was about participants and the different organizations in the virtual “room” getting to know each other better. This was also a time to introduce the framework that motivated the original summit in the first place. The summit's explicit purpose was to align building strategies (i.e., strategies that support the development of co-ops and myriad other forms of democratic, collectively owned initiatives) with resistance strategies (both community-organizing-based and electoral) and culture-building work. A Venn diagram was displayed that sought to illustrate the interconnections among the different efforts:



At the first gathering, virtual breakout groups were held around four themes based on participant interest—building a solidarity economy narrative about COVID-19, creating a tool kit to guide local mutual aid efforts, supporting funder and capital organizing, and developing resources for online popular education.

It's worth recalling just how new the pandemic-induced shutdown was at that point. The previous day, the U.S. Department of Labor had issued its weekly report on new unemployment claims for the week ending March 14; the

The challenge, noted one participant, was to move from a “charitable framework” to one rooted in principles of community self-care, solidarity, and support.

number of claims was a modest 281,000, only a 70,000-person increase from the week before. A week later, that number would jump to 3.28 million.⁵

Even so, very early on in the pandemic, the need for mutual aid was evident. The challenge, noted one participant, was to move from a “charitable framework” to one rooted in principles of community self-care, solidarity, and support.

CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES OF SYSTEM CHANGE

A month later, when the group reconvened on April 17, the initial shock of the shutdown had subsided somewhat, but the severity of the crisis had come into fuller view: 22 million Americans had received layoff notices in the intervening month.⁶ One conference organizer referred to the experience as “feeling a new normal of overwhelm.”

A central focus of the second gathering was to consider what is meant by economic system change and compare reformist progressive or “social democratic” policies with a more transformative, postcapitalist approach that reorganizes the entire economy along principles of solidarity, equity, participatory democracy, and sustainability.⁷

Participants were divided into four groups and were asked to imagine two alternative scenarios: one, a social democratic response, in which “a government following Keynesian/FDR/Bernie Sanders–type policies had been in power when the pandemic broke”; and another, in which the “capitalist structure itself had been replaced” by a solidarity economy model. Participants were asked to consider how each would have dealt with the pandemic differently from the actual U.S. policy response.

A central theme that emerged was that a social democratic/New Deal–type response that, for example, kept people on payroll, would have been better than, say, the chaotic rollout of the Paycheck Protection Program.⁸ But, as one participant noted, reformist efforts like the New Deal are “inherently unstable as long as capitalism is still the predominant economic system.” The reasons are not hard to discern. Indeed, U.S. history of the past few decades illustrates the ability of corporations to organize to cut

regulatory controls and reduce their tax burden, undermining the ability of the public sector to finance social services.

At the same time, the challenges of developing a solidarity economy—not just as an idea but a living reality—were widely acknowledged. On the one hand, the crisis posed by the pandemic enabled people to “imagine things we couldn’t imagine and critique things we wouldn’t have critiqued before,” noted one participant. On the other hand, as another person cautioned, “Crises can always cut both ways. Yes, it opens space for radical imaginings, but it also can make people long for what was before. It will also rely on countless one-on-one organizing conversations. Crises are collective problems that require collective actions. The system that we live in is brilliant in guiding people into individualistic solutions to resolve tensions of the system.”

One conference organizer added, “A question we need to grapple with is that white supremacy predated capitalism and is a broader cultural and ideological container. How do we ensure our solidarity economy movement is also effectively undoing white supremacy patterns, systems, institutions, ideologies, etc., which are very much present?”

It was clear that there remained much work to do. As one participant noted, “We have a Next System Project,” referring to a program of the nonprofit The Democracy Collaborative that seeks to promote the study and discussion of economic alternatives. “We don’t have a next system movement. We need to build that.”

CASE STUDIES OF LOCAL ACTION

The third virtual gathering, held May 15, sought to lift up local organizing efforts in Massachusetts; Humboldt, California; and Jackson, Mississippi. In Massachusetts, Ariel Brooks of the Center for Economic Democracy⁹ and Emily Kawano of USSEN outlined how a statewide solidarity economy network was built in 2019 to buttress and connect local community land trust and cooperative organizing, and how that network had been mobilized during the pandemic to direct financial support to mutual aid and solidarity economy groups.

One participant pointed out, “One of the connections that is really important is to understand that the way the United States responded to the pandemic is itself a form of state violence.”

In Humboldt, California, David Cobb of Cooperation Humboldt outlined some of the group’s efforts in Humboldt County, a community of 135,000.¹⁰ Among their efforts is an “honor tax” campaign that earmarks 1 percent of revenues for unrestricted funding for the native Wiyot nation, and support for a range of cooperative development initiatives.¹¹ The group also participated in a 2018 campaign led by a local Latinx group that led to the passage of a countywide immigrant sanctuary resolution.¹²

In Jackson, Mississippi, Kali Akuno talked about the work of Cooperation Jackson, which launched in 2014.¹³ Akuno identified five focus areas of the group’s work: mutual aid, organizing the unemployed, co-ops, political education, and food sovereignty. Akuno also talked about the group’s efforts to engage in small-scale community production as a pathway to greater community economic self-sufficiency. “We think small-scale industrial capacity is important,” Akuno noted. He added that the goal is to “mix that in” with urban agriculture to “attain a level of food security and food sovereignty.” Amid the pandemic, Akuno added, mutual aid and developing solidarity economy supply chains were of the utmost importance.

WEAVING THE THREADS

The last of the monthly gatherings took place on June 19. In the intervening month, George Floyd had been murdered, and a global uprising against anti-Black racism had resulted. The central discussions at this gathering hinged on two key organizing questions: (1) What seems possible now that wasn’t there before?; and (2) How does it connect with the solidarity?

More broadly, to paraphrase Septima Poinsette Clark—who, at Highlander, had led the development of citizenship schools to enable African Americans to vote during the civil rights movement—participants sought to be “weavers of threads” and identify areas of connection.¹⁴

One participant pointed out, “One of the connections that is really important is to understand that the way the United States responded to the pandemic is itself a form of state violence.” Reopening where the virus is growing, noted this

participant, was a form of state violence that was ravaging BIPOC communities in particular.

A report back from a breakout group emphasized that the rise of Black Lives Matter offered a chance “to raise conversations around reparations and Black community wealth . . . the prison-industrial complex cannot be reformed, just like capitalism [cannot be]. That is a connection.”

Another participant added, “Defunding the police and the military-industrial complex are vital demands, because they help make possible the major transfer of resources needed for social transformation. . . . As we ask, ‘What are the police for?’, the solidarity economy movement can provide some answers. The alternatives proposed are centered in values of ‘caring, mutuality, solidarity.’”

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

After June, the four-stage virtual conference had ended; but the network-building effort has expanded to include other organizations, both sectoral and local, working on systems change, and continues through working groups around the arts, education, mutual aid, narrative change, politics, and policy, among other themes. The different work groups have met twice: in October 2020, to hear from the Southern Movement Assembly and reconnect in regional breakout sessions, and in March 2021, to reflect on the new political environment shaped by the Biden administration (but also the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol). Most of the network-building work happens between meetings. (This edition of the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, for example, is one of the many products of the ongoing network-building work.)

In April 2021, the Resist and Build network, led by Cooperation Humboldt, convened the Post-Capitalism Conference. At one session, Nia Evans, who directs the Boston Ujima Project, spoke of the step-by-step work needed to build an economy rooted in racial and economic justice and solidarity.¹⁵ “We see our work,” Evans explained, “as providing as many opportunities as possible for people to practice everyday activities that would lead us to post-capitalism and a solidarity economy . . . we are actively building this every day. This is real. This is reality. We will win. We are winning in different ways every day.”

NOTES

1. For information on the United States Solidarity Economy Network (USSEN), see “Our Story,” USSEN, accessed May 18, 2021, ussen.org/about-ussen/our-story. For the history of the Highlander Research Education Center (Highlander), see “88 Years of Fighting for Justice,” Highlander Research and Education Center, accessed May 18, 2020, highlandercenter.org/our-history-timeline/.
2. Personal correspondence from the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network, February 18, 2020.
3. Steve Dubb, “After the Next Recession: The Search for an Economic Path Forward,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, February 19, 2020, nonprofitquarterly.org/after-the-next-recession-the-search-for-an-economic-path-forward.
4. “Nevada results,” *2020 Primary Elections*, NBC News, February 25, 2020, nbcnews.com/politics/2020-primary-elections/nevada-results.
5. For the records from March 19, 2020, see “Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims,” U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), March 19, 2020, dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OPA/newsreleases/ui-claims/20200480.pdf. For the report from March 26, 2020, see Quoctrung Bui and Justin Wolfers, “More Than 3 Million Americans Lost Their Jobs Last Week. See Your State.,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2020, nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/26/upshot/coronavirus-millions-unemployment-claims.html.
6. Jeff Cox, “Weekly jobless claims hit 5.245 million, raising monthly loss to 22 million due to coronavirus,” CNBC, last updated April 16, 2020, cnbc.com/2020/04/16/us-weekly-jobless-claims.html.
7. For a more detailed explanation, see Emily Kawano and Julie Matthaei, “System Change: A Basic Primer to the Solidarity Economy,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, July 8, 2020, nonprofitquarterly.org/system-change-a-basic-primer-to-the-solidarity-economy.
8. Steve Dubb, “Anatomy of a Rollout Disaster: The Paycheck Protection Program,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, April 10, 2020, nonprofitquarterly.org/anatomy-of-a-rollout-disaster-the-paycheck-protection-program.
9. “Our History,” Center for Economic Democracy (CED), accessed May 18, 2019, economicdemocracy.us/history.
10. On Cooperation Humboldt, see “Who We Are,” Cooperation Humboldt, accessed May 18, 2021, cooperationhumboldt.com/about-5. Population estimate is from “QuickFacts: Humboldt County, California,” United States Census Bureau, accessed May 18, 2019, census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/humboldtcountycalifornia/BZA210219.
11. “Wiyot Honor Tax,” Cooperation Humboldt, accessed May 18, 2021, cooperationhumboldt.com/wiyot-honor-tax.
12. “Did you know that Humboldt County is a sanctuary county?,” *Redwood News*, KIEM-TV, January 17, 2021, kiem-tv.com/2021/01/17/did-you-know-that-humboldt-county-is-a-sanctuary-county.
13. “Who We Are,” Cooperation Jackson, accessed May 18, 2021, cooperationjackson.org/intro.
14. Paraphrased from civil rights leader Septima Poinsette Clark, “I am not weaving my life’s pattern alone. Only one end of the threads do I hold in my hands. The other ends go many ways, linking my life with others.” For more information on Septima Poinsette Clark, see “Septima Clark,” Digital SNCC Gateway, accessed May 18, 2021, snccdigital.org/people/septima-clark/.
15. For more information on the Boston Ujima Project, see the organization’s website at ujimaboston.com. Nia Evans made her remarks at: The Democracy Collaborative, *The New Systems Reader at the Post-Capitalism Conference*, Eureka, California, Humboldt State University, April 23, 2021, published on Youtube on April 26, 2021, youtube.com/watch?v=Odti1bcclXs.

STEVE DUBB is a senior editor at *NPQ*, where he directs *NPQ*’s economic justice program and pens *NPQ*’s Economy Remix column. Dubb has worked with cooperatives and nonprofits for over two decades, including twelve years at The Democracy Collaborative and three years as executive director of NASCO (North American Students of Cooperation). In his work, Dubb has authored, coauthored, and edited numerous reports; participated in and facilitated learning cohorts; designed community building strategies; and helped create the field of community wealth building. He is the lead author of *Building Wealth: The Asset-Based Approach to Solving Social and Economic Problems* (Aspen, 2005) and coauthor with Rita Axelroth Hodges of *The Road Half Traveled: University Engagement at a Crossroads* (Michigan State University Press, 2012). In 2016, he curated and authored *Conversations on Community Wealth Building*, a collection of interviews of community builders conducted over the previous decade.

To comment on this article, write to us at feedback@npqmag.org. Order reprints from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>.