

Transformative Organizing Theory

Ai-jen Poo at the U.S. Social Forum, Detroit,
2010

[youtube.com/watch?v=otQcQY0Knyk&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otQcQY0Knyk&feature=youtu.be)
Presentation begins at 10:43



Moderator: [Ai-jen Poo helped to bring about] the first ever domestic workers' bill of rights. Yes. But that work took years, right? Ten years of building that. And that's been summarized in an article for *Organizing Upgrade*: "Organizing with Love: Lessons from the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights Campaign". And, you know, Ai-jen has often pushed us to think about how do we build a movement that is very deep in the base that actually brings real folks, right? And that [is] grounded in the left, but reaches out to other sectors. Because if we are ever going to transform society, we have got to transform people towards a transformative society. So with that, Ai-jen, I want you to dive in.

Ai-jen Poo: Alright. Hi everybody. Hi all these friends. It's like "This is Your Life", you know? I just want to start by asking how many of you have been moved by the work of the Labor Community Strategy Center? [Shouts]. So I think we should start by giving a round of applause [applause]. And how many of you have felt like you have learned important lessons about organizing from Eric Mann? [applause] How many of you think that Eric Mann should finish his...[laughter]. Okay, done already, okay, done already, done already...just kidding.

So I'm Ai-jen and I've been organizing immigrant women workers since 1996 ... and throughout all of those years, actually, I have learned at really important junctures lessons about transformative organizing from Eric and the work of the Strategy Center. And I think one of the most important things that he has always focused on, that Ng'ethe also focuses on in a different way, is the importance of practice. That you have to get out there and do the work. You have to get out there, knock on the doors, talk to people, get on the bus, and engage. And, there's no way around it. There is no better teacher than the practice itself.

And that's also the case around the personal development work that Ng'ethe talked about, which is that there is a lot [of] deep work you have to do on the personal level—it takes commitment, dedication, rigor. It's also a deep, deep practice.

And so, the importance of practice is something I want to lift up. And I think that one of my favorite points in Eric's pamphlet is point number five, which is "transformative organizing becomes truly transformative in the course of battle". Right? "Transformative organizing becomes truly transformative in the course of battle".

And ... when I think about transformative organizing, I think about change on multiple levels. There is a change that has to happen – the change that you are trying to make in the system, right? To change the system, the way that it works, the way that it is unequal, the way that it oppresses us.

You're also trying to transform the movement, so that you are more powerful and more dynamic as a movement. You're trying to transform your organization to be more impactful, to be stronger. And you are trying to transform the relationships between people who are involved in the work that you're doing.

And you are trying to transform yourself, right? You're trying to learn, you're trying to grow, you're trying to be better in the world, be better at what you do.

To me, the best container, and vehicle, for these types of transformations to happen, and all at once and in different ways, is through campaigns. Through fights, right? Some of the fights that we have all been involved in, I'm sure each of you can remember a defining fight that really, kind of taught you a bunch about organizing. I think that that is probably the case for all of us. And I have this metaphor that — I don't know how it's going to go over in this room but I'm going to try it [laughter] — which is that great campaigns are like great love affairs. [laughter]. So, I have a question. What happens to you, what happens to you when you fall in love? Tell me.

[Audience shouts out answers]

Ai-jen Poo: It's all consuming, right? What else? What else happens to you when you fall in love?

Audience member: Commitment.

Ai-jen Poo: Right, you get more committed.

Tammy: You lose perspective.

Ai-jen Poo: Tammy, talk to the hand. [laughter]. You gain perspective. [audience chatter] Alright, so the point is....huh?

Audience member: You have a one track mind.

Ai-jen Poo: Okay, exactly. You have a one track mind. It's all consuming. Have you ever had the experience where you feel like you are completely overwhelmed and busy and your schedule is completely packed and then you fall in love and all of a sudden all this time and space opens up to go to the movies and go out for dinner and, and it's like that, it's like suddenly the impossible feels possible. Right? So great campaigns are like that. And a lot of what we need is that feeling. That things change, deep change, big change is really possible.

And so a great campaign for me has been the campaign for the domestic workers' bill of rights in New York. It's a campaign ... [applause] that's been six years long in the making and we are in this really important moment where yesterday the governor, the senate, and the assembly came to the table for the first time with the full intention of creating a bill that would get signed in the coming weeks. [applause].

And what it will do is it will provide basic rights and protections that often times you find in a collective bargaining agreement to about 200,000 mostly undocumented women of color who work as nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers for the elderly in New York. And we're part of a national alliance and so, the California Domestic Workers Alliance just introduced the California Domestic Workers Bill of Rights...[applause]. And so, it's building, and, uh, we are looking at Colorado next year and so it's really an exciting time for us.

And ... because we are talking about the practice, I just wanted to give an example of how we are trying to really practice transformative organizing in the context of the Social Forum, building off of some of this work that we've done. So we're doing some different levels of work. One is that we are bringing together domestic workers for the National Domestic Workers Congress. We've got 33 member organizations in 14 cities and we're all meeting together. And what we are trying to do is build in a culture, that's a feminist culture, that's a transformative culture. So every morning before we start our program, we actually have Angel Kyodo Williams, who's at the Center for Transformative Change, come in and lead a centering exercise, so that everybody can be grounded, really in who they want to be, what they want to bring to the work, and in their sense of purpose as we go into the day. And then we go off and do our stuff about what do we want to build for domestic workers, how are we going to build the power of domestic workers, how are we going to organize the 2.5 million domestic workers that are in the United States.

And then we're part of this process called the Excluded Workers Congress, which happened yesterday. It was the first time that domestic workers, taxi drivers, day laborers, guest workers, formerly incarcerated workers – lots of workers that have been excluded by the system, came together...[applause] to define a new vision for the human right to organize and a new framework for labor laws in this country that is rooted in human rights. That's about our economy today, the reality of what it is today, not something that looked—that, that was born of 30 years, an economy of 30 years ago, but for the 21st century.

And then tomorrow we are going to be part of the Interalliance Dialogue “Enough is Enough” People's Movement Assembly, as we come together with all different struggles in the working class, things that define our future: climate, jobs, immigration enforcement, key campaigns that are about the future of humanity and the planet that we need to unite around broadly, right? And so we are going to be a part of that as domestic workers.

And so we are trying our best to connect the dots and move everything forward. And it's a work in progress. All of you know organizing is really, really hard. But I think with all this great theory that is being brought forward, and in the practice of it, we are actually moving towards bigger, better change. Much more than we've ever been and, yeah! [applause]

(Transcribed for Catalyst Project by Lindley Mease)