

Episode 10: Strategy, Tactics, & Direct Action

Speaker 1 [00:00:05] Hi, my name is Luke Bretherton and this is the Listen Organize Act podcast, which looks at the history and contemporary practice of organizing democratic politics. Organizing requires strategy, tactics and shared action to bring about change. But what strategies help us bring into being a more just and generous world and what kinds of tactics and coordinated action to help to achieve our strategic goals? To discuss these questions with me are Sandy Horwitt and Kathleen Patrón. Sandy is an author, educator and campaigner who has written extensively about organizing. He wrote the definitive biography of The Godfather of community organizing, Saul Alinsky. Kathleen is the lead organizer of greater Boston interfaith organization Gibeah, where most recently she's focused on police reform and equitable access to health care. Sandy observed and wrote about and Kathleen was directly involved in the work of an IF coalition in Milwaukee called Common Ground. In the wake of the 2000, 07 and 08 financial crisis, Common Ground led a successful campaign to address the foreclosure crisis in that city. I'll be discussing this campaign with them as it serves as a great case study for a wider discussion of the relationship between strategy tactics and different forms of shared action in organizing. So join me now for this episode of the Listen Organize Act podcast.

Speaker 2 [00:01:42] Sandy, Kathleen, great to have you with me on the listen organizer. Thank you so much for being with me today. And we're going to be focusing on strategy, tactics and direct action and through the Milwaukee Common Ground Campaign as the kind of case study to think about that things. And Kathleen, you were very involved in that as an organizer. And Sandy, you kind of followed it very closely and wrote about it in great detail, in detail. A terrific article, Kathleen, as the backdrop to the development of the common ground response to the foreclosure crisis. Can you tell me a little bit about Milwaukee in the in the mid noughties and how the economic crisis of 2007, 2008 hit the hit the city?

Speaker 3 [00:02:24] Yeah. So Milwaukee historically has been a city of immigrants, German, Italian, Irish and also the city of immigrants in terms of the great migration of black African-Americans migrating up from the south. And the big attraction was the the manufacturing industry in Milwaukee. A.O. Smith, the car company Bucyrus, built the shovels that dug the Panama Canal. So those were good jobs. They were union jobs. So people were able to move to the city of Milwaukee, get a good job, buy a house, raise a family. The American dream and the backdrop for this campaign was in 2000, the 2000s, a lot of, especially predominantly both White and Working-Class, African-Americans own their homes outright. And these were beautiful craftsmen, German built, gorgeous, gorgeous homes. And what happened was during the peak of the foreclosure crisis, companies like Countrywide went door to door and said, hey, you know, do you want to take a mortgage out on your fully paid house? And of course, a lot of families were like, yes, I would love to send my child to college or my grandchild to college, took loans out or refinanced. So door to door, predatory lending. And that really wiped out neighborhoods in Milwaukee.

Speaker 2 [00:03:59] So, Sandy, can you remind listeners, like some of the kind of broader underlying issues affecting housing and banking, the kind of came to a head in 2002, 2007, 2008 and its aftermath? Just give it a bit of context for the campaign itself.

Speaker 4 [00:04:15] Well, there was a very hot housing market around the country in the early 2000s, and there was a little niche that developed and it became a big niche and that was subprime, the subprime mortgage world. And that was, as Kathleen is already kind of

touched on, that was an attempt to get people to either refinance or to buy a house using a subprime mortgage, which was not the standard kind of mortgage that most people most that most people have, meaning that the terms of the mortgage were not very favorable. There was a teaser interest rate that got people hooked in, but the rate was often variable, meaning it would go up over the course of the mortgage. And as long as the housing market was robust and the value of your house continued to appreciate it all sort of made sense. I might also add that those people who went door to door that Kathleen referred to trying to sign people up to take out a mortgage on their house, even they're already paid up house. They had a lot of those applications were falsified by people representing the banks or other lenders because a lot of people who took out mortgages in the subprime period really not economically qualified. And, you know, being an ordinary person, you would think, as we all do, I think when you go to a lending institution, they want to make sure that you can pay your monthly mortgage. Well, this was just sort of the opposite, that the lending institutions wanted to sign people up because there was another kind of industry that developed and that was packaging all of these subprime mortgages, turning them into securities and then selling them to investors. And this was this was going on by 2006 in the millions around the country. It was just a phenomenal growth of a securities part of the banking world. And a lot of this came out of the deregulation of banking in the 1990s, the late 1990s, 1999, in particular, because banks normally would not have gone into this kind of is kind of. Very risky activity, so when the housing market started to crash, meaning the bubble burst in early 2007, a lot of these people could not afford to continue paying their mortgages. And in Milwaukee, in about a four or five year period, from 2007 to about 2011, there were 20000 foreclosures, which was just remarkable in a period that that short and suddenly all those neighborhoods that Kathleen referred to when you walk the streets is vacant, abandoned housing, many of them falling into bad disrepair because the banks, for quite as long as they could get away with it, kind of ignored these foreclosed houses.

Speaker 2 [00:07:33] So there's something there about how the kind of ordinary world of affections and kind of people's housings and savings were taken up from Milwaukee into a kind of globalized financial system that then when, you know, problems occurred in that system, they were left left high and dry. I just want to kind of press into that dynamic a bit. And, Kathleen, we can tend to look at an issue like housing and mortgages and strictly kind of economists ways. And but in a sense, that's kind of part of the problem. A house isn't just a commodity or a debt leverage instrument. It's the kind of back banks tended to treat them. Neither is house merely kind of roof over one's head or a place of shelter. You know, for all of us, it's a home and it's a place of intimacy and nurture and contributes to a kind of broader realm of affection through which people make a life together and create a neighborhood. Can you say something about this kind of broader, more intangible, but but in many ways more significant understanding of housing and how it played into the development of the campaign? And how did the banks view houses? And how did this contrast with how the kind of people who lived in them viewed the house as a home?

Speaker 3 [00:08:44] Yeah, I mean, the the American dream often gets equated with owning a home, and I will say this is an interesting podcast to do at this time. My husband and I just got an accepted offer on our own first home that we've ever purchased. And so this hits very close to home for me. And we just bought a home here in East Boston. And I've been reflecting on this for my own life. But it's really about putting down roots. It's about belonging, it's about ownership, not just about a piece of property, but I believe it's also ownership in the community that you've decided to live and invest your time. And I believe owning a home for many people and for myself is about having some political power in that jurisdiction as well. One of the big conversations post foreclosure crisis, one

of the big questions in Sherman Park was, are you a renter or are you an owner? Right. And renters often had a lot of stigma against them as you don't own this place, this community, as much as we do. And that all plays up plays together in the political fabric of how a place operates and home ownership or the lack thereof plays into plays into ownership of a whole community. And this political power and how how place functions and that that fabric of either a neighborhood or a city is directly tied to homeownership. And when you wipe that out, you're wiping out a whole ecosystem of of care and and who really runs this place. And that's not something, you know, at the bank level in terms of global industry. It's just not something that they think about whatsoever.

Speaker 2 [00:10:32] Does that kind of the ways in which homeownership is enmeshed in an ecology not just of affections of individual families, but a whole ecology of both political, social, economic life? And so you wipe out that base, it will, you know, eviscerate that broader ecology of relations and the kind of political economic life that undergirds that.

Speaker 3 [00:10:55] Well, absolutely. And when we talk about the three sectors of society, the market, government and civic, and how when you read any de Tocqueville, it's those three entities that really negotiate and are the body politic of how a democracy functions and when the market essentially wipes out home ownership and a lot of ways you're wiping out and you're crumbling that civic sector in a way that makes negotiation around the common good between those three entities much more difficult, much, much more difficult.

Speaker 2 [00:11:29] And we should also say when you when you prohibit access to that in practice, you know, previous banking practices like redlining, particularly. Absolutely. African-American communities, you're preventing that. And also, it's not just economic access and building up equity. It's also then a secure base for political agency in those communities as well. And I think that's one of the kind of, you know, why redlining. Part of the reason why redlining was issues is both the economic equity issue, but there's also the political agency aspect that that homeownership kind of on. Obviously, we can have a broader debate about the place of property and all of it. But actually, in this case, the realities of the American context, that kind of indexing of political agency and property ownership are very key to standing in the broader political economy. So what does the kind of campaign and the issues it address tell us more broadly about this kind of struggle we've touched on already, but this struggle between money and people and the kind of question of whether money serves human flourishing, whether humans are made to serve money, and why do we get so confused about that relationship and how that relationship should go?

Speaker 4 [00:12:40] Well, what's really extraordinary and thinking back now a little more than 10 years is how effective Common Ground was as an upstart organization, it was founded in 2008 and a lot of the activity in pressing the biggest banks in the country and under the Keisha case of Deutsche Bank, one of the biggest banks in the world, to acknowledge that they had created a problem. There was a problem, a serious problem, economic as well as community based in in a significant city like Milwaukee and many other Milwaukee's around the country. And the banks wanted to ignore this. And using some of the Alinsky tactics and starting with the premise that when it came to political power, it was either organized money or organized people that really made the difference. And so common ground engaged in just extraordinary tactics for to just daily kind of an organization, just two or three years old. And, of course, within the organization has become kind of legendary. And one of those tactics was to send to people from common ground the lead organizer and a citizen leader to the annual meeting of Deutsche Bank in

Frankfurt, Germany, to confront the CEO of Josef Ackermann and to tell him that in Milwaukee, Germans built that city and now a German bank was destroying that city. At the time, Deutsche Bank had over seventeen thousand housing code violations of houses that they all under control and go. And yet they would not sit down and talk with either the city or common ground about this problem until common ground send representatives to Frankfurt, Germany, at the annual Deutsche Bank meeting and got a commitment from the CEO of Deutsche Bank to begin a conversation in Milwaukee. So I think it's a good, good example of how organized people, even an upstart organization like Common Ground at the time, can confront, owe money and maybe, well, at least some some part of a victory.

Speaker 2 [00:15:07] Kathleen, can you talk a little bit? Sandi's give us a kind of that that broader overview, you know, of the direction of the campaign. Can you tell us a little bit about the origin story of the common ground campaign and how did it emerge from a process of organizing?

Speaker 3 [00:15:22] Sure. So, as Sandy said, Common Ground founded in around 2006. And we started the organizing cycle process, which always starts with listening, whether that's relational meetings, small group listening sessions or house meetings or neighborhood walks. And so we started that process and it was really the origins were really around neighborhood walks and people commenting on a spike in crime rate. And we said, what's contributing to that? What's going on? And people said, look at this empty, dilapidated home next to mine. There's people squatting in it. There's illegal activity. Many of the neighborhoods my neighborhoods were on fire, literally on fire with empty homes going up in flames at night. And that's it was through that process of really engaging with people, talking with people, hearing their stories, people inside of our congregations that were struggling with losing their homes, that we move from this issue of crime to what is who owns that vacant, abandoned home? Why is it not secure? Why is it not boarded up? Who is responsible here for our community that's on fire? And so it really started through the process of listening. And and it's through that process of listening. We're able to then cut an issue. And the issue was, why does Deutsche Bank at that point, we looked into it and why does Deutsche Bank own the majority of these empty homes in Milwaukee?

Speaker 2 [00:16:55] How did you build on that to develop a kind of deeper picture, get intelligence about the ownership structures, who you know, it wasn't just Deutsche Bank as Wells Fargo, all the other kinds of banks. How did you kind of use research actions in developing the campaign and research more generally in terms of working out who the target was going to be?

Speaker 3 [00:17:15] So since we're going to be talking a lot about action in this podcast, and this is really my I'm happy to be doing this because action is my favorite part of this work. You really go into action for three reasons. One is to get a reaction, which we'll talk about a little later, too, is to alter the relationship. And then third is to learn. And it's important to have that context, as you think about our research at. And it is, in fact, an action because one of the reasons is you go into action to learn. That's very different from doing a whole bunch of analysis online or trying to understand it from reading a lot, action means really going into a live meeting with a group of leaders trying to dig through this and learn and it and it's difficult for the ordinary person to want to take that step and go into action. And so research actions are really important for a couple of reasons. One, it's a leader. It's a way for people to grow in their leadership. And that's why we we do these meetings. It's not just to learn. It's to get it's to help people grow and develop as public people. And it's a really important first step for many leaders who have never done this. I was one of them, but I knew there was a big problem and I saw my neighborhood on fire.

And that research action helped me learn how to act in the world. But then second, yes, we met with local banks. We learned a lot about the foreclosure crisis. We met with local and state legislators. We met with developers. We tried to really understand how did this happen and what are the impacts. And so we learned a lot about how to how to actually grab hold of this and cut the issue as well.

Speaker 2 [00:19:02] That's fantastic. And I think it's brilliant. But what do you say about the research action also being kind of training ground for leaders and getting used to kind of having public relationships with people? And it's more than simply reading about stuff online or reading books or whatever. That's it's it's a formative process of leadership, development and society. Can you tell me something then? You know, you mentioned that this kind of infamous action of going to Frankfurt, Germany, what were some of the steps that led then into that boardroom meeting, that general meeting in Frankfurt, in Germany, thousands of miles away? What what kind of steps that led up to that in terms of the actions that took place?

Speaker 4 [00:19:44] Well, Kathleen has touched on some of the actions that led up to the trip to Frankfurt, Germany, to confront the Deutsche Bank at the annual meeting. And that is the scope of the problem. And how many and how many abandoned houses that were ruining neighborhoods in Milwaukee were either serviced or owned by Deutsche Bank. And Deutsche Bank wouldn't talk to anybody in the city of Milwaukee from the mayor on down, couldn't get meaningful meetings with any of these national big banks that some places had had. Local banks, not Deutsche Bank, didn't have a retail operation in Milwaukee, but Wells Fargo certainly did, and US banks and so forth. So it was it was really a result of all of the research actions that Kathleen talked about and then not being able to get a meaningful negotiating session started with any of the banks at this particular stage that led to that trip to Frankfurt in the next year. In 2011, I tag along with another common ground delegation, is something very similar at the Wells Fargo annual meeting in San Francisco. And one of the common ground citizen leaders, Larry Archer, had owned stock in Wells Fargo for generations through her family, that she lived in a small Wisconsin town growing up north of Milwaukee, and her father owned stock in the local bank, which somewhere along the way was purchased by Wells Fargo. So here was a elderly woman standing up and confronting the CEO of the I think Wells Fargo's the fourth largest bank in the United States and the biggest bank when it came to mortgages and bank that also was fined later two billion dollars for its various nefarious practices of misleading people to sign up for subprime mortgages. And it was just a thrilling thing to see ordinary people confronting the CEO of one of the country's biggest, most powerful banks. And because of that, generating the beginning of a sit down negotiating session back in Milwaukee.

Speaker 2 [00:22:19] Kathleen, one of one of Alinsky rules for organizing is that the price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative. What would what was the constructive alternative? You conventionally proposed to Deutsche Bank and Wells Fargo and the others? And what was the end result of the campaign?

Speaker 3 [00:22:35] Yes, we were very clear. And our our mantra was, you broke it. You fix it up level. And what that really meant was providing a fix it. Alternative and what we proposed very, very clearly was that we wanted money in a pot so that we could acquire rehab and sell the homes block by block in a really concerted strategy. Second was once the homes were rehab, we want a dedicated mortgage funding or mortgage funds so that people could actually receive a quality mortgage and purchase the rehabbed homes. And then last was we asked for funding to create for a job creation program that people would

actually be paid to maintain the empty homes, securing them, cleaning them up, cutting the grass, et cetera. And so the end result was. Sandy, remind me, was it thirty three point four, thirty three point eight million dollars in mix of those three parts, which then were used to start what was called the Milwaukee Rising program, where we actually ended up rehabbing, selling over one hundred homes just in the Sherman Park neighborhood, going block by block. So by proposing that alternative, we were able to actually get them to react around our specifics.

Speaker 2 [00:24:03] Just going to dig deeper into the kind of questions of those kind of tactics and strategy and things like that. There's a friend of mine has a great way of summarizing Machiavelli's great kind of corpus person. Political writing is that it summarizes basically its action in time, which is, I think, an important thing to remember about politics. And it's actually time to entails questions of when, where, how, with whom to act in order to kind of bring about purposeful change and to act effectively in time with a purpose towards a specific goal takes a strategy. It can't be kind of random or spontaneous. Sandy, can you can you say a little bit about how the kind of strategy that led to the Folkston, Deutsche Bank and the other banks, how did that develop? And and more broadly, you know, what is the strategy and how does one develop one in organizing?

Speaker 4 [00:24:54] Well, I think it's a strategy. A good strategy has to be creative. Alinsky used to joke that young organizers wouldn't carry around his first book, *Reveille for Radicals*, and try to look for lessons on pages and then just sort of parrot what they read. And that's not what an organizer who is as good as Kathleen is does. Yes, you learn the general principles that Alinsky and others have written about over the years. But what separates mundane and not really very effective organizing from the level of organizing that Kathleen does is creativity. And it's coming up with an idea that no one ever thought of before. No one really ever thought it in Milwaukee of going 4000 miles to Frankfurt, Germany, to confront the CEO of the second largest bank in the world over what they were doing to this German created city in Milwaukee. So it's really coming up with something that hasn't been done before often, even though it may be based on principles that are familiar. But the actual implementation is something that really requires some real creativity.

Speaker 2 [00:26:22] Could you give us a kind of all that talk about, you know, in your view as an organizer, what is a strategy and how does it contrast to a tactic?

Speaker 3 [00:26:31] Yeah, so I've actually developed some training around this, which I found very, very helpful in terms of teaching our membership about the difference really between mission strategy and tactics. Right. And I completely agree with Sandy. A lot of it is around creativity. A lot of it is around trying to pass these things out for people so that they understand the difference between all three. I would say, first and foremost, you have to add mission before strategy because. Our mission of our organization is about building power first and foremost, very clear, and people miss that part. We'll talk more about that later, I'm sure, when it comes to Occupy Wall Street. But and how we were able to consistently and persistently act over time. This campaign took about two and a half years. If you don't pay attention to your mission, which is we are building power first and foremost and developing leaders. Who have the ability to act, if you miss that completely, you you don't it doesn't matter what your strategy is, it doesn't matter what your tactics are. And so you have to remember, are we building power and did we build enough power before we took on this campaign? And then second, I would say strategy is the it's the creative way of how you get from point A to point Z once you have some power. So, for example, we

went directly after the big banks as a corporate target, as a strategy. Another strategy we could have employed was going to the state of Wisconsin's legislature. Right. And legislating some sort of change. Those are two very different strategies that can get you to a similar end. And you pick the strategy based on the power that you have and by doing power analysis. So, for example, in Milwaukee, a democratically controlled city in a very Republican controlled state and common ground being simply in the four counties around Milwaukee and around Milwaukee. That's where we had our power. And we didn't have power at the state level with a Republican controlled legislature. That strategy, once you do a power analysis, would not have actually worked. And so our strategy was let's go directly to the corporate, to the corporate sector, to corporate power and make demands and then less with tactics. We talk in organizing about action and reaction and tactics are where action and reaction happen. It's the that's where a lot of creativity happens. It's very fluid. Your tactics ebb and flow over time. Within within that strategy. Power doesn't change. We're building. Power doesn't change. Your strategy may change, but you can't shift strategy too much. Otherwise you won't get something done. You want to pick one based on power analysis that works. And then your tactics change a lot over time by acting, reacting and acting and reacting.

Speaker 2 [00:29:43] So how did you how do you come to choose certain kinds of tactics that in that process, the kind of practical reasoning to work out like this kind of tactic will get this kind of reaction and get us further towards achieving our strategic goals? How do you make those kinds of judgments?

Speaker 3 [00:29:59] Yeah, so you go into action to get specific reactions from a target. And this is the part that gets people really nervous because people do and leaders do want they want stability. One of the reasons people don't act in public life is because they're nervous about the gray areas. And this is where it gets a little bit tricky, where people you go into action and you try something and then you have to see how the world reacts to you and you organize off that reaction. So the tactics that you choose are you put yourself out there in the world. That's why research actions are really important right away to get people used to that process. Let's go. Let's see if we can get a meeting with this bank. Let's see if we can get a meeting with this politician. Let's see how they react to us in the meeting. So then when you when you get into the actual campaign work. And start running actions and getting reactions, you have some practice with that. So, for example, with common ground, we sent letters to all of the big banks trying to get a meeting with them. And that was the first action. It was a first tactic. It was let's send a letter and see if we can get a reaction. And Wells Fargo specifically sent a letter back saying, thank you, CommonGround, for the inquiry about your mortgage. Somebody will be getting back to you. So that was a reaction. And then you organize off of the reaction. So action, reaction and you and you decide the tactic based on the reaction that you get. And it's a back and forth dance for a long time until you can actually get somewhere and you learn to escalate. Shortly after that, there was a very large press conference in front of Wells Fargo with big pictures saying we demand you meet with us, read that letter out loud, said this isn't good enough. So so your action reaction, you organize off the reaction. And we could the rest of the story goes from there right over two and a half years.

Speaker 4 [00:32:01] Luke. I might just add one extra point to what Kathleen said and all of these often mundane research actions of going and meeting with a second level of vice president at whatever institution is turns out to be a terrific learning experience and common ground in this campaign on foreclosures. Literally had a couple hundred citizen leaders who had never done this sort of thing before, spending hundreds of hours

collectively learning about banking, about how the city responded to all of the messy details that were part of this whole terrible housing foreclosure disaster.

Speaker 2 [00:32:46] In rules for radicals, Alinsky sets up a number of rules that make for good tactics. It's obviously been a hugely influential kind of text in organizing circles over many years. His second rule, there is never go outside the experience of your people, while the third rule is wherever possible, go outside the experience of the enemy. Why are these important and how did the campaign follow these rules? How did they play out in terms of this campaign?

Speaker 4 [00:33:11] I think staying within the experience of your your people means that you do things. For example, if you're dealing with sort of working class or middle class people who are very law abiding and have learned not to break rules, is that when you do your research action, you do things in that same vein. You send a letter asking for a meeting. You do things that we, for lack of a better word here that might be polite as opposed to being very obnoxious right off the bat. Later, being more confrontational is something that people learn that the old fashioned way of asking, may I please? And getting back the letter that Kathleen referred to before from from Wells Fargo, just blowing you off is not going to achieve your ends with staying within the experience of your own people, at least initially, is really important and mandatory if you're going to have a successful organization. And on the other end of that, going outside of your enemies experience, I think you'll be confronted at an annual meeting by people who, in the case of they're going to be people from Milwaukee came all that way and got press coverage saying that this otherwise highfalutin bank was destroying a city in the United States was something that Deutsche Bank really did not know quite what to do with. And if anything, its CEO acromion, if we want to be hard nosed about it, kind of panicked on the spot and immediately said he was she was designating his top lawyer to go to Milwaukee and to meet with common ground. And in fact, there was such a meeting so that that was probably something outside of the experience of the CEO of one of the world's most powerful corporations.

Speaker 2 [00:35:14] Kathy, do you have any any further reflections just on that point?

Speaker 3 [00:35:18] Yeah, I think, again, this is why you have to be really clear from the outset that our work with organizing is really again, it's about building power and you build power by developing leaders. And if you use a tactic that is outside of the experience of your people, oftentimes that doesn't work for all the reasons Sandy mentioned. And it goes against the rule of are we are we developing leaders? Are we building power? And we'll talk I'll talk more about this later. But whenever possible, going outside the experience of your enemy, I think, has the. What to do with dominant power and consent and how you think about breaking consent,

Speaker 4 [00:35:59] just to repeat and emphasize again, the torture bank episode is actually common ground, as Kathleen just sort of implied, with two trips to Frankfurt at the annual meeting, because the first one was not particularly productive. And it was the second one when the speaker for Common Ground looked at the use of acromion, the CEO right from close distance and said German immigrants guilt, Milwaukee and now a German bank is destroying Milwaukee. And no one ever talked publicly, probably to the CEO of Deutsche Bank like that or not? Not often. And he reacted instantly to that ridicule. And that could turn out to be more productive as far as a follow up meeting later in Milwaukee

Speaker 2 [00:36:55] that he just want to go back. I mean, again, there's a kind of key rule in to keep the pressure on. And you've talked about the variety of tactics you've did. The you know, as you said, it's a two and a half year year process. You got to the settlement. How did you kind of keep the energy up among the leaders and keep that sense of momentum and the kind of through the evaluation, the different tactics and then the action reaction process? But but there's a there is a kind of question of how do you keep the focus? How do you keep the energy? How did you kind of address some of those issues?

Speaker 3 [00:37:28] I think that in our work, this is, again, where evaluation always plays a key role and that you are always along the way evaluating these tactics or the actions that you take. And it's within that evaluation process that you are able to garner the small victories or the small wins. So, you know, the the jump from a form letter from Wells Fargo to a meeting except at Wells Fargo accepting a meeting, even if it was a low level power person evaluating that reaction as a win. We've moved up the power pattern gives people a lot of energy and being able to, within the broader campaign, evaluate this. The smaller the smaller wins is really, really important. And then and then it's escalating tactics over time. Another rule and organizing the best person to organize your base or your people is the opposition. And so each moment and each meeting where we're actually face to face with Wells Fargo, with Deutsche Bank, and they disrespect our people or direct organize our people provides incredible energy. It's it's the Bull Connor strategy where Bull Connor is on the news, just acting absolutely horrific and that actually organizes your people. And so this, I think, directly connects with going outside the experience of your enemy, because what you're trying to do is get them to react in a way that moves you forward with the campaign, but then also pisses off the leaders because nothing is better than a great target. So, for example, Sandy might mention this some more, but the first time that we actually did confront Dr. Ackerman at Deutsche Bank, Dr. Sue Giammo from St. Catherine Parish in Sherman Park, you know, she did it in German, but they were there for like hours, I guess. And then the they actually shut the mic off on her when she was speaking right. The first time. And so what a better yeah. What a better action to keep the energy up of our people say. So that's that's what makes people want to escalate then. And so you do want to do a power analysis and think about your target, think about how they'll react and then get people into a fight that that just keeps them going. And you just keep doing that until you eventually move up the power pattern and you win.

Speaker 2 [00:40:13] That's a key aspect of the target. And that kind of egregious, disrespectful rudeness can actually be the best way of organizing because it suddenly goes back to think about the kind of false glory. It it's a it's a it's an act of revelation. It shows actually what what power really thinks that they claim to be your friend. They're really not your friend. And say that for the fight for recognition to ensure that they are taking notice of you, they are respecting you, they are in conversation with you. Is that that then become is this very starkly? Represented in that in that moment, and those are often key moments, transformative moments in campaigns. So I kind of want to talk to you both a little bit about the kind of some of the different kinds of actions the campaign involved. We talked about research actions. Were there public hearings, accountability assemblies? Obviously, we've got the disruptive direct action of going to the the the general general annual general meetings of these banks. But in between that, like, what were some of the other forms of public action that were involved, Kathleen?

Speaker 3 [00:41:32] So one action that we took, one of the first actions we took with Deutsche Bank was to organize a bus full of people to actually go down to the German consulate. And demand that the that we get a meeting with Deutsche Bank through going to the German consulate in Chicago. We took a busload of people. You broke it, you fix it.

Big signs of House is owned by Deutsche Bank. And the reason we targeted and this is, again, where power analysis is very important, that strategy is very important is because the German government is actually the largest was the largest customer of Deutsche Bank. And so that was the purpose of that action. And again, it was we were trying to move from total debt recognition. No, you know, no meeting whatsoever. Let's try this tactic to get to Deutsche Bank to actually get a meeting. So that was one creative, creative tactic.

Speaker 2 [00:42:32] And this question of going to it in terms of the direct action of going to shareholder meetings, Sandy, that that's not a kind of new, you know, acting on shareholder meetings isn't that isn't a new tactic kind of pioneered by Alinsky and others in the 1960s? I think that churches by proxy shares as part of a strategy to challenge racist racist employment practices in Kodak in Rochester. Can you tell us a little bit about that history, about that particular campaign and and how kind of shareholder proxy came about and something of how developed?

Speaker 4 [00:43:05] Yes. Well, here's a good example of the use of ridicule as well. Luke. Yes, Alinsky was one of the first, if not the first, to have an organized effort at a shareholders meeting of a major corporation, Eastman Kodak, which our younger listeners may not think of as a major corporation these days. But when put in color, film and cameras use film or such a big part of American life. It was Kodak film that everybody thought, I still have those film cameras. Do I still use Kodak film? But I guess the issue was hiring the hard core unemployed by the Alinsky organization in Rochester that would recruit and train with Kodak's help and and with promising jobs for a significant number of unemployed people. And Kodak refused to negotiate. And so Alinsky came up with the idea of rounding up stock proxies from church organizations around the country, the Unitarians in particular. I remember it, quite a good holding Kodak stock and and then descending on Flemington, New Jersey, where Kodak had its annual meeting to confront very much like Deutsche Bank was confronted decades later, the CEO and to embarrass Kodak into doing something for unemployed people in their home town. And Alinsky line during this campaign was and when it came to race relations, Kodak's only invention was the invention of color film. And other than that, they had done nothing to improve race relations and that was not appreciated in ever so proper Rochester, New York at the time. So that's that's kind of the very beginning or close to the very beginning of the U.S. stock proxy's. I must say that this is a corollary to the rule that you referred to before Luke about what an issue drags on. It becomes a drag when you do an action against an opponent. If you continue to do that same sort of action, like going to annual meeting, shareholder meetings, the opposition gets pretty good at handling or deflecting that kind of tactic. And so I think these days it's probably less effective to show up at annual meetings to protest a particular issue that it might have been some years ago, or if there an extraordinary situation such as the emergency around the country having to do with foreclosed housing, which made the confrontation at the Wells Fargo annual meeting something that was useful for common ground and resulted in some victory.

Speaker 2 [00:46:16] Now, I mean, I think that's I think it's a very good point. It did become, you know, particularly then through the Vietnam War and on particularly now today around environmental issues. So oil companies and kind of gas companies are very used to handling protesters. That annual general meeting, I don't think banks are. And I think that was part of the success of the Wells Fargo and Deutsche Bank intervention, that that's not a world in the sense that that that wasn't in their expected. Kind of responses that I used, and I think certain industries are much more used to this kind of intervention, but but just thinking about nonviolent direct actions more more broadly, you know, we've

got to we've got to act to bring about change. And there's a whole variety kind of I think the the Einstein Institute lists 198 different kind of tactics and forms of direct action you can use from marches to vigils to sit ins, boycotts, rent strikes, these kinds of things. And they've they are a key feature of a kind of grassroots, radical Democratic politics. So, Kathleen, in terms of, you know, this often does taking part in direct actions which can involve conflict, tension, speaking out, you know, and speaking out of turn, you know, very these these are these aren't habitual for people. And these often can feel I mean, I've been involved in it. There's a kind of pit in your stomach and you feel a bit nervous, like, oh, can we really do this? You know? And so how do you get people to kind of feel comfortable in that space? Not as comfortable as the long term, but like, you know, that is how to get people to to to do that. And is it only have a certain kinds of people or is it kind of anyone can do that kind of stuff? Yeah.

Speaker 3 [00:47:58] And I just want to point before I go there, one of the things that people always get wrong with organizing. If you say you are going to be an organizer, I'm going to organize something, is you think that you're putting together pieces inside of a world that isn't already organized crime and that's something people get wrong all the time. And the bottom line is the world around us is already organized and has been organized and the powers that be are organized. And if you need to understand that context in order to try and build something or reorganize a group of people that have the power to either disrupt that or challenge that that dominant power or structure that's around you. And so and that's what that's what you're doing. And yes, that does that when you do do that, when you do organize and you confront the way the world is already pretty organized around you, that causes a lot of conflict. And that is about organizing people to help to help people see that they can, in fact, break what we call break and consent. And so part of this is that it's getting people to take public their pain. So when the foreclosure crisis did hit, a lot of people were just mortified and embarrassed. They blamed themselves. They turned their their anger inward. They felt they felt like, oh, I'm the only one. And so it's through our relational organizing that we take that pain public first and foremost. And I say, oh, it's I lost my home. You also lost your home. It's not just me. And that's the that's the reorganizing that we do inside of a pre organized system that was really there. It was put in place to crush people and to take advantage of of ordinary people and keep people separated and isolated. And so the way first and foremost that you get people to have the courage to act is you say, wow, that happened to me, too, or that happened to you as well. That's the first and saying saying, no, I'm not alone in this first and foremost. And then and then you build some power around that and help and figure out what do people want to act on and what are they angry about. The person who understands this or understood this best and the best reading I've ever done on this is Frederick Douglass, the limits of tyrants. So in our organization, I'm sure many of you have heard the power, concedes nothing without a demand and never will. But you should read the whole essay because it is a master class in all of what we're talking about today. And the the line that's also really important in this is he says the limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress and that, yes, the organized society that we're working inside of it starts first and foremost with that relational work so that people can even come to, oh, this actually isn't right. I want to do something about it. I am angry about this. I want to act on this and that that that's the organizing work that it takes.

Speaker 2 [00:51:23] So that sense of I'm not alone, I this is just private grief. This this this is a shared story that we can hold together and that the system is a recognition. It's not just my fault. There's a systemic problem here. We. I'm subject to you with these other people, and that's the trigger which breaks the consensus, there's a sense in which I'm with these people in this place and how are we going to act together to change this system, which I

up to that point, I mean, in the subprime lending issue, if it's just my individual problem, then I'm somehow giving consent to the system and I'm defined. I'm letting the system define the terms and conditions of my action. I lose my home. I've got to pay back the debt. Whereas if I break consent and through hearing these other stories and recognizing there's a community of people here, we can act together. It's we're defining the reality. This is wrong and we're going to act together to change it. And it's the system which needs to change, not me. And I think that's really key in all social movement organizing work. It's what how was how do we get people to see that there's a systemic structural problem here or institutional process problem rather than the kind of the way the system is set up to individualize people better? You're right. I think that the breaking consent is a key, key, key element to this. So do I mean just in relation to that? Because obviously, one of the ways you want to go is and as you mentioned, Frederick Douglass and then looking forwards and like the civil rights movement, do you think there's ever a place for civil disobedience in community organizing work? It hasn't tended to move in that direction. Other forms of direct action do. What's your what's your feeling about that, Kathleen? You know, 20 Sandy.

Speaker 3 [00:53:20] So I'm of the mind in the belief that all of our organizing is civil disobedience down to the very act of the relational meeting and down to the very act of going back to doing relational meetings is an incredibly beautiful, subversive act of civil disobedience that is radical. And in a world where dominant power keeps us apart in order to maintain the status quo, I think every single thing that we do is about civil disobedience.

Speaker 2 [00:53:52] I think it's wonderfully put. I think the because it's a it's a deeper form of civil disobedience. It's a it's a refusal to let the basic structures of it's not you know, I'm going to act against this law by sitting at a lunch counter, which is very significant, an important act. It's that sense of I'm not going to be defined by the basic structures of our society which says you are just alone. It's just you you can't act. Your acted upon the world as it is is defined. And the reality that can't be change other than the change that the state of the market generate. And I think that that act of building relationship with others, building power, saying we can change, we can move from the world that is to the world as it should be. And I think it's beautifully put

Speaker 4 [00:54:44] said yes, Kathleen really did a great job that when you ask the question Luke I thought what you were getting at was civil disobedience that might result in being arrested and possibly jailed. Well, let me make a couple of quick comments to follow up on what Kathleen said. Alinsky in all the years that he organized and employed a lot of tough tactics. Now, one person that I am aware of, not one citizen person, is part of the organizing effort ever was arrested and went to jail. And Alinsky was very conscious of this because and this is this is under the heading of doing things inside the experience of your own people. He felt that most people, whether middle class, working class or poor, did not really want to be arrested and put in a jail. It just simply said we don't particularly aspire to he has Thoreau and other people, but the civil rights stuff in the South uses trailing to good, good effect. But Alinsky thought for the vast majority of people, that's not what would help build the organization. And yet, as Kathleen just said, a lot of Alinsky actions were clearly not civil in the usual sense of the term. They were pickets of of African-Americans who were protesting housing discrimination by a slumlord owner who lived in an all white neighborhood. And so the action was to have all African-Americans. This is back in the 60s picket in front of this slum owner's house. It is all white neighborhood saying, did you know that? Mr. Brown, who lives here, is a slumlord owner, and it was all perfectly legal, the police were alerted beforehand that there were deep pockets and it was meant to

embarrass the slumlord and to get his neighbors to say, we don't care what the issue is, we want these picketers out of our neighborhood. You do what you can to you have to do to do this. So it's a good example of doing something within the law that was clearly uncivil in any meaningful sense of the term, but along the lines of what Kathleen has said as well.

Speaker 2 [00:57:18] Yeah, I mean, I think that that one of the other issues for for Alinsky and more broadly was, you know, most working people, a the question of jail time goes on your record. Is that going to affect your employment? And that's just very real economic costs to that which have to be considered. He was kind of conscious of that. And then a lot of the kind of civil disobedience work at the 60s is, you know, you witnessed firsthand hand study that was done by young people. You know, they weren't having to go to pick up kids from school. They wouldn't have to look after, you know, the mother, the grandmother, whoever was stuck at home. There was a whole set of broader obligations that the kind of jail time or those kind of highly disruptive tactics could generate, they just weren't socially in a place to take that up. And so there was an alertness of how do you do disruptive tactics that also paid attention to the the actual conditions that people had to make a life through as well, which which I think is is a key. People can sense social movements because that can be a kind of snottiness about this. But I think actually there's a there's a tension to the reality of how people are making a life and that kind of other obligations and commitments is is actually needs to be a kind of accounted for in these kinds of elements. I mean, talk talking about that, then, you know, obviously at the time that the common ground campaign was going, you had Occupy Wall Street in many ways addressing the same kind of world of this economic crisis and the plutocracy and the kind of dominance of finance capitalism. How would you contrast your use of direct action with kind of what they were doing and any broader reflections you have, Kathleen, on this kind of contrast between Common Ground's kind of approach and some of like Occupy Wall Street?

Speaker 3 [00:59:07] Yeah, so I think along these lines and the reason I wanted to bring it back to power and the reason I bring it back to. The need to really understand how the world around you is organized and then you you either choose to act in that or not, is because a lot of organizing I see even the way that sort of we think about even looking at the words civil disobedience, a lot of organizing is unfortunately reenactment, which frustrates me quite a bit because we're not teaching these universals of and that's that's what I see as my job as an organizer is to teach the universals. And then within the particular context, which is different from the 60s, which is different from the Alinsky era. How do you break consent? How do you act? How do you think creatively rather than reenact this thing like like somehow there's a prescription going forward. And so I see a lot of organizing is simply a reenactment, which just doesn't it doesn't actually work. And so I do remember meeting with Occupy Wall Street and they simply told me, yes, oh, one of the things that we did is we marched around the empty AI Smith building, the old car company, because it was owned by Bank of America. And I was like, was anybody from Bank of America that there was there a target, was there anyone? And there wasn't. And I'm not blaming Occupy Wall Street, you know, and I think and we could get into a much larger conversation about the connection between protest and power organizing. I think Occupy Wall Street was a great example of large scale public protest, which which really all that does is it it shifts public opinion. It shines a very broad light. It shifted the conversation nationally in a way that was helpful. When you're building a power organization, when people think it's their fault to be able to see a large protest movement that says it's not your fault, it's the big banks does help. At the end of the day, though, there's got to be a power organization that can get to the table, get recognition, negotiate a deal, make a deal, and then keep a deal. And public protest and public shifting of opinion

is it only does so much. And then you you have to have a power organization that can get to the table and make something happen. And that's what I saw common ground do. And a lot of our conversation was today, it was about you have to be able to build that power, do it over time and actually cut a deal to make some real change. And that that takes the power organization. And the last thing I'll say is it's not, again, when we look at the world and how it's organized, it is organized by dominant power. And so I think a lot of the reasons why there's a lot of organizing reenactment is because dominant power has co-opted these stories. And and and there's a terrible there's terrible education out there for people. And that's that's I view that is quite frankly, my role as an organizer is to help bring people back and then figure out what's happening in my context and then how to how to fight in a way that's not reenactment, but it's really about power and making something happen.

Speaker 2 [01:02:34] No, I think that's right. So I've often said there's a I love your term reenactment that I sometimes call it kind of it's either just political theater in the worst sense of that, or it's a kind of politics is therapy. I feel I've done something, you know, I've got arrested in this kind of tokenistic way. Nothing's really happened. I'm released. There's no charge. You know, power can completely absorb that. And there's no real effective change. It's not linked up to any effective change. But somehow I feel I've stuck it to the man by going on this protest. And it's much more to do with how it makes me feel and the kind of compensations of protest rather than protest as part of a broader strategy for change. And that links up. But yeah, so I think that's a key, key kind of element, that the reduction of certain kinds of direct action and tactics to becoming merely symbolic. I mean, obviously the symbolic is very key to a lot of this, but it's when they're just simply symbolic, it's just reduced to the symbolic is problematic.

Speaker 3 [01:03:41] I'm of the mind that this all happens again in a broader ecosystem, which is why I'm again going back to you have to understand how things are already pre organized. And I think our work happens inside of a of a larger change ecosystem. For example, Massachusetts and GIOE, Greater Boston Interfaith Organization was integral in passing in twenty eighteen statewide landmark criminal justice reform. I really, truly do not believe that that would have happened in Massachusetts if it were not for Black Lives Matter and the protest shift in public opinion this year. We just passed Landmark Police Accountability and Reform in Massachusetts. GBIF is a power organization that has this depth of power and depth of relationships. We would not have been able to do that if it not if it were not for the protests in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, a lot, Aubrey and others. Right. But it takes a power organization to build on that and make that happen. So I view these things as a critical they're critically connected and very, very important and oftentimes dismissed by the kinds of organizations, sometimes by the ATF,

Speaker 2 [01:04:56] to be frank. I mean, obviously touched on here a little bit, but want to kind of turn the focus away from common ground and think, man, you've made this very important point, Kathleen, about how the world is organized and how dominant power organize. So it's not just those engaged in democratic change or using strategy and tactics. The those who already have power use strategy and tactics to keep power and refuse change, resist change and undermine those acting against them. And some of the kind of classic. Referred to as putting under the heading of the seven D deflection, delaying, deceiving, denying, discrediting and destroying. And Kathleen, you mentioned another which is coopting. Did you encounter any of these in relation to the banks?

Speaker 3 [01:05:47] Oh, yeah. It was funny when we started meeting with all of the banks and we ended up engaging with five of the largest banks in the world. We were like, did

they all go to the same school of thought, like they're all acting the exact same? They were the nicest people they would send us the nicest people in the world. Oh, how are you? We love coming around. So great to meet you. It's so great to be here. It's wonderful. Which is very disarming for our leaders. Right. And it is it's strategic. It's their tactic. They're using tactics. And so we have to teach again what's happening in these meetings. I mean, there was an incredible story where Ali Gardner, who was my colleague and this was years after the fight with the banks, but a lot of the leaders had learned a great deal and they were trying to deal with a home that was owned by Bank of America. And they had this meeting at Saint Katharine Drexel. They wanted to get the home donated to actually be, in fact, rehabbed. And they demanded a meeting with with Bank of America. We had a decent relationship, but they still pulled stuff like this. So they showed up and they brought this big tray of popcorn and said, oh, we're so happy to be with you. Here's this big tray of popcorn. Isn't this so nice? And it's just the most insulting, strange thing. But once you start to teach people in these actions and that's why going into action and then evaluating and learning is so important, you learn each time how to break consent. And this was again years afterwards after the leaders have been through many meetings with the banks. They were able to see this, smell it out and then and then break consent in a much more in a much stronger, confident way and simply stare at the popcorn and say, no, we're not here to eat your popcorn. No, thank you. And simply breaking consent can be and that's that's an act of civil disobedience as well as simply saying, no, I'm not going to eat the tree you brought for me. It's a very powerful act, and so, yes, they follow a lot of the same strategies, they think about us, they think about our interests, how to help or hurt us, you know, go after us, go after our clergy, our member congregations at worst, to hurt our self self-interest or at best, be super nice. Nice. And try to put us up to. Help our self interest, so to speak.

Speaker 2 [01:08:29] Just I just don't know the particularly when I was doing some organizing work in London around the city of London, which is a huge corporation of city London, it's kind of huge power in London, which has a massive PR department to keep itself out of the headlines and out of the news that I learned through that always wants to render itself in real power. I want to read themselves invisible. They don't want PR. But one of the things they we had this meeting with them and they'd got all these banks together and they sent all their corporate responsibility people. And because this was a corporate responsibility, it was their kind of philanthropic. And there was all sorts of things about, you know, how can we give a grant to do this? And and I was like, this is just cooption, kind of like there. And it was immediately a sidelining over to the philanthropic side of things. No, we're trying to get you to take responsibility for the irresponsible lending practices that you're engaged in and supported by, you know, the broader city of London kind of framework. And so that there was a classic case of deflection. This is the social problem. And we have people and we do all this volunteer kept on telling us about all their workers doing is volunteering. And it's like that's really not what we're here to discuss. That's irrelevant to proceedings. So Sandy just closes out any any

Speaker 1 [01:09:52] final reflections on the common ground campaign.

Speaker 4 [01:09:56] Common ground, really, for a young organization. It's still not much more than 10 years old now 12, 13 years old, really, because there's a ton of credit for changing part of the discussion on the foreclosure issue in Milwaukee and probably saving a large historic neighborhood in a Sherman Park from a much worse future. So all in all, it was a major accomplishment and a good example of community organizing at its best.

Speaker 2 [01:10:32] Very, very good. That's excellent. So, Kathleen and Sandy, thank you so much for your time. Thank you for being on the list and organize that podcast and this terrific conversation around strategy, tactics and action. That's been great to be with you today.

Unidentified [01:10:48] Thank you, Luke.

Speaker 2 [01:10:55] Thank you for joining me for this episode of the list

Speaker 1 [01:10:57] and organize our podcast in which I explored the relationship between tactics and strategy and direct action in organizing and how they work together to generate meaningful democratic change. This podcast is a collaboration between the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Keenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. As with other episodes, you can download readings directly relevant to this episode from the website. That's www.ormondcenter.com backslash listen-organize-act-podcast. Do sign up at the website for news about events and resources related to the podcast or to send me questions. For now, let me say goodbye and I hope join me next time as I continue this journey through the different elements of community organizing and how it embodies a distinctive vision of Democratic politics.