One such woman is domestic worker and organizer Bernadette Herrera, who is on a mission to build a grassroots, all volunteer, membership organization of Filipino domestic workers and caregivers in San Francisco. Herrera draws inspiration from the popular movement for National Democracy that she experienced in the Philippines. Throughout high school and college, she had worked at multiple retail and administrative jobs but her involvement in the struggle against drastic tuition fee increases got her elected president of the student council in 1984. It was during this struggle that Herrera began to recognize the fee increases as symptomatic of a deeper overall problem devastating the people of the Philippines.

“I would visit various barangay [farm] and learn from peasants how they work the land all day, then [give] at least half of all they harvest to the landlord,” she recalls. “They still have to pay for animals and the tools they rent to till the land. I also met workers on picket lines and heard how they work nonstop but cannot afford food for their family.”

Herrera went on to join the League of Filipino Students (LFS) and became a member of BAYAN, an alliance of more than a million members from over 1,000 organizations representing workers, peasants, students, women, church leaders, indigenous peoples, and professionals united in the struggle for national liberation and democracy in the Philippines. She participated in the People Power Revolution of 1983-86 that ousted the dictator Ferdinand Marcos and when President Corazon Aquino took office, the 23-year-old Herrera was appointed to the provincial board of Pampanga where for the next nine years, she helped people in the community bring their issues to the attention of the various government agencies. But overwhelming poverty coupled with a pressing need to provide for her sick parents, three children, and 11 siblings, compelled Herrera to embark on a road frequently travelled by Filipinos who leave their country in search of work. In 2000, she came to the United States on a visitor’s visa and never left, finding work cleaning homes and caring for the elderly in San Francisco. After a lifetime of organizing mass movements and being deeply involved in the lives of workers, students, and peasants in the Philippines, Herrera found herself thrust into a life of isolation and anonymity as a domestic worker in the U.S.—until she discovered the Filipino Community Center (FCC).

Grassroots Organizing

Herrera began to volunteer at the FCC in 2007, embracing its orientation towards supporting grassroots organizations as opposed to membership-based nonprofits—much like the all-volunteer popular movements in the Philippines that she had been involved with. When she was offered a job as organizer for FCC’s Workers Rights program, she gladly took it on but continued to work at cleaning houses.

The FCC’s main work is in providing services, Herrera points out. “There is a budget, but we never know for
how long,” she says. “That’s why non-profits need mass organizations where we can build lasting strength.”

Herrera points to the model employed by domestic workers in Hong Kong, where the service-oriented non-profit Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW) assists domestic workers with their housing, health care, and legal needs, and helps hook them up with grassroots mass organizations, such as United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-HK) and the Indonesian Asosiasi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia di Hong Kong (ATKI), which are committed to the long-term politicization of their members.

FCC also provides services to workers, women, and youth. And although it provides some staff support with the base-building work, most of it is led and housed in the grassroots organizations that work with FCC, such as ALAY (youth), babae (women), Samaka (mothers), and the newly forming Migrante (caregivers and other workers). Members of the groups take up campaigns, conscious of the fact that they are the leaders of their organizations, making decisions and running programs independent of the FCC.

The idea that grassroots movement-building should happen autonomously but in harmony with the work of nonprofit corporations or NGOs (non-governmental organizations) is commonplace in many countries outside the U.S. These movements are orientated towards sustaining themselves, not the nonprofits that support them. Service is Good but Organizing is Better

Some services, such as legal representation to stop a deportation, are absolutely necessary. But even this essential service is ultimately just a Band-aid that does not alleviate the need for a complete overhaul of the U.S. immigration system, which brutalizes and dehumanizes people.

The most direct path to fundamental change in policy is through large-scale organizing driven by the collective power of the most impacted people. It’s the will of the people, not the work of paid nonprofit employees, that’s the engine that powers the collective action of the group in any effective grassroots or volunteer-based organization.

The victories of the Civil Rights and Women’s Suffrage movements were certainly not led by nonprofit corporations funded by the 1%. A common analysis, a collective will, and unity in action were the key ingredients in those movements, which inspired millions. Without a proper analysis and political consciousness of the root cause of our suffering, and collective strategies to challenge it, we are no better off than a church choir or key club in effecting change. Without a will to organize and act, we might as well confine ourselves to academia.

Maria Poblet, executive director of Causa Justa::Just Cause (CJJC), believes that her organization has found a way to deal with the contradiction of functioning as a nonprofit corporation while actively applying certain political principles.

CJJC engages members in regular political education on a multiplicity of interconnected issues and advances strategy development rooted in the organization’s political vision—not the fundable priorities of the 1%—ensuring that capitalists, banks, and corporations are the main targets of their organizing campaigns. CJJC played a leading role within the Occupy movement to ensure that the issues of working and poor communities of color were at the center. Staff and members participated in Occupy general assemblies and helped organize key Occupy actions in the Bay Area with calls to ‘Foreclose on Wall Street West’. CJJC also helped with tactics, such as taking over foreclosed properties and using them to provide housing, libraries, workshops, and children’s activities to the community.

In Poblet’s opinion: “Given the current state of the movement and the work that needs to get done in this country, having a nonprofit is not so limiting that it should be abandoned as a tactic.”

“Eventually, when the revolutionary spirit and movement in the country get much further along, nonprofits will reach the limits of their usefulness and many people
will move to other forms of organization to do the work of creating change,” she adds.

In building this “revolutionary spirit and movement” we can hone the organizational tactics, such as those outlined by Herrera, to help communities strengthen their sense of analysis, will and action, unconstrained by the nonprofit corporation form.

**The Rise of the Nonprofit Corporation**

The rise of charitable giving as a way for multimillionaire robber barons like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie to defend their income from taxes began in the early 20th century. Hyped by financial magazines as “tax shelter tools,” foundations for charitable giving became all the rage, forming at the rate of 1,200 per year by the early 1960s. The foundations triggered a rise in the number of nonprofit corporations being set up, eager to accept their tax-deductible donations. Soon, funds that might have been paid to the government as taxes, were it not for the exemptions, began trickling back but with strings attached. Membership-based organizing around root causes was not funded and there were severe restrictions on political lobbying and support for candidates. (*The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, edited by the INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence collective is an excellent resource for a more in-depth look at the issue.)

Some nonprofits, such as CJJC, have successfully exploited the nonprofit corporation format to build a dues-paying membership, develop base leadership, and win life changing improvements in their communities. But even as we dream about a movement that truly challenges the root causes of the problems challenging our communities, we can’t help wondering if the political will to organize around that purpose will continue in the absence of funding.

**Building a Movement Outside the Nonprofit**

The vision of a movement that moves us all is both irresistible and palpable but we know that it cannot be done to scale within the confines of the nonprofit structure alone. It is time to set aside the mutual distrust between nonprofits and grassroots membership organizations and work instead towards a goal of harmonizing and maximizing the strengths of both to create new organizational forms to help us achieve our vision.

We can begin by rising above our egos—which makes each of us view our particular organization as the sole authority on an issue or the comprehensive voice of a community or movement—and focusing instead on exchanging lessons learnt, sharing assessments and strategy, and moving closer towards a unity of analysis. When we do, we will become an irresistible power with the capacity to grow and nurture the type of mass movement we need. Or as W.E.B. DuBois put it, we will be the “great song… the loveliest thing born this side the seas.” DuBois, of course, was talking about the coming of freedom for the Black slaves, when he said: “It was a new song and its deep and plaintive beauty, its great cadences and wild appeal wailed, throbbed and thundered on the world’s ear with a message seldom voiced by man.” But the words still resonate apropos the mass movement we hope to build.

**Endnotes**

4. <bayan.ph/site/about/>
7. Ibid., pp.5.
Reimagine Planning Jobs Women & Economic Justice Transit

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