

WORKPLACE LEAVE IN A MOVEMENT BUILDING CONTEXT

How to Win the Strong Policies that Create Equity for Everyone

MOVEMENT MOMENTUM

There is growing momentum in states and communities across the country to support workers and families by passing or enhancing workplace leave policies—from expanding unpaid family and medical leave to enacting family and medical leave insurance and paid sick days. In 2014 alone, campaign victories resulted in a fivefold increase in the number of new workers who will be able to access paid sick leave by law—that’s more than 9.5 million workers. As a result of change won over the past decade, nearly 27 million people across the country have gained new access to paid sick days and paid family leave insurance!

These campaigns are a testament to the power of organizing and worker-centered campaign strategies as well as to diverse and robust coalition building. They have the potential to advance a broad vision of justice

and the power of collective action, and to lay the groundwork for future wins.

In the fall of 2014, organizational leaders from work-family, LGBTQ, labor, and reproductive justice organizations explored workplace leave campaigns from a movement building perspective. We understand that workplace leave campaigns are just one part of the equation when it comes to advancing economic justice. But we believe that looking at workplace leave campaigns in a movement building context will reveal lessons that can be applied to all types of justice campaigns. We hope this document will spark further thinking at the local, state, and national levels so that an increasing number of campaigns will embody a movement building approach to win the strongest possible policies that create equity for everyone.

WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?

Workplace leave victories provide tangible benefits to workers and families. Even with the string of wins, more than a third of pri-

vate sector workers have no paid sick time for personal or family health needs, and 88% of private-sector workers lack paid family leave

to bond with a new child or to care for a seriously ill family member. At their core, campaigns to provide workplace leave are about the people and the families who are most likely to struggle to make ends meet on a day-to-day basis. These policies disproportionately affect people of color, LGBTQ people, immigrants, and women.

However, in order for these victories to contribute to a broader movement for racial, gender, LGBTQ, and immigrant justice, we need to think beyond our immediate policy goals. Sometimes, our path to victory is too narrow to include all who need to be side by side with us for the long haul. When this happens, we not only sacrifice members of our communities that we seek to lift up, we lose the opportunity to build the broad and deep political power we need.

Every workplace leave campaign involves at least two arenas greater than the immediate reform: one, shifting power away from the corporate lobbyists and power structures re-

sponsible for these inequities through building collective political power by organizing workers; and two, building resilient communities that leave no one behind. Movement building campaigns create the potential for alliances between organizations and communities that haven't always worked in solidarity. These campaigns call for LGBTQ, labor, work-family, and reproductive justice advocates to work together, to intentionally integrate a racial equity focus, to amplify the leadership of women of color, and to challenge the anti-immigrant sentiments fomented by those who profit from division within our communities. In short, movement building campaigns ask organizers to build now the future we want to experience, in order to make that future possible.

Integrating the following principles or guideposts in our campaigns will build a stronger movement for change. This list does not encompass every strategic movement-building consideration, but it does reflect themes that resonate across past and current campaigns.

EXPAND THE DEFINITION OF FAMILY IN PUBLIC POLICY

One look around tells us that families are constantly evolving. Our communities define us and reflect our values, culture, and experiences. Our families take many forms, including blended families, single-parent families, LGBTQ families, chosen families, multigenerational families, and multinational families. Government and public policy should neither reward or punish families based on factors such as biological relationship and marital status, nor coerce particular family formations.

Workplace leave campaigns can expand the definition of family beyond current cultural and policy constraints. In the best-case scenario, we seek protections that allow workers to care for family members defined “by blood or affinity”—providing coverage that diverse families need. If the political landscape of a particular locale or state makes this an untenable option at the moment, we must work together to broaden family definitions beyond current precedent and to avoid exclud-

ing families that exist outside the parameters of the nuclear family, including heterosexual marriage, while laying the basis for winning the desired definition in the future.

Luckily, work-family, labor, reproductive justice, and LGBTQ advocates have been crafting expansive family definition models that we can draw from as we develop policy proposals.¹

LAY THE GROUNDWORK FOR UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO HUMAN RIGHTS

Sometimes, economic justice campaigns leverage strategies and messages that unintentionally reinforce the idea that only work in the formal economy makes us worthy of access to human rights, such as healthcare or the ability to take care of family members without sacrificing financial security. In the language of politicians and political pundits, this message often starts with, “People who work full-time shouldn’t live in poverty.”

This narrative distinguishes the “deserving” from the “undeserving” in ways that ultimately do not serve us. Many people are shut out of the formal economy and the traditional employer/employee relationship. Whether through explicit exclusions based on past arrest record or felony convictions, discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, family caregiving responsibilities, or immigration status, or any other form of conscious or unconscious bias, access to traditional workplaces is limited by systems of injustice. When this happens, people find ways to sustain themselves and their families through what is sometimes called the informal economy, the street economy or the survival economy. Whether through bartering childcare for home repair or selling sex or cigarettes, there

are many ways in which people work hard to make ends meet outside what is traditionally described as “employment.”

Additionally, we are still struggling as a society to define work in ways that value *all* the work that builds our families and fuels our economy. Work that has been traditionally defined as women’s work—childcare, caregiving, domestic work—continues to be defined outside the formal economy. Even as gender norms evolve, women still carry out the vast majority of this work. The disconnect between recognizing caregiving as work and supporting caregivers to work in the formal economy is particularly felt by poor women, especially women of color. Furthermore, the overall absence of safe affordable childcare and elder care complicates the ability of caregivers and parents to work outside the home—and thus access workplace leave and multiple types of social insurance. Mothers receiving assistance under TANF face limitations in accessing education and training at the same time that their caregiving is not recognized as work. There are campaigns to break down these barriers, such as efforts around the country to pass Domestic Workers Bills of Rights that help domestic workers—who are primarily women of color and immigrant women—to

receive labor protections in the formal economy. However, the gendered definition of work is far from losing its potency.

Finally, the nature of the workforce continues to evolve in the U.S. as owners seek new ways to skirt accountability to workers through business models such as using independent contractors or forcing part-time work. In the vast majority of these situations, workers lack access to collective bargaining and historic labor protections don't apply, leaving these "hard workers" outside the frame of the "deserving worker."

Our campaign strategies, tactics, and messages can lay the groundwork for universal access to basic labor standards and fair work conditions and protections, as well as to the social safety net and supports outside of the employer/employee relationship without reinforcing access based on formal employment. We can disrupt the dominant paradigm of "deserving and undeserving" in multiple ways, including by addressing the next three movement-building considerations.

ADDRESS INTERSECTIONS OF OPPRESSION, WHAT'S AT STAKE

There are opportunities throughout our campaigns to articulate the intersections between worker exploitation and collaborating systems of oppression resulting in inequitable outcomes driven by factors like race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and immigration status. Every building block of a campaign—from research to political education to policy solutions—can acknowledge and amplify disproportionate outcomes as part of the problem we are trying to solve.

We must recognize each part of our community and value members of our communities as "whole people" with unique and varied identities—so that a Black queer worker raising her children in the South doesn't need to leave her race, sexual orientation, or motherhood at the door and take on the sole identity of "worker." When we recognize whole people with all of their identities and experiences of exclusion and exploitation, our campaigns

can identify specific solutions for each community that will achieve our overarching goal of justice for all workers. While we may begin with a "universal" outcome (e.g., workers have access to workplace leave policies that allow them to adequately take time to care for themselves and their families), the leadership of whole workers will help us identify the "targeted" solutions we need to prioritize in order to address the range of barriers and challenges specific workers face.²

In addition, when we build the skills of organizers and leaders to talk about systems of oppression and when we build solidarity across different experiences, we also build resiliency into our campaigns and communities, and greater awareness of what we stand to gain from removing every form of oppression. This resiliency and awareness protects us from our opposition's wedge strategies that seek to divide and conquer our base of support.

SUPPORT AND AMPLIFY THE LEADERSHIP OF THOSE MOST AFFECTED

Movement-building campaigns go straight to the heart of changing power relationships. Because of the intersecting systems of oppression, there are enumerable pressures and influences that result in many campaigns being carried out by women yet led by men or carried out by people of color and immigrants and led by white people.

Workplace leave campaigns in a movement-building context resist these pressures at every step along the way, even if polling or relatively powerful allies tell us otherwise. Investing in and resourcing the leadership of the workers who are disproportionately affected by inadequate workplace leave policies at all phases of our campaigns ensures that when we win the policy, we have also shifted the relations of power and laid the groundwork to take on further struggles together.

Women of color are uniquely impacted in these fights as they are over-represented in low-wage jobs with no workplace leave policies and they are highly likely to be responsible for caring for children and family members. Their experience and expertise is invaluable to understanding the problems workers face and ensuring that policy solutions are responsive and effective. Yet they face multiple barriers to stepping into leadership in campaigns. Movement-building campaigns can ensure that our structures, strategies, and resourcing address and overcome these barriers to amplify and support the leadership of women of color in powerful and visible positions.

BUILD LONG-TERM VALUES-BASED RELATIONSHIPS THAT WILL CONTINUE POST-CAMPAIGN

Groups have achieved workplace leave victories by leveraging resources and strengths of many partner organizations and allied movements. To turn these victories into long-term progressive power, these moments of coordination must evolve into ongoing relationships of collaboration and solidarity.

Long-term values-based relationships call for more than tactical alliances such as working together when it's easy and beneficial to both parties. Our movement-building rela-

tionships will force us to take risks that may be challenging in the short term but will be transformative in the long term.

The same principle that applies to supporting workers as "whole people" applies to building long-term values-based organizational relationships that recognize and value the various needs or priorities of member organizations and communities. For example, LGBTQ organizations can't and shouldn't be asked to leave liberation for LGBTQ people at the door when

supporting economic or racial justice issues. Nor should women of color-led reproductive justice organizations be asked or expected to leave access to abortion care and comprehensive immigration reform at the door when they work on economic justice issues. We can, however, take these opportunities to

strengthen the commitment of our base and leaders to our overarching values of equity, so that when we are asked to take a risk for work-family rights, labor protections, immigrant justice, LGBTQ equality, or reproductive health access, we are ready to move together as a movement for justice.

ENDNOTES

1. For more information on family definitions in workplace leave policies, contact Jared Make at A Better Balance: jmake@abetterbalance.org.
2. For more information about targeted universalism see Powell, J. A., Menendian, S., & Reece, J. (2009, March/April). The importance of targeted universalism. *Poverty & Race*.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

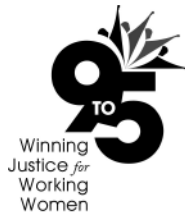
While these movement-building considerations may seem overwhelming, they don't have to be. The organizations that developed this document each have expertise in different aspects of this work and we are here to learn with you. Please be in touch.

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Supporting Organizations

- Coalition for Social Justice
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- Family Forward Oregon
- Movement Advancement Project
- National Center for Lesbian Rights
- National Partnership for Women and Families
- New Jersey Citizen Action
- New Jersey Time to Care Coalition



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