

WINNING THE WAR FOR GRASSROOTS EMPOWERMENT: BENEFITS OF BUILDING A PUBLIC POWERS MOVEMENT

By Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Khulda bat Sarah

Why would a faith-based or turf-based organizing project (already engaged in demanding campaigns) want to get involved in the business of transforming their metropolitan government? Why would they want to create a lower tier of directly democratic neighborhood governments with public powers? The effort could take years, even decades to accomplish, and only the most compelling arguments could justify such a commitment of resources, time, energy, and spirit.

We have presented many of those arguments in four previous articles published in *Social Policy*.¹ We won't review them here, except to say: The moment is now. The need to build institutional power wielded directly by the grassroots citizenry is pressing relentlessly.² Without *countervailing institutional power* vested in the demos, it's virtually certain the imbalance of power at the heart of the country's devastating economic, political, and social inequality will go unchecked and worsen. The reason is not complicated: corporate and billionaire money corrupts every level of representative government. But money doesn't have the same effect on directly democratic governments, because there are no representatives—just the people acting directly in their own self-defined interest.

In those previous articles, we explored in detail the political and economic feasibility of directly democratic metropolitan government through the creation of a lower tier of neighborhood governments, popular assemblies based on the New England model of "open" town government. We suggested the vanguard role of faith-based organizing in such a movement. We also believe turf-based organizing can fill an essential role.

We focus here on the inestimable value of directly democratic public powers in responding to local, regional, and statewide problems and issues. The need to expand opportunities to address them is assuming drastically greater importance in the Trump era. The problems and issues we have in mind include: police malpractice and lack of accountability,³ unsustainable energy-generation,⁴ oppressive immigration policies and practices, environmental exploitation, inadequate or non-existent local control of commercial and industrial development, voter-suppression, Fourth Estate delegit-

imization, absence of low-cost entry-portal health services, obstacles to small-scale public enterprise, unaffordable cable and Wi-Fi, and more. We have selected a limited number of examples to suggest the relevance of public powers to some of the most significant problems and issues.

A neighborhood government has the unique potential to sustain citizen action permanently in its own self-defined interest. Its acquisition of public powers to legislate, tax, appropriate public funds, take by eminent domain, police, market tax-free bonds, and more, even given limited scope, when exercised by a directly democratic assembly, can significantly enhance the persistence and effectiveness of any grassroots solution strategy or campaign. Neighborhood governments that represent most of the metropolitan population may also carry on campaigns to promote regional and state-level action, such as adopting tax policies that can reduce economic inequality.⁵ Problems and issues will change over time, but the benefits of directly democratic exercise of public powers are timeless.⁶

While the practical means for neighborhoods to acquire limited grants of public powers and become authentic governments vary from state to state, city charter amendment via popular ballot initiative is a commonly available method.⁷ And initiative campaigns are certainly not beyond the potential power of a coalition of faith-based and neighborhood-based organizations, even in a city the size of Los Angeles.

Policing

The failures of urban policing are well-documented, including hundreds of deaths of unarmed citizens of color by police patrols assigned to inner-city neighborhoods and to cities in which minorities comprise the majority.⁸ Usually, the officers assigned to these activities are not minorities themselves and reside elsewhere, mostly in suburbs. Evidence of noteworthy racist attitudes, policies, and practices has been forthcoming for decades from a variety of commissions, academic studies, citizen testimony, and video recordings. Chicago is a recent and egregious example⁹ in a long history of police malpractice extending from coast to coast and

border to border, and to many cities in between, including Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Miami, Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit, and of course Ferguson, Missouri.¹⁰

The prospects for remedying police malpractice have diminished significantly with the appointment of Jeff Sessions as U.S. Attorney General. Mr. Sessions has made it clear that the Department of Justice will avoid actions that “vilify the police” and have a “demoralizing” effect on them. The predictable effect will be the “undermining and obstruction” of achieving police reform through consent decrees.¹¹ More frightening, however, is Mr. Sessions support for resuming militarization of local police forces. Although it’s unclear at the time of this writing whether Mr. Sessions will remain as AG for the duration of the Trump administration, we imagine that his replacement would continue to promote retrograde and regressive police practices.

Much of police malpractice and unaccountability reflects patrol activities directed by centrally run, bureaucratic departments, which do not respond to the needs of politically powerless minorities. However, there is a “public powers” strategy to deal with this problem. It has been studied and developed by academics and professional planners for decades, although it has not been implemented because it has not been acceptable to most city councils.¹² Well-documented studies have confirmed that in several respects, policing on a smaller scale “can provide higher levels of service than larger departments.”¹³ Functions such as maintenance of public order, including traffic control, mediation of disputes, suppression of low-level street crime, and responding to juvenile delinquency can be managed effectively by police employed by neighborhood jurisdictions of 5,000 to 10,000 residents, with operational links to higher levels of policing.

Our vision of neighborhood-based, directly democratic exercise of public powers in urban policing offers progressive possibilities for policies and practices that reflect the diversity of urban cultures and constituencies as well as specific organizational objectives.

Energy

It’s hardly news that progressive forces have been fighting against a highly resourced, rear-guard action waged by the carbon-based energy industries. These industries have taken every political, policy, and media opportunity to undermine the development of renewable energy sources and distribution systems. An outrageous example was the attempt to tax homeowners for leased solar panels in Arizona.

The question of how to finance solar installations hinges in part on whether we regard energy as a luxury or a necessity, and thus whether we should treat it as a private “profit center” or as a government-regulated essential service, much as we do with other utilities, such as electricity, gas, and telephone. The ideological bias against government-operated enterprise does not extend to public utilities generally. The City of Los Angeles, for example, operates the Department of Water & Power. But public operation of utilities, when a monopoly, are not necessarily the most efficient or eco-

nomical. Moreover, their vertical integration requires that one size fits all consumers, whatever the single source of power may be, and regardless of whether it accommodates the varied preferences of diverse urban neighborhoods.

Neighborhood-based solar utilities are an alternative. Such an approach to solar power generation would allow residents to save on electricity bills,¹⁴ reduce coal burning which would help curtail asthma epidemics, and reduce CO2 emissions.¹⁵ Of course, it would also give citizens directly democratic control of their own energy utility.

We can enhance the potential for successfully implementing and sustaining neighborhood-based solar power generation by the directly democratic exercise of the public powers to tax, to exercise eminent domain, and to market tax-free bonds.

There is yet another potential benefit of bringing solar energy generation under directly democratic control of neighborhoods. The public management of what often is a matter of private enterprise creates the possibility of a directly democratic neighborhood assembly hiring and training its own residents for the technical and managerial positions needed to operate the utility.

Immigration

One of the most troubling aspects of the Trump administration is its immigration initiatives. We need not review them here, except to acknowledge that they bring catastrophic consequences into the lives of *millions* of law-abiding and productive immigrants. The responses of many public and private organizations to minimize the potential harm of reactionary immigration policies and practices are encouraging, but we are also aware that these responses are not likely to stop the Trump onslaught. The tensions associated with immigration are not peculiar to any specific era. In effect, they remain unresolved or “uncured.” They repeatedly emerge in the political life of the nation.

Our question: what more might metropolitan governments do to ameliorate the threat to undocumented immigrants? There are at least two possibilities: (1) an upper-tier or metropolitan governing body, responding to the demands of neighborhood assemblies, might take more progressive action, as is already happening in several cities and counties, including the City of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County;¹⁶ and (2) neighborhood governments themselves, using their public powers, might well respond more effectively with enlightened policing, entry-level health services, and other supports.

Unlike centrally directed patrol police who function at best as an enlightened occupying force, the positioning of indigenous police, who are well-grounded in face-to-face relationships (both with citizens and staff of service organizations), allows them to divert individuals away from the criminal justice system when there is no necessity for criminal justice involvement. They are in a much better position to act as gatekeepers to neighborhood-based human services, private enterprise employment, and social supports. And, of course, this

approach offers a far better prospect of keeping immigrant families intact, healthy, and economically productive.

Health Care

At the time of this writing, the Affordable Care Act (ACA—Obamacare) is significantly less threatened by President Trump and the Republican majorities in the House and Senate. By the time of this article's publication, complications in replacing the ACA may have permanently derailed its repeal, forced its redesign, or (most unlikely) repeal-legislation may have passed in Congress and become law by Trump's signature.

Whichever of these scenarios, or some other, eventuates, millions of undocumented immigrants and economically marginal citizens will continue to be without preventative and diagnostic health care. Two of the main obstacles are geography and economics. For many, access to non-emergency health care is nonexistent because it requires lengthy trips by public transportation or high out-of-pocket fees.

What's most shocking about the deficiencies of the U.S. health care system is their durability; very little will have changed for most low-income citizens over the last 40 years if Congress repeals the ACA or it's otherwise undermined.¹⁷ Withal, the roots of the U.S. health care crisis, now a half-century old, are largely unchanged. Entrenched structural interests—notably insurance companies, the pharmaceutical industry, the medical equipment and appliance manufacturers, major hospital systems, and organized physicians—pose the main barriers to single-payer reform. They promote their interests by high-powered lobbying, by securing key appointments on government panels and commissions, and by dominating the sponsorship of hospital and medical school professionals that serve as consultants and media experts.

The upshot of profit-driven health care is that the most vulnerable populations rely disproportionately on one of the highest cost-centers of the system—the emergency room, leaving all lesser maladies and injuries to fester until they reach a crisis stage and require high-cost intervention. We estimate that approximately 20 percent of low-income citizens rely on emergency rooms for *regular* medical care.¹⁸

Unfortunately, the strategic visions and plans to date for introducing neighborhood-based health care have invariably been top-down schemes, imposed on the low-income citizenry, although occasionally with their “advisory input.”¹⁹ The idea that those same citizens could act through their own neighborhood assemblies—directly wielding public powers to finance and administer entry-level health care services—is entirely beyond institutional healthcare planners' imagination. Their proposals, well-intentioned and somewhat progressive, are nonetheless unrealistic. They are not going

to attract the public and private support, including from health-care insurers, necessary to scale up sufficiently to meet the overall need.

Fixing this systemic malfunction can be achieved by operating neighborhood-based health care centers staffed by nurse practitioners.²⁰ There is no doubt that neighborhood-based outpatient and outreach health care services can have a substantial positive effect on delivering health care.²¹ Local neighborhood centers can serve approximately three-quarters of all day-to-day health complaints and needs for prevention and education services, while simultaneously operating as economical screening and entry-portals into more sophisticated and costly testing and treatment.²² There is no insurmountable medical or legal obstacle to neighborhood jurisdictions with public powers operating such decentralized health care centers.²³

Conclusion

It's not surprising if experienced organizers and network consultants view as speculative the advantages we have enumerated here for neighborhood-based, directly democratic public powers. In effect, they might well believe we are proposing that progressive faith-based and neighborhood-based organizing projects make extraordinary investments in this strategic vision without any guarantee of the ultimate payoff. It's true, there are no guarantees.

We note, however, that in its early days much the same must have been true about investing in the incipient labor movement and the organizing of union locals. Much the same must have been true about the Basque investment in the cooperative structure as a means of grassroots empowerment. Much the same must have been true when sowing the first seeds of the civil rights movement.

Nothing short of an historic grassroots movement can begin to bring the citizenry into full, directly democratic participation in its own governance, which is imperative to rectify the imbalance of power that is poisoning American life. While the road to achieve such an extraordinary transformation will undoubtedly be long and demanding, we recognize the wisdom that, “anything worth doing is worth doing now.”²⁴ When Marshal Lyantey, a famous French colonial administrator in North Africa, was urging people to plant trees in a new city he was laying out, he was told it would take 150 years before the trees would give any shade. He replied, “all the more reason to do it today.”²⁵

What is *our* calling now? The time has surely come to give up our exclusive dedication to winning endless campaigns in a never-ending war. It's time to begin investing in a strategic vision for winning the half-century war for grassroots empowerment.

¹ See “Directly Democratic Metropolitan Government: Envisioning Beyond Oppression, Rebellion, and Reform,” *Social Policy* (Spring 2016) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/METRO_GOVT.pdf]; “Public Powers for the Commonweal: A Challenge to Faith-Based Organizing,” *Social Policy* (Winter 2015) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/PUBLIC_POWERS.pdf]; “Refocusing Our Organizing Vision,” *Social Policy* (Winter 2016) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/REFOCUSING_VISION.pdf]; and “The Blinding Rapture of Mobilization,” *Social Policy* (Spring 2017) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/MOBILIZATION_RAPTURE.pdf].

² To assess how far the United States has come from what in other times was the range of “normality,” see Henry A. Giroux, “Normalizing Trump’s Authoritarianism is Not an Option,” *Tikkun* (January 19, 2017) [<http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/normalizing-trumps-authoritarianism-is-not-an-option?print=yes>].

³ In a national poll, 72 percent of the officers said that “poorly performing officers are not held accountable” for bad behavior. See Rich Morin, et al., “Behind the Badge,” Pew Research Center (January 11, 2017) [<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/01/11/behind-the-badge/>].

⁴ The need for greater local control of energy-resource development exists currently in Los Angeles, which has more than one thousand oil wells, many of which are in “proximity ... to homes, playgrounds, and schools,” especially in lower-income neighborhoods of the city. The “city has permitted drilling without performing required environmental reviews...,” which the oil companies actively oppose. See: The Editorial Board, “Drilling and Dirty Air in Los Angeles,” *New York Times* (January 30, 2017).

⁵ See Elizabeth McNichol, “How State Tax Policies Can Stop Increasing Inequality and Start Reducing It,” Economic Policy Institute, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Washington, DC: December 15, 2016) (accessed at <http://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/12-15-16sfp.pdf>).

⁶ See Hannah Arendt, “The Revolutionary Tradition and its Lost Treasure,” in *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963, 1965), pp. 217-85.

⁷ For an illustrative state approach, see State of New York, Division of Local Government Services, “Revising City Charters in New York State” (1998), James A. Coon Local Government Technical Series [<https://dos.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/09/revising-city-charters.pdf>].

⁸ See “Unarmed black people were killed by police at 5x the rate of unarmed whites in 2015,” from Mapping Police Violence [<https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/unarmed/>]; for a current review of the data related to police violence and racial bias, see Kia Makarechi, “What the Data Really Says [sic] About Police and Racial Bias,” *Vanity Fair* (July 14, 2016) [www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/07/data-police-racial-bias]; and for what purports to be a listing of deaths caused by police, see “Mapping Police Violence” [<https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>].

⁹ Julie Bosman and Mitch Smith, “Chicago Police Routinely Trampled on Civil Rights, Justice Dept. Says,” *New York Times* (January 13, 2017).

¹⁰ Enumerated in Shaila Dewan and Richard A. Oppel Jr., “Efforts to Curb Police Abuses Have Mixed Record, and Uncertain Future,” *New York Times* (January 14, 2017).

¹¹ See Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Eric Lightblau, “Sweeping Federal Review Could Affect Consent Decrees Nationwide,” *New York Times* (April 3, 2017).

¹² City councils are loath to antagonize their police department brass by reassigning major police functions, such as patrolling, to neighborhood control. Such an initiative might predictably start a “revolt” in the police ranks, from top to bottom, which would be anathema to the council.

¹³ For a seminal study on this question, see Elinor Ostrom, et al., “Do We Really Want to Consolidate Urban Police Forces? A Reappraisal of Some Old Assertions,” *Public Administration Review*, 33(5):423-432 (September-October 1973), which concludes: “(1) small police departments can provide higher levels of service than larger departments, and (2) high degrees of specialization and professionalization are not required for effective police services. On the basis of this, we believe more serious attention should be paid to proposals for creating small jurisdictions within large cities to provide generalized patrol services while enhancing opportunities for community control. At the same time, a large-scale police jurisdiction in the same city may be needed to provide the more technical services which require specialization of personnel and equipment. Conceptualization [of] reform as *either total consolidation or total decentralization* may not lead to better police services in metropolitan areas. Conscious use of overlapping jurisdictions of varying sizes may be necessary to combine the advantages of both small and large scale” (p. 430).

¹⁴ See Useful Community Development, “Neighborhood Solar Solutions Could Be Cost Effective” (2017) [www.useful-community-development.org/neighborhood-solar.html]; and for additional perspective, see U.S. Department of Energy, “A Guide to Community Solar: Utility, Private, and Non-profit Project Development” (2010), [www.nrel.gov/docs/fy11osti/49930.pdf].

¹⁵ Arthur Waskow (office@theshalomcenter.org) proposed the latter two advantages as benefits of neighborhood-based cooperatives in his Shalom Center email broadcast, “From Solar Neighborhood Coops to a Sustainable Planet” (February 26, 2016).

¹⁶ See Melissa MacBride, “Measure Approved to Protect Los Angeles County Immigrants from Deportation,” ABC Eyewitness News [<http://abc7.com/news/measure-approved-to-protect-la-county-immigrants-from-deportation/1643329/>]; and Dakota Smith and Cindy Carcamo, “Responding to Trump, L.A. proposes \$10-million legal defense fund for immigrants facing deportation,” *Los Angeles Times* (December 19, 2016).

¹⁷ Robert R. Alford, in *Health Care Politics: Ideological and Interest Group Barriers to Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 129, conveys strikingly the situation as it existed decades ago.

¹⁸ For an example, see A. Feinberg, et al., “Launching a Neighborhood-Based Community Health Worker Initiative, Harlem Health Advocacy Partners (HHAP) Community Needs Assessment” (December 2015), A joint report by the NYU-CUNY Prevention Research Center, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, New York City Housing Authority, and Community Service Society [<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11142885/>].

¹⁹ For an example in this vein, see Jennifer E. DeVoe and Rachel Gold, “Community of Solution for the U.S. Health Care System: Lessons from the U.S. Educational System,” *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*, 26(3):323-26 (May-June 2013).

²⁰ See Andrea Kline Tilford, et al., “A Description of Nurse Practitioner Practice,” *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, 26(1):69-74 (2012) [www.medscape.com/viewarticle/757506_2]; and Nan Liu, et al., “A new model for nurse practitioner utilization in primary care: Increased efficiency and implications,” *Health Care Management Review* (January-March 2014) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256665728_A_new_model_for_nurse_practitioner_utilization_in_primary_care_Increased_efficiency_and_implications].

²¹ C.M. Brown, et al., “A neighborhood-based approach to population health in the pediatric medical home,” *Journal of Community Health*, 40(1):1-11 (February 2015).

²² See Medical Group Management Association, “NPP utilization in the future of US healthcare,” *MGMA Research & Analysis Report* (March 2014). The report cites David Gans (MSHA, FACMPE senior fellow) to note: “In primary care practices, they [NPPs] can provide 80 percent or more of services with equal or better patient satisfaction at a lower cost than a physician” (p. 15).

²³ See Maria Schiff, “The Role of Nurse Practitioners in Meeting Increasing Demand for Primary Care,” NGA Paper, National Governors Association (December 2012) [<https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/1212NursePractitionersPaper.pdf>].

²⁴ From Joseph Telushkin, *Rebbe* (New York: Harper Wave, 2014), p. 145.

²⁵ Paraphrase of remarks by John F. Kennedy in his address at UC Berkeley, March 23, 1962.