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Act Build Change

Collecting Our Dues

The purpose of this report is to challenge the popular belief that ordinary people can not organise their own money, **because they can.**

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Contents

01 Executive summary →

02 Introduction →

03 The problem with
our current system →

04 What we learnt →

05 Final reflections →

Executive Summary

In every major struggle that has won and grown – from the Civil Rights Movement to the Suffragettes, from farm workers to the trade union movement, from the church to the African National Congress – the movement has organised the money of its members. Not only grants and wealthy philanthropists. The backbone of these movements was the regular, ordinary members who paid dues to fund the work.

Mass based membership movements are prolific in the United States and South Africa. In the UK, however, our third sector was predominantly built from wealthy people's "largesse" rather than major modern struggles.

Our sector was born with roots of 19th century 'beneficence' of philanthropy, combined with the move to professionalised and less grassroots organisations from the 1980s onwards.

In this report, we argue the gap of organisations that are built from ordinary people's money, with some exceptions, such as trade unions and the religious congregations, is a fundamental block on the development of movement infrastructure in the UK.

We think that this limits our movements because:

- Most organisations' funding is too precarious to build the long term, focused efforts to effect lasting change in our country.
- Our movements agendas are often not owned by the people they belong to.
- Opportunities to learn how to organise money, a pillar of power, is withheld from ordinary people.
- Funder dynamics often limit an organisations' ability to be radical, especially when taking money from the state.
- Organisations can choose to not be accountable to how funding is allocated and strategized to the people they are for.
- It disempowers ordinary people creating a transactional, charity-based model rather than having important conversations about what it truly takes to achieve meaningful change.
- Organising becomes less transformative and more focused on achieving outputs for funders, rather than goals for members.

What we wanted to know is what we could do about it in our own organisations. This research is about learning from the generous time and reflections of those who do have a dues and membership system and why others who have chosen not to.

This report came from a place of curiosity - how are others organising their money? How do we have more conversations about money acknowledging money is tied up to value, shame, privilege, oppression? Can there be lessons we can share for other collectives involved in fights funders are not interested in supporting - beyond an ad hoc invite to a panel conversation?

It comes from a place of grief as we see so many incredible organisers burning out, collectives shutting down and radical work not being recognised for their efforts. It was written with a hope that things can be different.

Throughout our 23 conversations, we dove deep into topics such as membership rates, their impacts on the base, and the nature of the relationship between members and their respective organisations. We acknowledge that this is a challenging and complicated conversation, but we firmly believe that it is a necessary one. As we continue to learn and grow, we must recognize that money is a vital component of building collective power, and our research serves as a call to action towards that goal.

Introduction

This report is written by two community organisers. We work with ordinary people to come together across lines of difference to build the power they need, to change the issues that matter to them.

We decided to do this research because having done this work for a long time in other organisations, we have both birthed relatively new organisations, and we were thinking about how we could best set up membership.

We know that in every major struggle that has won and grown – from the Civil Rights Movement to the Suffragettes, from farm workers to the trade union movement, from faith institutions to the ANC – the movement has organised the money of its members.

Not only grants and trusts; not only individual wealthy philanthropists - the dues based, regular membership of ordinary people.

This learning was primarily for us, but we kept speaking to people wrestling with these questions too, who wanted to know answers to questions like...

- How do membership organisations work in the UK?
- What are the difficulties we should be aware of?
- How do people decide what dues they charged?
- How do people make meaning out of it? Are there rituals and celebrations to learn from?
- Does ordinary people paying change the relationship people had with the organisation?
- What were the impacts and implications of who joined such organisations?

This research is a love letter to the possibilities of what our movements could be. We believe solely chasing funder grant systems or contracts will not get us where we need to get to. We want to encourage people's organisations to think about how they organise their money and the stake that ordinary people get to play in the work that affects their lives.

We believe to organise our own money is not just for cashflow. It is so much more than that. It creates new opportunities to create a culture and infrastructure that can lead to winning transformative change owned by the people who have the biggest stake in its future.



→ [ACORN meeting](#) - Photo: ACORN Facebook Page

“We want to encourage people’s organisations to think about how they organise their money and the stake that ordinary people get to play in the work that affects their lives.”

If you're anything like us, you work or volunteer in the third sector in some form. You want to see change in our society, and you're under a lot of pressure right now.

- Maybe this report exists as a guilt inducing tab on your laptop or email in your inbox, where you thought “that looks interesting” and then left it for a few days or weeks.
- You probably have plenty on your plate just thinking about the work ahead of you, the work you need to get done, without spending time imagining the bigger picture.
- Maybe you're dealing with the aftermath of burnt-out and fragile teams from the pandemic.
- Maybe you're overwhelmed by thinking of the scale of the work ahead of us.
- Maybe you're looking at the hundreds of charities closing, unable to make ends meet.
- Maybe you're making ends meet but frustrated at the amount of work and energy it takes to raise enough money to do the work you really want to do.
- Maybe you're frustrated that there is never enough to do the work that would really transform the issue you're focused on.
- Maybe you're frustrated with the constant cliff edge of grant funding, and funders' changing priorities.

If so, this report is for you.

Plenty of organisations are doing well and achieving great successes at this moment. We've specifically written this report for any groups that consider themselves member organisations - organisations that see themselves as genuinely representing and being rooted in and built from a constituency of people, geography and/or issue.

Not all good organisations are that. There are some brilliant advocacy and service organisations that work on behalf of others very well, and we are grateful for. We wanted to explore organisations that claim to represent people. This is not about undermining great work or good funding; it is about learning from others about how we organise with people.

Mass based membership movements where ordinary people fund the work are prolific in the US and South Africa, but in the UK, the third sector was built from wealthy people's “kindness” instead of major struggles. This gap – with some exceptions, such as trade unions or faith based organisations – we think is a fundamental block on the development of movement infrastructure in the UK.

But how do we change it?

We've spent the last few months talking to scores of membership organisations about how they organise money. We want to thank all those organisations. We've anonymised them here, but this work and their perspectives as thinking partners does not go unrecognised (and we've left a list of recognition in the back). We also want to thank a funder, Lankelly Chase, and specifically Jenny Oppenheimer, for supporting us in asking this question.

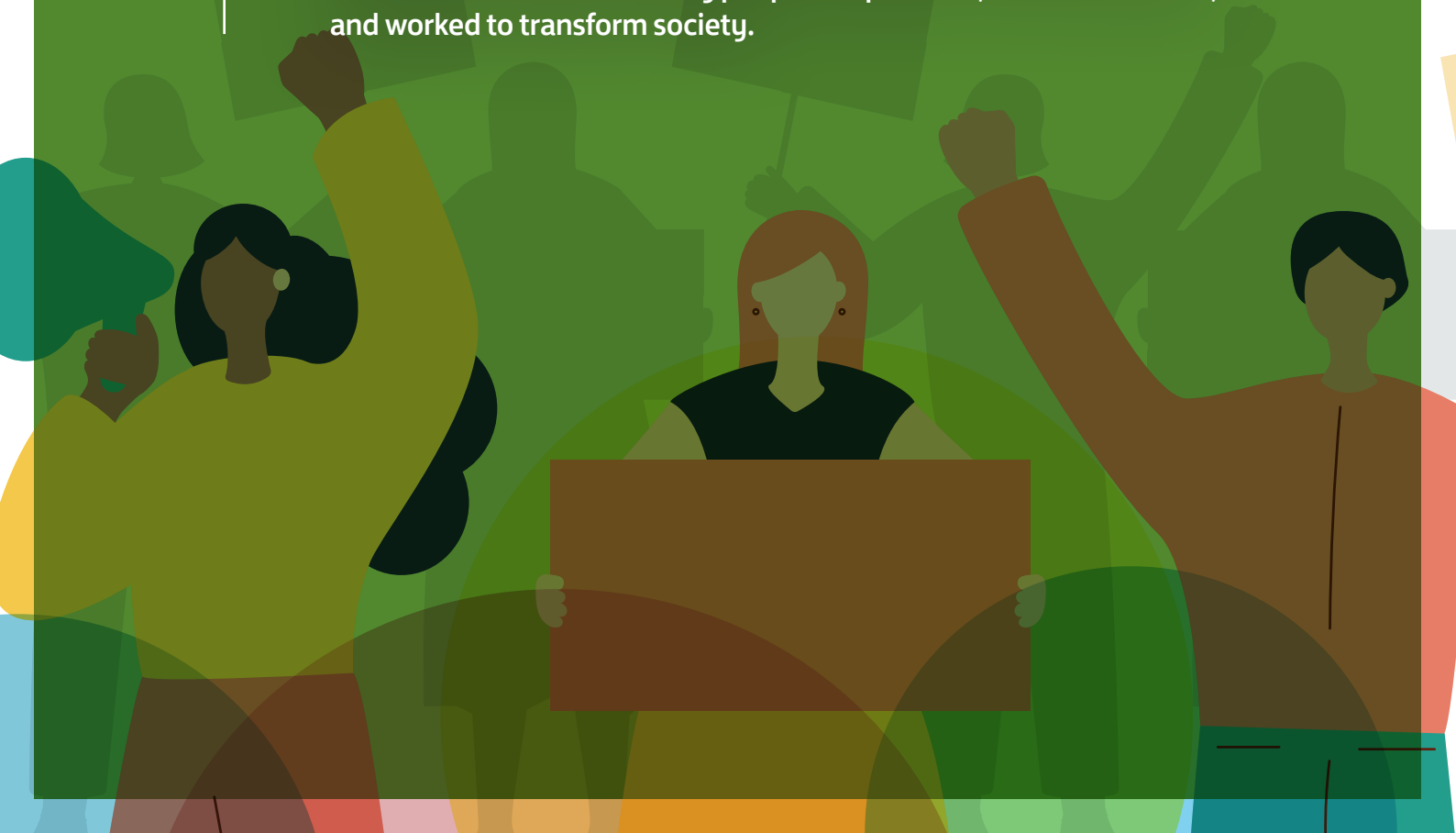
The problem with our current system

The third sector in the UK comes from a different place than in some other countries.

In South Africa or the US, for example, much of the infrastructure of the third sector came out of struggle. From people in major nationwide fights building organisations that they needed as they went.

Despite this, there have been movements that have been built out of ordinary people's experience and resources. From trade unions and other workers organisations, to the women's movement, to the gay rights movement, to racial justice and civil rights movements.

These were rooted in ordinary people's experience, built broad bases, and worked to transform society.



As a result, our nation experienced a spate of policy changes that transformed life, like an end to child labour, the institution of a maximum working week, access to abortion, women being able to have a job and bank account after marriage, the Race Relations Act and subsequent amendments that outlawed for the first time discrimination based on race, the end of the criminalisation of “homosexual acts” to name but a few.

After this spate of people’s movements, there was a change again - one that affected many countries, particularly but not exclusively in the global north. Groups that had started as grassroots groups, often in protest to the state, asked, ‘what’s next?’ Some, having won the argument for their need in the general public, became service organisations - often relying on funding from local authorities, the national state, or charitable donations.

Examples might be domestic abuse shelters. These started in people’s movements, committed to the root causes of an issue, but, now often operate with a much smaller staff devoted to political change. This change is represented in their funding too: most have moved from being financially supported by a political movement made up of many ordinary people into a service financially reliant on government. This creates tensions and makes it harder for them to be an effective force fighting or holding the government accountable.

“Domestic violence support services and refuges are continuing to face on-going cuts or threats of closure, as local authorities are failing to prioritise specialist services while attempting to mitigate budget cuts enforced by central government. Contracts for funding are being tendered, meaning that specialist voluntary services are forced to bid for the same funding as public and private sector services, despite scarcely having the time or staff available to do so. Funding contracts are only awarded on a short-term basis, leaving services under regular threat of imminent funding loss and closure.”

Sisters Uncut pg. 4

Others chose to become professionalised campaign organisations, removed from a large-scale grassroots base. We are not necessarily against professionalisation. There is real skill in campaigning that should be recognised as a career path. But the key change for many was that instead of there being a mass based movement making decisions and setting strategy, there is now a small group of people, often not with living experience of those they claim to represent, who make decisions. The members, if they exist, have small opportunities to contribute.

→ **Extinction Rebellion Protest**
- Photo: Stephanie Wong



As Fong, Naschek and Skopcol write:

“... nonprofit professionals who oversaw the “advocacy explosion” beginning the ‘60s and ‘70s, which changed the landscape of the civic universe in America. Traditional membership organisations up until that point were popularly rooted and “rivalled professional and business associations for influence in policy debates” They were “much more likely to involve less privileged participants” than contemporary associations..... “The nonprofit world created by the advocacy explosion is markedly more oligarchical. It is run by educated, upper-middle-class experts who engage in “politics” as a form of insider lobbying rather than mass mobilisation.

When they do interact with “membership” it is through mass mailings and fundraisers with issues narrowed to stand out among grant applicants and garner media attention. Indeed, their strategies are largely media-centric, focused more on propagating a dramatic and polarised “message” for which they find a constituency rather than advocating on behalf of an existing membership”... “with a paternalistic beneficence, they act on behalf of the masses, without necessarily stooping to take direction from them.”

NGO-ism, The politics of the third sector, by Benjamin Y. Fong and Melissa Naschek.

If we were to summarise the changes they are talking about, it might look like this:

The Model Skopcol, Fong & Naschek describe	What their research shows this results in:
Issues are picked by staff not members- sometimes with very basic ‘surveys’ to suggest members input.	A loosening of the ties between different groups and communities - and over time as a result, a national de-skilling of people’s ability to work together across lines of difference that results in increased polarisation.
‘Actions’ offered to members are small and predesigned - aka write to mp, sign a petition, and more likely to be stunts. Ordinary peoples’ skill set to win and work together are not deliberately built up.	The practice of politics becomes an elite experience left to a comparatively small number of professionals, hollowing out both the change we imagine making and the processes we use to get there.
The focus is to mobilise people who already agree with an issue not expand a base.	A loss of the power to win big change, because we stop actively building power, upskilling ordinary people and expanding constituencies. Instead they rely on mobilising a small group of people who already identify with topics and issues .
‘Members’ aren’t in relationship with shared set of trainings, values, funding, language and commitment to action. Instead the term is used as a shorthand to describe a group of people who all subscribe to a mailing list.	We can’t win as big - and we get caught much more in hurting each other and infighting - because we don’t have shared language, understanding or relationship.

Some of the organisations in the right hand column still take money from people - but as supporters rather than members. One is people funding an organisation to do some work they agree with - the other is funding a movement as part of building the collective power of a group.

These changes affect our movements' ability to build real power, because:

- Organisations' funding is too precarious to build the long term, focused work on change in this country.
- Our movements and their agendas are not really owned by the people they belong to.
- Learning and opportunities of how to organise money, a pillar of power, is withheld from ordinary people to be able to access it from themselves.
- It limits organisations' ability to be radical, because they have to not upset funders.
- It allows organisations to not be fully honest with their members, about funding, how decisions and strategy are being made, or anything else – because members can't close them down.
- It ultimately disempowers ordinary people, because we aren't honest about what it takes for movements to win – and for them to own them.

→ **Biscuits, cuppas, megaphones, listening campaign, Grapevine** - Photo: John Whitmore



What we learnt

We spoke to 23 people across 16 organisations.

These ranged from unions - the large and small, political parties, large movements, small collectives, charities, co-operatives and academics. Of these organisations, 5 took hard membership dues from ordinary people and 8 took some money.

Hard membership dues are not just a general call for donations but a system that makes clear what is expected and offered, including financial contribution, in exchange for membership.

Here is some of what we learnt.



Why charge?

For the organisations we interviewed who did have a dues based membership, charging was fundamental to building power. It was understood as being a core part of what it meant to win victories and to be able to have transparency and integrity to those you are working alongside.

“Our job is to win. You can’t get that without organised money.” - Participant

“It gives you independence if you are trying to build power. You are self-sufficient. In the early labour movement ordinary people built and created something from nothing. If you want to convince people you can’t talk to the poor about money - you are patronising people. If you want the right people in the room, the power to change things, you need money. A lot of charity work is intermediaries. It’s not the voices of the people. It is a bloated layer on the top absorbing a lot of money.” - Participant

“In the co-operative movement it is understood that you don’t get something for nothing. It is part of our culture you pay in and you get something from it. It provides us solid funding. Hopes, dreams and prayers are not enough - you need money.” - Participant

The main arguments for charging members were:

- Allows people to win change.
- Ensures the work is being led by the people who the issues concern.
- Creates transparency and accountability.
- Provides security and sustainability.
- Builds effective people power now and into the future.
- Allows development into leaders of the movement.
- Devolves responsibility for generating income from being the responsibility of one or two staff members to being the whole staff team and a raft of members.

“Membership is core to the labour movement... The labour party charges because you are one of the people who wants a labour government. To do that we need to fund our own future... Regular sustainable income gives us power and this is understood by everyone who pays into it.” - Participant

Leadership development of members was mentioned often. Membership dues allowed income to flow into the upskilling of members. People we spoke to shared that being a member provided them a civic education that was not being made available to them in the professionalised charity sector.

“Having our own source of income means we will not be co-opted by funder’s momentary agendas or organisations not interested in radical change. We got people from working class backgrounds, from a variety of communities and people who have not been in formal employment and education before into high levels of leadership because we could give opportunities and finance them. Myself included - I could not have done that without a living allowance that came from us organising our money.” - Participant

“I was an activist for a long time, always talking to other activists, mostly about shit wages in care homes and housing. What I noticed was activists were never talking to the unemployed, people in bad housing or carers. We were standing outside with other well intentioned activists. It bothered me. The union I joined provided an answer. It gave me a model that allowed me to do something that was about getting together with people who were living with these issues. At its heart it is not being in this little lefty bubble. It’s just normal people fighting for this to change. I pay because we win and we have the chance to be developed as we win. It been 5 years and I have not seen anything better.” - Participant

For others, they spoke about the freedom that membership provides the ability to do the things that were fundamental in their own timescale. To strategise and plan on what matters to the members compared to working to wealthy individuals or trusts and foundations:

“It allows you freedom to focus on campaigns.”
- Participant

We have much more freedom to say - this is what we need, this is what is important. We’ve seen from [specific] crises it’s individual donors that allow us to respond and respond faster. Trust and foundations are 2-3 months behind - just not fast enough for our response.”
- Participant

→ 1 in 3 young people spend less than an hour outside on a Saturday, Coventry Youth Activists Taking Action
- Photo: John Whitmore



Who is responsible for raising money?

“Everyone.” - Participant

Unlike larger charities and non profits who will often have a paid member of staff or consultant responsible for raising money - or in smaller collectives where this is added to the list of to dos of the director. What we learnt in some membership organisations is that organising money is everyone’s responsibility.

“Every meeting the jar would go around and enable people to take part. It was all framed around removing barriers. We need every voice heard and it couldn’t be for people only privileged enough. That meant all of us chipping in.”

- Participant

“Our organisation is explicit about how money is calculated, it’s purpose and how it is spent.” - Participant

One group who raised the most amount from some of the poorest community members - a new migrant community - said that the fact their members knew how the money was spent was one of the two aspects of what allowed people to donate. “They know this money goes to running costs of the building. Bills. It’s for the building - and that’s why they try to make sure the building is there.” - Participant

Other organisations shared differently - either only with staff or not at all:

“We don’t talk about money at all.” - Participant

“We’re too British about it.” - Participant

“I think it’s a problem [how little I speak about money] because when I do talk about it people don’t go “oh, of course you need money”. From now on, I’m saying on the training course for leaders - when we do a fundraiser I’m going to ask you to donate. If you can’t, that’s fine.”

With staff I’m upfront - what we’ve gotten, where we’ve applied to, whether we’ve gotten it or not. I’m trying to balance to make sure all teams in the organisation are funded. To do this well though requires financial literacy - of what does this mean to my job?”

This left us with a question, why are people comfortable to ask for people’s time but not their money? Many people are both cash poor and time poor. Both can bring into question whether the work is worth it. Or is the assumption that people get the benefit of being part of a community through giving their time (but not their money)?

Another question for us was, could there be mutual accountability within a community when the money is everyone’s money (rather than a donors money) - e.g. if someone fails to deliver or doesn’t turn up or is supported but doesn’t reciprocate....how does the accountability work differently to when it’s your own money opposed to a funders?

How is membership calculated?

“Our model is we ask 1% of an organisation’s payroll. This feels meaningful, fair and simple. It makes sense to us.” - Participant

While most of the organisations we spoke to had an organised money arm to their work, almost all of their strategy on how to raise membership was “back of the envelope” imaginings. Only two organisations thought about how to calculate fees strategically. This means they had an amount they needed to raise and worked their membership costings according to that. Unsurprisingly, they were the organisations that got the highest percentage of their money from dues:

“We start with the amount of money we need. Then we think about how can we get there in a way that feels both practical and intentional about diversity - how many big organisations? How many small? In that conversation is a calculation on the cost of our working - we can’t just have a thousand small groups because the money won’t raise enough to pay for the organiser time a thousand groups require. We don’t want only the big groups because then we won’t represent the energy and diversity of an area. We calculate the ideal mix of big, small and medium groups and work out the dues necessary to reach funding an organiser. Some organisations may not be able to afford or justify it - but the organisation is clear on what it needs to be able to do work with groups.” - Participant

“People tend to make membership more complicated than it needs to be. Keep it simple, remove as much friction as possible.” - Participant

Most organisations that set dues acknowledged that their calculations were historic or rather random. Some had percentages that went up each financial year, recorded in their articles, but completely separate to what strategy had been decided, what budget was needed to enact that strategy, or even what inflation might be. Some had systems such as an hour’s wage, and some chose numbers that meant something in the culture or tradition of that group.

Only two had started with an analysis of:

- How much they needed to raise.
 - That it would look like for a mixed income group to raise that.
 - Considered the time they could give each group.
 - Then set dues accordingly.
-

To ensure dues were accessible, many have a reduced fee and are often randomly set. There is very little evidence showing that this helps or inhibits people joining. The assumption for many was, any contribution is better than no contribution.

“We also have different rates. If you can’t afford as much you get a different rate. There is some flexibility about that, It’s not about the amount but the act of paying in.” - Participant

“We have tiers of membership - standard, reduced for folks on benefits and youth one which is very cheap... It is not policed at all. Momentums membership is like that and World Transformed Forum events you can basically voluntarily say I can't afford that. There is a fairness versus getting more people involved challenge - that some people will think it's unfair about paying full amount over others. But on balance it seems to be alright...The flip is where it gets abused when people are signing up all of sundry to get numbers...they will always choose the cheaper options - it genuinely happens.” - Participant

“We set a nominal and low rate for a particular group of people we wanted to recruit , but we have no data on whether it worked.”
- Participant

“It's a historical amount. Rather random. Originally a fiver seemed about right. Then had a higher and lower amount.” - Participant

“My union has two rates, a full rate and a low rate, based on salary. The cutoff for the low rate is currently around £27k per year. The rule book stipulates that membership dues will increase annually, in line with inflation, although the National Executive Committee has the power to review this. Occasionally a “campaign rate”, usually £1 per month, might be set, where there's a specific drive to organise workers in a particular area.” - Participant

“For larger co-operatives is much more complex. Membership that is more substantial like members paying between £10,000 - £120,000 a year this is pure relational management. You are tailoring and offering membership involvement.” - Participant

We are left with more questions around why we are not bringing more rigour to these calculations. What is it that more of our organised movements need to be able to get there, and is their appetite in the wider field to support more of us to get to this financial stability?



“Good membership has to be simple or extremely meaningful - it's best when it's both.”

- Participant

→ [Green New Deal Rising Protest, from Ellen Lee's blog on Act Build Change](#) - Photo: Ellen Lee

Where it is not appropriate to take money

As organisers who have been brought up in a tradition where organising money is a fundamental part of how our struggles win, this answer created more questions for us. It often came from people we deeply respect.

For these organisations, it was about acknowledging that having paid membership felt impossible. They never used the language of membership when talking about the people who their organisations represent, but did use the language of community and/or movement.

“We toyed with a membership model in 2018, but we recognised so much has been taken from our communities, it felt distasteful about asking to take from them. We engage with young people and so raising money through membership is not possible.” - Participant

Others reflected similar concerns with asking people for money, when also working with a group who are systematically oppressed:

“I feel the people we work with can’t be asked to give more.” - Participant

In order to meet this challenge organisations who did not adopt a membership strategy relied on a mixture of donations. Some small individuals, some large one offs, celebrities and wealthy donors. There was also a significant reliance on funders.

“If funders said they could fund us no more, it wouldn’t be a sudden crisis for us, we already have a pipeline of income. However, it wouldn’t be long before it would be devastating for our organisation.” - Participant

This choice is a real one. We are not claiming this is a right or wrong decision. We are curious though in what this means for future work, risk taking and how decisions are made and navigated. Raising membership is not easy, comfortable and perhaps is not possible in some circumstances.

We know two things - firstly, that poor communities can and do organise money. We come from nations in the Global South where slum dwellers’ movements have been successfully built, funded by people who live in tin shacks, and London neighbourhoods where families who have very little won victories for the roofs over their own heads.

The majority of organisations working with the communities who are the very poorest in our conversations actually did organise money from their members. From refugee organisations to labour groups - the exact same groups that others said couldn’t or it wouldn’t be appropriate to take money from, with one exception, had a fundraising strategy that involved organising their own money.

The second is, consciously created or not, it results in a power dynamic where founders/ senior teams often have more power than the people they claim the movement is for. They are the ones accessing/engaging with the alternate forms of money coming in. They are the ones deciding budgets, taking money in the form of salary, and keeping relationships with funders.

One organiser said to us;

“Organisations need money. We can’t be ashamed of that. The people who can support that are well resourced powerful people. What we have to recognise is that that group of people will never be representative. Paid membership by its nature is likely to skew towards particular cohorts of usually better off people. This creates a specific problem if your membership is your only route to connecting with people impacted by the issues you are working on and hearing and raising up their voices and experiences. So, it’s incumbent on the organisation to ensure those aren’t the only voices influencing us and that we specifically create ways to collaborate with other campaigns and organisations as well as individuals with different experiences.” - Participant

For us, this raised questions both of what membership meant, but also of whether it is appropriate for people for the organisations to represent people they don’t actually have in membership? Goerge Goehl tells a story from when he was a new organiser, thanking a member for putting out chairs in a meeting. His supervising organiser stops him. He asks - “why are you thanking them? Is it your organisation or theirs?”

“If you are funded by philanthropists you work for them, you are the foot soldiers of philanthropists. If you are funded by your members you are doing it together.”

- Participant

→ A #MillionsMissing protest - Photo: Omar Wasow (@owasow)

We were left with a similar question - if you raise, decide the spend, and take a substantial amount of the money as paid staff without the input of those who your organisation/movement is said to represent... whose organisation is it really?

“It is difficult for people to find the money. And when they do it is something that they own, it affects their lives, they shape it and it becomes our union. It’s creating organisations that represent the people. With a charity you’re not letting people be members, you are not accountable to them - you’re accountable to the people who pay you - the funders, the state. Our members truly have a stake in how all this is run. They get to put their lives in and inform what we do - non membership orgs do not give that. We can be flexible/cheaper but it’s never the low income people who complain about paying - it’s the people who are the homeowners on wealthy salaries who don’t pay in and they also say what people like myself can and can’t do or afford. It’s never the people in rented accommodation with shit and water dripping through their ceilings who say they can’t pay. We see this as a contribution to truly creating organisations that are ours and not paternalistic - founded by and run by the communities they work and live in.” - Participant



Another organiser shared:

“On the other end of the scale to membership there are a number of charities / NGO’s that feel that it’s important to pay people with lived experience of the issue they campaign on for their time. This might look like offering vouchers for taking part in a survey or small amounts of cash for coming to a round table etc. The desire to do this generally comes from a recognition that the staff of the NGO are financially much better off than the people the NGO campaigns on behalf of. There is a belief that paying people to participate both removes a barrier to participation and is “the right thing to do” NGOs that do this are not wanting to have extractive relationships with people and believe that ruminating on them changes this dynamic. Organisations that do this often have fleeting, low-level relationships with those with lived experience, are not interested in becoming mass movements, and very much have a paternalistic “us and them” attitude to the people the organisation seeks to benefit. Even if they are paying people for their time.”

- Participant

The question of whether it’s possible or appropriate to raise money from communities who don’t have much was challenged by people doing it. A group organising recent refugees - many dealing with real poverty - spoke about how generous their community was in raising money for the collective:

“People collect money on Friday prayers in buckets and through contactless. Some members will stand at the front and say - you need to donate something for the organisation. We don’t tend to have standing orders or direct debits - Friday is a charity day so it’s the day we give. It’s an extension of the culture of the community. The bucket is there and someone goes around and collect. 150-200 people come every Friday. Some people can’t give, but most people give £10- £15. It’s all done anonymously - we don’t keep records of who gives what.”

- Participant

“People collect money on Friday prayers in buckets and through contactless. Some members will stand at the front and say - you need to donate something for the organisation.”

- Participant

→ Placard at a Climate Strike protest
- Photo: Markus Spiske (@markusspiske)



Transparency and decision making

“People are scared of empowering people - what if they make bad decisions? But if you look at top down, they are often bad.” - Participant

A common theme shared by organisations of why they don't have membership was not only to do with the discomfort or assumptions of asking for money - it was about the responsibilities that came with membership, if they did. How would they manage risk? What if people came up with bad ideas? What do you do if someone behaves badly or causes harm? How will decisions ever get made?

However, the same tensions that came from those who did not engage with membership, were the spaces of comfort for those who did. It provided clarity in direction, paying meant people had to understand the values of a space and what would happen if they acted against those values. It meant that ideas were generated rapidly and decisions could move based on what the people wanted.

There were differing levels of boundaries and discipline around membership and what members can do and contribute off the back of these calculations. Some were more rigid - no pay no participation, to pay what you can, if you can and you can still vote the same as those who have chipped in. People spoke about the transparency that membership provided.

It supported in getting strategy and direction for the organisation as a whole, and gave some reassurance to the uncertainties that come up in organising, because it was grounded in decisions from the people;

“You vote as a members - we vote for campaigns we vote for a committee - any decisions of the union runs through the membership - we say to the members its your union - direct the the action.” - Participant

“You have to be 100% transparent locally how you're spending that money - if you don't understand the structure of that organisation our job as members is to teach people. Here is how much it pays for. We all must be armed with the right information.” - Participant

This theme of membership meaning you had power to decide on how the movement is run was shared with movement organisers;

“We all have an opportunity to input on key strategic decisions through open source documents, meetings and voting.” - Participant

But there are still challenges around power like in any space with people.

“Anyone who pays has the opportunity to contribute but people who have lots of money and relationships can take that opportunity away from people who have the littlest often have the most to give. Like MPs who are parachuted in from elsewhere.” - Participant

“Those who have the strongest relationships to the core have often had the most decision making power but this has been changing.” - Participant

Also depending on how much participation was happening, would result in whether the cultures of your membership were positive or not.

“Some areas have really good cultures where people are e.g. they don’t have an election for a post because a bunch want to do it and they set it up organically. If people say its cliquy there are instruments in place to vote them out - if everyone is pitching in that feels like a healthy atmosphere. It becomes less about winning and competing for things. It’s about getting our members involved and winning power.”

- Participant

So who gets to be part of the membership? Do you remove people when they break the commitments of the space? How do you manage that in ways that are progressive and transparent? This seemed to be a really tricky space for people in membership conversations.

It was why some felt membership was not for them as trusting membership, who got to be a part of that membership and ensuring a good culture was maintained felt spiralling and potentially out of their depth. Those who do have membership also felt that governance was an area that needed to be.

On how you hold people to account was another area where answers were vague at best.

“You can’t be a member of the labour party if you have stood for office for another party and that you are a real person. It doesn’t go beyond that. Governance around membership is the biggest challenge - the extent to which an organisation takes legal liability and how you decide who is a member and who isn’t and the boundaries around that to be right up front is important. Bad governance impedes political action.” - Participant

“In a modern movement there isn’t much transparency. More transparency would help the labour movement and I think more people would be up for paying more. What goes to CLPs and what is kept nationally needs understanding.” - Participant



→ Climate Protest - Photo: Li-Ann Lim

“All orgs need to think about governance really carefully. Once you introduce money and subscription you are formulating what the terms are of solidarity, purpose and mission. When you don’t have strong governance in place it goes wrong and that should be a warning.”

- Participant

Organised money for development and participation

“Most people talk about wanting to have more active members, why!? All your members should be active or they aren’t members. They are subscribers at best, most likely a mailing list. If you want to be powerful, you need to be committed together.” - Participant

“Membership provides belonging. It is a sense of ownership. There is tons of scientific research that says this way of being together is healthy for us. This is different to being a customer and this is what has happened to many of our unions. They have fallen into providing services to their members - effectively customers and have completely forgot about belonging.” - Participant

Some organisations spoke about dues as a tool for people to develop their political understanding of how the organisation works and win. This was nuanced - sometimes it was as simple as understanding that money is necessary, and other times was about speaking in depth about how the organisations had made decisions on how to spend the money. There were also limits on what membership and money gave people control over:

“I want to get people to understand there are costs associated with this.” - Participant

We’re trying to achieve lots of different things with membership - freedom financially is one, and that’s different from membership that is democratic engagement. Membership gives you a role in our governance - but that’s separate to how we choose campaigns. It does not give you a direct vote or say over our campaigns, that’s shaped by a wider set of considerations and voices.” - Participant

We speak to all our members about dues, but two things are important - communication and information. We need both to be able to have

a conversation about how money works in our organisation, so we’re doing it at our AGM.”
- Participant

The power of leadership development was spoken consistently across due paying organisations and also by those who organised their money beyond funder relationships and ad hoc donations. Power of ordinary people was spoken about both in terms of the personal development of those we spoke to and the wider development of movements on the ground.

“If you are a member you can stand for office.”
- Participant

“I was interested in labour and began doing a different range of stuff in the local branch. I just kept putting myself forward for opportunities. I got to be secretary of the branch then secretary of the constituency. I then joined the forum for secretaries across the country and I ended up supporting lots of my peers and answering people’s questions. I was able to get ideas and best practice across constituencies. I got a strong grounding in how the labour party works, what makes a good labour team and how this influences central office.”
- Participant

People also shared that membership and conversations about money supported care and sustainability around the work.

“I invested so much into XR because my experience of being involved in other forms of activism had been so rooted into an extractive approach to people’s time and commitment - if you weren’t burning out you weren’t doing enough. The power and commitment from resourcing ourselves meant I was able to do this work with care and understanding” - Participant

Rituals, recognition and celebration

“The reason I am still a member and will still pay into it is because no matter how bad it gets at different moments in my lifetime, I am very conscious of its historic importance. My membership is one piece of a very long chain of 100 years of working people trying to get power, winning changes in our country and I wouldn’t want to break that chain.” - Participant

Rituals, recognition and celebration were key themes that came as part of what it meant to be a member or organising money for a movement. Music, food, one-to-ones, socials all weaved together as part of building power. Some people we spoke to spoke how raising money would be celebrated publicly both locally in their teams and by the wider national movement to recognise efforts. People also spoke that some people may be a member just for the social element. That it created a sense of belonging that they couldn’t find in other areas of their life. It also was what brought new members in.

“You get a phone call and welcome email when you join and we have a one to one with the person if they want to get involved in anyway - you need to respond fast to make new members feel welcome.” - Participant

“Food. All good movements start with food.” - Participant

“We send our members a pin when they join and they get regular updates from us.” - Participant

“For membership there are rituals that are decentralised. Every party will be different and get different vibes from the cultures of the membership that they bring.” - Participant

→ **Black Lives Matter Protest**
-Photo: Colin Lloyd



Secrecy around organised money

“Steal as much as you can from the corporate world as you can and transform it into something ethical. They will have spent a tonne of money to understand what works best. Money you probably don’t have.” - Participant

The purpose of this report is coming from two organisers who have been brought up in traditions that teach organising our money matters. How you organise your money will have a direct impact on your ability to effect change.

It was interesting to see movements, smaller unions and charities involved in deep organising wanting to contribute. For example, Black Lives Matter UK, have created spaces for conversation, accountability and transparency around how their members spend their money and for what purposes. The scrutiny of this movement to be accountable to how they spend their funds we also note has not had the same level of heat or expectation compared to other movements or organisations who are not black person led.

Those that couldn’t give time to this report or were not interested were direct. However, what we did learn also is that larger Non Profits who spend a lot of time building funded subscriptions were much less forthcoming in sharing their learning. Many of the larger organisations that had paid staff members who specifically work on this question or had head of membership in their titles were uncontactable, or didn’t reply. We were curious why this was, and what it reflects. How does that reflect how easy it is for paying members to be in touch?

In one such case, we were ourselves paying members of the organisation - and couldn’t get hold of the staff person in charge of looking after members! Does it speak to a sense of power, shame, overwhelm, or a lack of sense of solidarity? Does it reflect a more transactional culture that adopts the language of membership but actually never means anything more by it than a direct debit and shared email list? With their silence, we don’t know.

“The purpose of this report is coming from two organisers who have been brought up in traditions that teach organising our money matters. How you organise your money will have a direct impact on your ability to effect change.”

→ **Coventry Youth Activists, Taking Action Against Online Violence to Disabled People**
- Photo: Slawomir Furgalski



Challenges from funders and other discomforts

“Most funders - in terms of philanthropic trusts - are not set up to encourage or even understand a system of membership and dues.”
- Participant

One person who straddles both being a funder and an organiser reflected;

“The problem with funders is they don’t understand the sector they are working in most of the time. Funders think it’s more important that there are 25 groups going to something than 3 groups who are genuinely building power. Funders 80% of the time use the wrong metric to measure impact. If you are relying on funding you have more chance of going down a route that you don’t want. This is why hard money is important. The second reason to organise your members’ money is that if the funder is worth anything they will dig into your model and find out what the commitment of your people is - and if they are giving money, that is a metric of it. There’s more security with it too.”

There is also something to acknowledge about funder appetite. Even if you are able to engage the handful of funders who will go into their pockets of systemic change work, organising is a long arc of practice. Short term project grants are not conducive to organising. As Ben Naimarke-Rowse shares from a US context;

“The annual rate of funding for grassroots organizing remained at 3 percent from 2011 to 2019, the most recent year for which data is available. This occurred even as events such as Trump’s election and high-profile police killings of Black people led more grant makers to espouse the importance of grassroots organizing and social movements.”

A report from the Civic Power Fund shares similar bleak findings in the UK;

“We found that 28% of social justice grant-making goes towards work that addresses the root causes of injustice — just 2.3% of all UK foundation giving. And of the funding that does target the causes of injustice, only a tiny proportion is spent on community organising — around 0.3% of the 4,110 grants analysed, amounting to 0.04% of all UK foundation giving.”

So pragmatically speaking, to influence a powerful funding culture that does not respect the amount of work it takes to organise, as opposed to exploring the possibility of raising the money within our own communities seems potentially short sighted. These are not clearly binary offers. Perhaps it’s an and, and, and answer. But I know which of the choices are more in our circle of influence.

“In the cooperative movement equity is a strong value. You get what you put in. We are self reliant movements. If people don’t pay you are probably not doing something valuable.” - Participant

We had really frank conversations about how, in addition to setting up power dynamics where founders are the ones with access to money, it also can be uncomfortable for organisers to ask for money. One common theme was that when asking members for money, organisers expressed the insecurity of the questions in their heads, “is what I’m doing valuable enough, meaningful enough for you to give this money?”. It caused existential concern and a sense of deep rooted shame in some organisers. It surprised us, although maybe it shouldn’t have - conversely, as people who have asked for money from ordinary people throughout our careers, it is a vindication that people pay when the work is worth it.

At some level, it goes to the heart between the two models. In a supporters’ model, people are donating to you for you to do the work they like you doing. If they don’t like it, they don’t give, and that can feel like a personal evaluation. In an organising membership model, people are giving money in order to build their collective power. It’s not so much a judgement on the individual organiser, as of the strength of an organisation in delivering the collective power needed. Here is an excerpt from Cesar Chavez, the organiser of farmworkers, particularly on the US -Mexico border, speaking to this tension organiser can feel:

“...I went to a workers home in McFarland, 7 miles south of Delano. It was in the evening. It was raining and it was winter. And there was no work. I knew it. And everyone knew it. As I knocked on the door, the guy in the little two room house was going to the store with a \$5.00 bill to get groceries. And there I was. He owed \$7.00 because he was one full month behind plus the current one [on farmworker union dues]. So I’d come for \$7.00. But all he had was \$5.00. I had to make a decision. Should I take \$3.50 or shouldn’t I? It was very difficult. Up to this time I had been saying, “They should be paying. And if they don’t pay they’ll never have a union.” \$3.50 worth of food wasn’t really going to change his life one way or the other that much.

So I told him, “You have to pay at least \$3.50 right now or I’ll have to put you out of the union.” He gave me the \$5.00. We went to the store and changed the \$5.00 bill. I got the \$3.50 and gave him the \$1.50. I stayed with him. He bought \$1.50 worth of groceries and went home. That experience hurt me but it also strengthened my determination. If this man was willing to give me \$3.50 on a dream, when we were really taking the money out of his own food, then why shouldn’t we be able to have a union—however difficult.”

...The statement: “They’re so poor they can’t afford to contribute to the group,” is a great cop-out. You don’t organize people by being afraid of them. You never have. You never will. You can be afraid of them in a variety of ways. But one of the main ways is to patronise them. You know the attitude; Blacks or browns or farm workers are so poor that they can’t afford to have their own group. They hardly have enough money to eat. This makes it very easy for the organiser. He can always rationalise, “I haven’t failed. They can’t come up with the money so we’re not able to organise.....we knew that the money had to come not from the outside but from the workers. And the only way to get the money was to have people pay dues....”

- Cesar Chavez, An Organizer’s Tale

This awkwardness is echoed in a more modern reflection by US organiser George Goehl:

“When we decide FOR a community that they cannot afford dues, we rob those people of ability to make decisions for themselves. And is this really about protecting ourselves, because ultimately we’re uncomfortable asking people for their time or money.”

Final Reflections

“We have such a difficult relationship with money - we have a charity mindset here not a mutual aid mindset and that stops us from building the powerful movements we need.”

- Participant



We began this research thinking about our own organisation's efforts to set up membership, and hoping to learn best practice.

We have finished it with a much clearer sense of what some of the challenges are and simultaneously more committed to the notion that ordinary people can and do organise their own money. We must take seriously organising collectively our financial power in order to build political movements that make systemic positive change in society. We are clearer eyed and untangled some of the reasons holding many back, we leave this research marvelling at the impact and possibility created by those who do have dues paid membership.

For those wanting to explore membership we hope this has given you some insights from organisations who are grappling with the challenges. We're excited to start it in our own organisations -and if you are interested also, please get in touch with us with your questions and reflections. This is the start of an ongoing series of conversations we want to hold over the coming year.

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“We must take seriously organising collectively our financial power in order to build political movements that make systemic positive change in society.”

→ **Fighting for your right to party, Grapevine Walk and Talk** - Photo: John Whitmore