

Rural Organizing in this Pivotal Time

We are living and working at a crucial time in our nation's history. The elections in November 2016 brought to light a lot of things, including the fact that people who operate and work outside of rural America weren't listening to or addressing the experiences and concerns of people living in rural communities across our country. This left an opening for the advancement of both the corporate agenda and corporate power, and sometimes racist analysis and action, in the United States. Hundreds of thousands of rural Americans voted for Barack Obama and then voted for Donald Trump for President.

As leaders of primarily farm and rural organizations in the Midwest, we are in the midst of the struggle for economic and racial justice. Many of our members and leaders voted for Donald Trump for President; many of our members voted for Bernie Sanders; many of our allies are organizations led by and for people of color. So, the reality is not as simple as it appears from the outside.

As we fight against the destruction of our communities and for justice and prosperity throughout society, some things are clear:

1. It's a bad idea to try to "reach out" to white working class Americans and ignore race. That does injustice to everyone. It allows the haters and the far right to command the conversation in rural communities about race. Race must be addressed.
2. It's a bad idea to assign rural Americans en masse to the cultural and moral dumpster as deplorables, unworthy of attention and unnecessary for progressive movement. White rural Americans are directly impacted by decades of corporate-driven policies that have impoverished them and their communities, destroying the land, democracy, and hope. We need to do even more to organize this base.
3. Paratroopers won't win this war. Change comes from the ground up. Sustainable, real and long-term change that addresses economic and racial injustice in rural America needs to come from the very people who live, work and are grounded in rural America.

Both the Land Stewardship Project (based in Minnesota) and the Missouri Rural Crisis Center are predominantly rural and white membership organizations that have strong track records of effective work, long-standing relationships with organizations and leaders of color, and growing bases of people who are joining and taking action through our organizations. We believe that resources must go to organizations of color in order to win racial justice. And, we believe that resources must also go to groups who are organizing white rural people from the ground up. It can't be either/or, it must be both.

Both of our organizations, through our own processes, have identified key strategies that must be prioritized now to help build healthy communities, racial equity, and a shared prosperity in our country. Simply put, these are:

- Organizing white rural Midwesterners, leading with values and winning on issues that matter to them and that effect their lives and communities, while being explicit that we stand for racial justice.
- Directly identifying excessive corporate power as a core problem that hurts all of our communities, both urban and rural; and, intentionally lifting up a pro-democracy frame in which *everyone is in and no one is out*.

- Racial justice training, education, action, and analysis with our staff and member/leaders.
- Movement organizing—joining with, sometimes following and sometimes providing leadership to, emerging statewide, multi-racial movements that are working to achieve economic and racial justice.
- Show up and stand with allied organizations and communities that come under attack, especially communities of color and Native American communities.
- One of the most important things that we can do as organizations who are grounded and based in rural America is to create opportunities that bring together, in the same room on an ongoing basis, people who look different, are from different backgrounds and cultures and have different experiences to listen, learn and identify where we have common values and goals. Without these kinds of experiences, opinions are often based on a narrative of isolation and exclusion.

Contrary to the what it might feel like, we didn't get here overnight (in Nov. 2016), and we won't fix it overnight. Shortcuts and simple fixes won't be sufficient for long-term change—it's about long-term commitment to **building power together** in rural and urban America.

We'd like to engage further in conversations about this—please feel free to contact us.



Mark Schultz
612-722-6377
marks@landstewardshipproject.org



Rhonda Perry
573-449-1336
rhonda@morural.com