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**Juliann Allison, Ian Breckenridge-Jackson, Katja M. Guenther, Ali Lairy, Elizabeth Schwarz, Ellen Reese, Miryam E. Ruvalcaba, and Michael Walker**

## Is the Economic Crisis a Crisis for Social Justice Activism?

The recent economic crisis, which began in 2007, has had devastating impacts for people throughout the United States, with over 15 million workers out of their jobs and several million families out of their homes. Compounding these problems, demands for social services have soared at the very time that revenues to states and nonprofit organizations have decreased.

At first blush, these circumstances seem ripe for social justice activism in the United States. Grievances tend to increase during recessions, thereby creating a larger pool of potential participants. Social justice movements may also have opportunities to identify new opponents (such as “big banks”) to help galvanize support, and economic crises can increase strain on political and economic structures in ways that render them more vulnerable to challenges by social movements. At the same time, difficult economic circumstances may reduce funding available to social movement organizations, and may reduce participation among individuals who are worried about their personal financial circumstances.

Has the economic crisis created a crisis for social justice activism in the United States? This paper examines how social justice activists perceive the effects of the economic crisis on their political organizations and how new organizing campaigns are seeking to address the problems associated with the recession. We analyze quantitative and qualitative data collected at the 2010 United States Social Forum (USSF) in Detroit, Michigan, where some 20,000 activists affiliated with a variety of organizations and social movements gathered to discuss current issues, plan actions, and broaden their alliances.

Nearly half of activists reported that funding has become tighter in the context of the economic crisis, while slightly more than one quarter (28 percent) of activists reported that the goals and priorities of their organization and its alliances had shifted in light of the economic crisis. At the same time, our content analysis of the USSF program and ethnographic observations from the meeting suggest that the economic crisis has inspired or revived campaigns for economic justice among consumers, homeowners, and unemployed workers, as well as among a variety of public sector workers and their clients. Thus, the economic crisis seems to have produced divergent effects among organizations advocating for equity and social justice: increasing the need for such organizations and increasing the pool of interested participants, while at the same time presenting budgetary and logistical challenges to social movement organizations.

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## Introduction

The recent economic crisis, which began in 2007, has had devastating impacts on people throughout the United States, putting over 15 million workers out of their jobs and several million families out of their homes. By March, 2009, about 5.4 million mortgages were delinquent as middle and working class households faced the aftermath of financial deregulation and speculation: spiking interest rates for many borrowers and the collapse in home property values. Mass layoffs further exacerbated the foreclosure crisis, which continued to deepen the following year. In October, 2010, one in every 389 houses in the nation received a foreclosure filing (Realty Trac 2010). That same month, the official unemployment rate reached 9.6 percent of the labor force and, among the unemployed, nearly 42 percent (or 6.2 million Americans) experienced long-term unemployment—27 or more weeks without work (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). While the unemployment picture improved somewhat in early 2011, the official rate remained as high as 9.0 percent as of April, 2011 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

Compounding these problems, demands for social services have soared at the very time that revenues to states and nonprofit organizations have decreased. As revenues from income, property, sales, and other taxes declined, many states and local governments came under pressure to cut services. Already, state revenues had declined through several decades of tax reductions for large corporations and wealthy families. While federal economic recovery funds in 2009 helped to stave off further budget cuts, those funds only covered about 30 to 40 percent of states' deficits. Meanwhile, tax increases (enacted in over 30 states since 2007) were insufficient to make up the difference. At least 40 states cut back spending on state services in their 2009-10 budgets and 46 states did so in their subsequent budgets. Altogether, in the 2010-11 state budgets, 31 states reduced spending in healthcare, 29 states cut back services to the elderly and disabled, 33 states spent less on K-12 public education, and 43 states reduced spending on higher education (Center for Budget and Policy Priorities 2009, 2010).

Social justice groups (including labor unions, housing advocates, anti-poverty groups, and the like), have played a prominent role in pushing for economic relief and equity. The economic crisis has created shifting terrain for the social justice movement in the United States, creating both challenges and opportunities that activists must navigate.<sup>1</sup> At first blush, these circumstances seem ripe for social justice activism in the United States. Grievances may increase during recessions, thereby creating a larger pool of potential participants (Piven and Cloward 1977). During a period of economic or other

strain, movements may also have opportunities to identify new targets or opponents to help galvanize support. For example, in the current recession, "big banks" have become a widespread target of discontent. Similarly, any type of crisis may generate new opportunities for using innovative social movement frames—the beliefs and meanings that social movements use to inspire and legitimate their activities and campaigns (Benford and Snow 2000). Finally, economic crises can increase the strain on political and economic structures in ways that render them more vulnerable to challenges by social movements.

At the same time, difficult economic circumstances may weaken the internal dynamics of social justice organizations (Goldstone and Tilly 2001). People may become more reluctant to participate in collective action if they see such action as potentially jeopardizing their livelihoods. Furthermore, financial resources are often more limited during times of economic struggle, which may mean that social movement groups must cut back on expenditures. Indeed, 52 percent of non-profits in a recent national survey of 800 nonprofits reported cuts in funding. Nearly half (49 percent) reported a 10-20 percent reduction in their organizational funding, while another 25 percent reported a decrease of 21 percent or more. At the same time, many nonprofits reported increasing demand for their services as a result of the economic crisis (Bridgeland et al. 2009).

Has the economic crisis created a crisis for social justice activism in the United States? This report examines how social justice activists perceive the effects of the economic crisis on their political organizations and how new organizing campaigns are seeking to address the problems associated with the recession. We analyze quantitative and qualitative data collected at the 2010 United States Social Forum (USSF) in Detroit, Michigan, where some 20,000 activists affiliated with a variety of organizations and social movements gathered to discuss current issues, to plan actions, and to broaden their alliances.

The USSF is the largest meeting of progressive social justice activists in the United States, making it a strategic research site for examining patterns and shifts in the country's social justice activism. While mobilization by conservative groups such as the Tea Party has drawn extensive media and scholarly attention, those advocating for leftist and progressive causes have received comparatively less notice (Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting 2011). Examining the perceptions of USSF participants helps us to understand better the experiences and perspectives of various grassroots constituencies, including women, people of color, immigrants, low-income communities, LGBT people, people with disabilities, and those who serve them and advocate on their behalf.

Our analysis of how the economic crisis has altered social justice activism is based on a combination of data and methods. First, we analyze original survey data we collected from 564 USSF participants on the perceived impacts of the economic crisis on political organizations in terms of their access to resources, membership, agendas, framing of issues, and alliances. Second, we analyze descriptions of 1,039 workshops listed in the USSF's online program, examining what portion of them addressed problems associated with the recent economic downturn and how they did so. Finally, we examine field notes from 20 workshops that members of our research team attended, considering how, and to what extent, they sought to address the problems associated with this historic crisis.

We begin by providing background on the USSF, which grew out of the World Social Forum. We follow this introductory discussion with a summary presentation of our findings, starting with an analysis of our survey results. Next we present our analysis of the USSF program and our field notes from workshops. Our findings indicate that the economic crisis has created or increased financial hardships for many organizations, even as it has inspired or revived popular demands for jobs, housing, and social services. However, many organizations focusing on non-economic issues appear to be going about 'business as usual,' without much shift in their political agendas or coalitions. In our conclusion, we discuss the implications of our findings for understanding emergent policy agendas from the left, and the challenges that activists must overcome in order to gain wider political support for their demands.

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## History of the U.S. Social Forum

The USSF is the outgrowth of the global justice movement and the World Social Forum process. The global justice movement seeks to create solidarity across a diversity of movements in order to achieve a more just world. The global justice movement is "a 'movement of movements' that draws together all those who are engaged in sustained and contentious challenges to the current global political economy and all those who seek to democratize it" (Reese et al. 2011: 1). Since its origins in 2001, the World Social Forum has provided the largest international meeting for participants of the global justice movement to network, share their ideas and experiences, and coordi-

nate actions.

The first World Social Forum (WSF) took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001 as an alternative to the annual World Economic Forum, which brings business, political, academic and other leaders of society together to coordinate and shape global, regional and industry agendas. The WSF has drawn growing numbers of global justice movement participants across the globe. Participants must agree to adhere to the WSF "Charter of Principles," to not attend as official representatives of any government or political party and to refrain from advocating for the use of violence. While the logistics of the WSF are addressed by the International Council and a local Organizing Committee, most of the workshops are independently organized by participants. Regional and local forums have increasingly been organized around the globe, although they remain more concentrated in Western Europe and Latin America (Reese et al. 2011).

The WSF inspired U.S. global justice activists to organize a national social forum in order to strengthen the capacity of the country's social movements. After years of preparation, the first USSF meeting took place in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2007. The organizers were mainly leftist social activists, many of whom were affiliated with mass-based community organizations. Seeking to overcome the tendency of more privileged social groups to dominate activist gatherings, organizers purposefully targeted their outreach towards grassroots organizations of low-income people of color as well as queer (or LGBT) and feminist groups within the U.S. (e.g., Smith et al 2008). This had the effect of attracting participants who were far to the left of the political mainstream in the United States, and who were racially diverse (Reese et al. 2008).

USFF organizers selected Detroit as the site for the second USSF in 2010 in part because the problems of unemployment, poverty, and social dislocation are so severe there. According to USSF organizers, Detroit at that time had the highest unemployment rate of any major city in the country with nearly one in four (23.2%) of residents of Detroit unable to find work. Detroit used to be known as Motor City because of the importance of automotive manufacturing to its local economy. Thousands of living wage jobs have been lost in the automotive industry and related sectors as a result of the rise in offshore production and the economic recession. By locating the USSF in Detroit, organizers hoped to highlight the economic problems that were plaguing millions of Americans around the country, and how activists were responding to those problems.

The 2010 USSF drew nearly 20,000 participants from across the United States. Most attendees were left-of-center activists who are

affiliated with community-based organizations, independent workers organizations, unions, student groups, or academic institutions. Participants focused on a variety of causes and included grassroots activists from a number of politically marginalized groups, including indigenous nations, workers, poor and underemployed people, women, queers, people of color, immigrants, youth and children, the elderly, and differently-abled people.

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## Analyzing the U.S. Social Forum

Our analysis employs a mixed-method approach, using a variety of sources of evidence. First, we analyze survey data gathered from 564 participants at the 2010 meeting of the USSF. Due to the unavailability of a complete list of Forum participants, we selected a purposive sample at a variety of event venues, including registration, the lobby area, workshops, evening plenary sessions, organizations' tables, and cultural performances over the several days of the forum. This sampling method is consistent with other survey research projects fielded at previous Social Forums (Kavada 2005). The survey itself was available in both English and Spanish and consisted of 50 questions covering respondents' demographic and socio-economic characteristics, political views, affiliations with different types of organizations and social movements, and political activities.<sup>2</sup>

Second, we completed a content analysis of the program, which lists more than 1,039 workshops held during the 2010 USSF. Here, we were interested in ascertaining the proportion of workshops that addressed issues related to the economic downturn and how they did so. We first searched on the key words "economic crisis" to identify workshops that might have addressed the economic downturn, and found 590 such workshops. We then used the following set of key words to identify other potential workshops (excluding any duplicate workshops): fiscal crisis, budget crisis, recession, economic depression, financial crisis, banking crisis, housing crisis, foreclosure, and unemployment. Next, we inspected the descriptions of all of the workshops we identified with these key words to determine whether they actually did mention the economic downturn or were focused on more long-standing and systemic problems with capitalism. We found that the vast majority of the workshops focused on systemic

problems such as the "crisis in global capitalism," one of the main themes of the 2010 USSF meeting. We coded the remaining 124 workshops addressing the economic downturn in terms of the particular problems that they addressed. Identifying the specific issues these workshops address clarifies how workshop leaders integrated the economic downturn, and the various problems associated with it, into their agendas.

Finally, we draw on field observations conducted at workshops during the USSF to provide additional detail on the ways in which social justice activists have been affected by the economic crisis and how they are responding to it. Seven members of our research team who participated in the USSF in Detroit attended twenty different workshops, during which they took detailed notes about the themes of those sessions. Workshops were selected according to observers' interests and represented a wide range of movements and issues. Of these workshops, eight addressed the economic downturn in some way. The field notes from those eight workshops were subject to more detailed analysis. While not representative of the 1,039 workshops at the USSF, these observations, along with our program analysis, help flesh out how the economic downturn and associated problems are incorporated into the debates, discourses, and discussions at the USSF.

## Survey Findings

Our survey provides us with information both about who attended the 2010 USSF meeting and how attendees perceived the impacts of the economic crisis on their political work. Our survey sample suggests that attendees at the 2010 USSF were mainly leftists, with about 83 percent of our sample identifying as left-of-center. Our sample of USSF attendees was also more racially diverse than the U.S. population, with whites making up only a slight majority, or 55 percent, of all respondents. Women made up about 55 percent of our sample, while nearly half, or 47 percent, were 30 years old or younger. The vast majority of respondents had at least some college education, with only 13 percent of respondents having a high school education or less. A comparison with a similar survey carried out during this meeting by University of Michigan and Indiana University researchers (with a total sample size of 691) found similar results in terms of the distribution of gender, age, and educational attainment (see the Appendix for more details).

Survey respondents were given a list of possible ways that the economic crisis affected the political organizations they worked with, and were asked to check those that applied to their group. Table 1 reports our findings for respondents who reported an affiliation with

some sort of political organization (85% of all respondents). We call this sub-group “organizational affiliates” for the purposes of this paper.

As we expected, the most common response among organizational affiliates was that the economic crisis had reduced their organizations’ access to resources (48%) and only 7 percent reporting that their organization had gained material resources as a result of the economic crisis. About one third (36%) of organizational affiliates reported that their group had shifted how issues were framed in order to link them to the economic crisis. More than one-quarter (28%) of organizational affiliates reported that their organizations shifted their goals and priorities in response to the economic crisis, while the same proportion reported that they shifted their alliances. Slightly more than one-fifth of organizational affiliates claimed that their organization was spending more time trying to meet the needs of its members. About 16 percent reported that membership participation increased in the context of the economic crisis, while the same percentage reported a decline in membership participation.

**Table 1. Impact of Recession on Political Organizations**

	Percent
Lost Material Resources	48
Shifted the Issue Framing towards Crisis	36
Shifted Goals and Priorities	28
Shifted Allies	28
Spend More Time Responding the Members Needs	21
Membership Participation Decreased	16
Membership Participation Increased	16
Gained Material Resources	7
Other	6
Don't Know	17

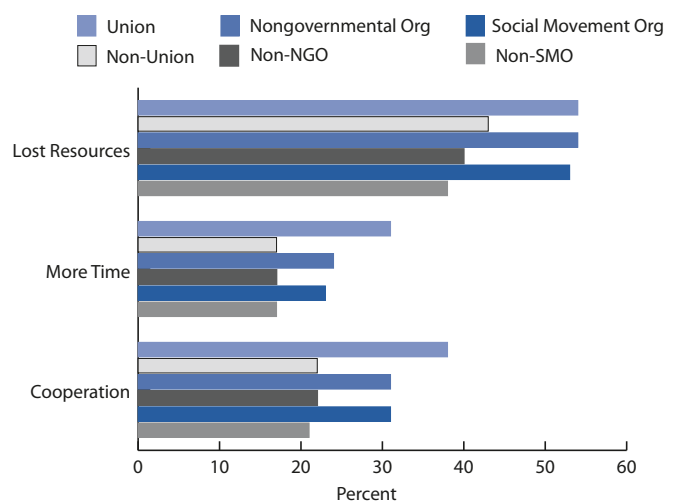
Source: 2010 US Social Forum Participant Survey

Note: Asked of those affiliated with organizations. Results total more than 100% because of multiple choices per respondent.

In addition to finding the overall impacts of the economic downturn on organizations, we are also able to differentiate the perceived effects by organization type (Figure 1). Given that working class people have been disproportionately affected by layoffs and foreclosures, and that unions are mainly funded through membership dues, we expected there to be significant differences in the responses of union members and members of other organizations. The results of our survey bear these expectations out. When compared to respondents not affiliated with unions, a significantly higher percentage of union members reported that their organizations lost material resources (54% vs. 43%), spent more time and resources on providing for the material needs of their members (31% vs. 17%), shifted their

goals or priorities towards issues related to the crisis (36% vs. 23%), have had changes in their membership participation (with divergent outcomes on increases as well as decreases 25% vs. 12%), and cooperated more closely with other organizations or shifted their organizational alliances (38% vs. 22%). As in other differences that we note in this report, these divergent outcomes between union and non-union members were statistically significant at the .10 level, meaning that there is only a 10 percent or smaller chance that the two groups are not distinct from each other. Indeed, for most of our results, the p-values are less than 0.05 or 0.01, indicating an even stronger level of certainty about group differences.

**Figure 1. Economic Crisis Impacts by Organization Type**



Source: 2010 US Social Forum Participant Survey

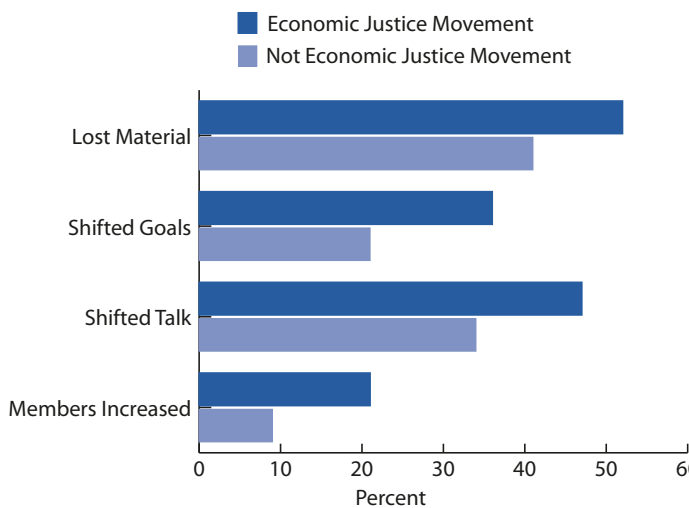
As Figure 1 shows, individuals affiliated with non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, were significantly more likely than those not affiliated with NGOs to report that their organizations had lost resources (54% vs. 40%), spent more time and resources on providing for the material needs of their members (24% vs. 17%), shifted how they talk about the issues they work on to link them to the economic crisis (39% vs. 30%), and cooperated more closely with other organizations or shifted the kinds of organizations with which they work (31% vs. 22%). Finally, individuals affiliated with social movement organizations were significantly more likely than other respondents to report all types of impacts except for decreasing membership participation.

Perceived impacts of the economic crisis also varied depending on respondents’ affiliation with different kinds of social movements. About 60 percent of respondents identified themselves as “actively involved” in at least one of 27 movements specified on our survey. Among these, we categorized the following as being primarily ori-

ented towards “economic justice” issues: Communist, Development Aid/Economic Development, Fair Trade/Trade Justice, Housing Rights/Anti-eviction/Squatters, Jobless Workers/Welfare Rights, Labor, Peasant/Farmers/Landless/Land-reform, and Socialist.

As Figure 2 indicates, a larger proportion of economic justice activists reported that their organization lost resources, when compared to activists involved in other types of organizations (52% vs. 41%). Similarly, when compared to other respondents, a significantly larger percentage of economic justice activists reported that their organization had shifted their goals or priorities towards issues related to the crisis (36% vs. 21%), shifted how they talked about issues to link them to the economic crisis (47% vs. 34%), and saw their participation increase through membership gains and/or increased participation by existing members (21% vs. 9%).

**Figure 2. Economic Crisis Impacts by Economic Justice Movement Affiliation**



Source: 2010 US Social Forum Participant Survey

Similarly, we also found that respondents’ political ideologies informed their experiences of the recession (Figure 3). A larger percentage of those identifying as ‘leftist’ in their political views than those identifying as center/right reported that their organizations lost resources (49% vs. 38%). By contrast, individuals with center/right political views were more likely than those with left-of-center views to report that their organizations saw declines in membership participation (23% vs. 11%).

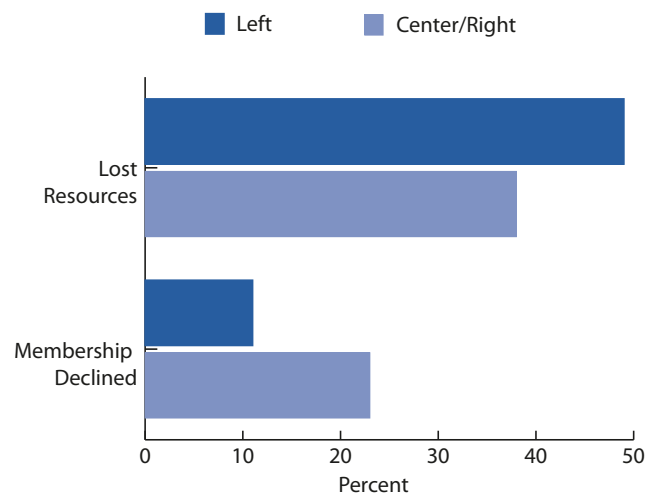
Disaggregating our sample by social class showed some significant differences in respondents’ class position and the perceived effects of the economic crisis on their organization. When compared to upper middle class respondents, a larger percentage of individuals who described themselves as lower middle class, working class,

and lower class noted that their organizations spent more time and resources on providing for the material needs of their members in the context of the economic crisis (22% vs. 11%). Similarly, those without a college degree were more likely than those with college degrees to report that their organizations were more focused now on the material needs of their members (25% vs. 17%). Respondents with less household income and educational attainment may have been more personally impacted by the economic crisis than upper class individuals, offering more motivation to work toward these goals or a greater awareness of these kinds of organizational efforts.

We found no significant differences among respondents’ responses to these questions across race or gender. Finally, with respect to the age of the respondent, we did find that older respondents were more likely to report that their organizations had shifted their goals (31% vs. 19%). However, this may be due to the fact that older individuals are the ones most likely to have longer histories in well-established organizations, and so may have greater awareness of how their organizations have shifted in response to the economic crisis.

To sum up, the USSF survey data suggest that the most common perceived effects of the economic crisis on respondents’ political organizations were declining resources and shifting frames. Respondents affiliated with labor unions, NGOs, and social movement organizations were more likely than those affiliated with other kinds of organizations to report various impacts of the economic crisis on their organizations.

**Figure 3. Economic Crisis Impacts by Political Ideology**



Source: 2010 US Social Forum Participant Survey

Compared to other respondents, higher percentages of political leftists, middle to lower class individuals, and those affiliated with economically oriented or leftist social movements reported impacts

on their organizations. However, it is difficult to gauge from this data whether these trends reflect real differences among activists' experiences or simply differences in their perceptions. For these, and other reasons, we turn to two other sources of evidence from the U.S. Social Forum to discern the influence of the economic downturn on the interests and priorities of social justice activists.

### *Program Analysis*

Our content analysis of the 2010 USSF meeting program provides a detailed understanding of how and to what extent workshops addressed issues surrounding the economic crisis. Of the 1,039 workshops listed in the online program, we found that 124 workshops (slightly fewer than 12% of all workshops) mentioned the economic downturn in some way in their online description. Among those that refer to the economic crisis, 30 workshops (about 24%) included the general idea of crisis in capitalism in their program descriptions, one of the major themes highlighted in the USSF program. In addition, 37 workshop descriptions discussed the economic crisis in general terms, examining it at the global level or considering alternative ways of organizing the economy.

The workshops that invoked the economic crisis in their descriptions addressed a range of topics. The greatest share focused on workers' rights and job creation. Specifically, 39 workshops incorporated discussions of workers' rights and labor organizing and 36 workshops covered issues of unemployment and job creation. For example, a workshop entitled "Roots of the Economic Crisis and the Case for a Solidarity Economy," involved an interactive activity during which organizers and attendees analyzed the origin and consequences of the economic crisis in terms of "unemployment, lower wages, and foreclosures" (US Social Forum Program 2010). Similarly, 17 workshops addressed the topics of anti-poverty and welfare rights in relation to the economic crisis. One such workshop was the "Voices from the Front and a Vision of a New Society," which was described in the program as promoting solutions to economic problems through social movement mobilization and demands for "a new society free of poverty and oppression" (Ibid). Eight workshops discussed homelessness, 14 addressed cutbacks in social services, and 12 workshop descriptions invoked spending cuts in public education.

*The workshops we observed focused on three types of campaigns: 1) defending the public sector against cuts, 2) organizing the unemployed, and 3) organizing homeowners and consumers against predatory financial institutions.*

Workshops also focused on issues surrounding banks, credit issues, and home foreclosures. Bank and credit justice was a topic covered by 20 workshops, including 17 that addressed foreclosures and evictions. Recognizing the failure of mainstream economic and financial institutions to meet people's needs, some activists promoted alternative economic systems. One such workshop, for example, promoted TimeBanking initiatives through which people swap skills and labor directly with each other, banking the time they spent helping another rather than paying each other with cash or financial credit.

Finally, we also found several attempts to link the economic crisis to a wider range of social issues and problems. A workshop centered on homelessness, for example, also included reference to housing foreclosures, poverty, inadequate and underfunded schools, unaffordable healthcare, and unequal income distribution in its description. Other workshops linked the struggle to meet human needs in the age of budget cuts with the struggle against U.S. militarism. The widespread inclusion of the economic crisis in workshop descriptions points to the diffusion of the crisis-oriented rhetoric into social justice organizing, and suggests that the crisis is shaping activism on a broad range of issues.

### *Observations from USSF Workshops*

Our program analysis indicates that workshop leaders used the economic crisis to revive long-standing demands for workers' rights, welfare rights, and affordable housing. Activists are linking the economic crisis to campaigns opposing public sector cutbacks and privatization and supporting workers' (including unemployed workers) rights and consumer-friendly policies and practices among financial institutions. The workshops we observed focused on three types of campaigns: 1) defending the public sector against cuts, 2) organizing the unemployed, and 3) organizing homeowners and consumers against predatory financial institutions.

Defending the Public Sector: In many of the sessions we observed, discussions often centered around protecting the public sector, including social services, public education, and other types of public goods and services. For example, the session entitled "They Say Cutback... We Say Fight Back: Responding to Economic Crisis through Movement Building" focused on public sector cutbacks and the challenges in creating alliances between labor and communities to forestall the further decline of the public sector. Like many sessions at the USSF, this session began with a panel discussion and then involved smaller break-out groups in which attendees could discuss the issues at hand. During their presentations, panelists described

their experiences with public sector cutbacks, emphasizing how such cuts affect a range of people, including clients, workers, vulnerable populations like children and the elderly, and community members at large. Panelists also discussed how policymakers used the fiscal crisis and Hurricane Katrina to justify the continued shrinking of the public sector and the corresponding growth of privatization of services. To counter these trends, workshop participants (both panelists and audience members) advocated building coalitions between labor organizations and community organizations for larger and more effective mobilization. Other ideas for restoring funding to the public sector included taxing the rich and businesses, lowering policing and incarceration rates through the decriminalization of poverty, and ending American military incursions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Participants also reported local successes in stopping service cutbacks through popular mobilization.

In the realm of public sector cutbacks, several workshops focused specifically on opposition to cuts in public education, particularly at the post-secondary level. The workshop titled “Another Education is Possible” addressed several problems in public education, including the loss of public funding and the reproduction of social inequalities through the public education system, including disparities in educational achievement. The speakers described proposed and actual budget cuts to public education as an “attack” on public education. Presenters and audience members linked this attack to neoliberalism and the economic crisis. The speakers addressed issues of school oversight, the corporatization of schools and student services, budget cuts, and racial differences in resources dedicated to students. The attendees then split into small groups that focused on these topics and discussed how these social processes have affected them and their communities.

While cuts were widely seen as a major cause for the deterioration of public education funding and quality, participants also asserted that the crisis is attracting attention to the ongoing deterioration of education quality that may help make changes in the short term. One of the presenters mentioned that she had lost her job as a teacher as a result of budget cuts. However, this loss of employment gave her more time to devote to organizing efforts. Thus, while the economic crisis clearly worsened the problems demanding attention from social justice activists, it also created possibilities for new strategic frames and the mobilization of new participants.

Discussion of public sector cutbacks was not limited to sessions specifically on public education. For example, a workshop focusing on the need to improve working conditions and environmental conditions within the global goods movement industry emphasized

building regional coalitions against public sector cutbacks and privatization. Likewise, during the workshop “Using University Money for Economic Transformation,” workshop leaders mentioned the shrinking of university endowments as a consequence of the recession and discussed the implications of these declines on student fees and instructional quality. Thus, the aftermath of the economic recession was felt over a wide range of issues.

#### Organizing the Unemployed for Jobs and Income Support:

Another important area of emphasis was the rights of unemployed workers. A workshop on organizing unemployed workers recognized high rates of unemployment as creating ideal conditions for promoting the rights of the unemployed. This workshop focused on sharing experiences and strategies for organizing unemployed workers. The sixty-three participants came from many different kinds of organizations, including faith-based, community, and union-affiliated organizations. Prevailing themes at this session included the consequences of the economic crisis, as well as the introduction of tools and skills for organizing the unemployed. Participants discussed the impacts on workers and their families and how unemployment leads to significant hardships. At the same time, many audience members mentioned that the need for food and social support among the unemployed often helped in organizing efforts, as unemployed workers got to meet each other and discuss opportunities for mobilization. Furthermore, the unemployed also had more time to participate in protests and other organizational activities. Thus, while high unemployment clearly has negative consequences for the unemployed and their communities, it also increases the pool of potential movement participants, as well as their opportunities and motivation to participate.

#### Financial Justice: Organizing Consumers and Homeowners:

Sessions focusing on consumer protection addressed a range of issues with an emphasis on promoting corporate accountability and government regulation to protect consumers better. The workshop titled “The New Redlining: How Consumer Debt Harms Communities of Color and Perpetuates Inequality and Poverty” was both educational and organizational, providing information about the negative effects of consumer debt in communities of color and creating a forum for sharing ideas on how to address this problem. Participants referred to predatory lending and the monopolizing of the banking industry by “big banks” such as Chase Manhattan, Bank of America, Citicorp, and Wells Fargo. Furthermore, participants argued that actions made possible by the lack of regulation within the financial industry

created a cycle of debt for people of color. In addition to the negative implications of this debt cycle for individuals, the speakers also identified numerous ramifications for communities of color including a lower property tax base, gentrification, family strain and disintegration, and inadequate access to credit. Pay-day lenders were subject to pointed criticism for placing people into never-ending debt. Cooperative ownership was suggested as an alternative model for homeownership in particular.

Even a session on a very different consumer issue, namely food safety, quickly dovetailed back to problems facing homeowners and other borrowers. The workshop titled “The Untold Truth about Our Food System—Screening of Food, Inc.” addressed issues surrounding food production in the United States. In addition to discussing food safety, panelists addressed the complex connections between the banking and agricultural corporations. Participants noted that major American banks routinely support agricultural corporations that offer unsafe working conditions. They also argued that these same banks foreclose on the homes of low income farm workers and other low income workers. A representative from the Farm Workers Organizing Committee of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) discussed a divestment campaign to stop JP Morgan Chase from investing in R.J. Reynolds, which labor organizers contend engages in human and workers’ rights abuses. Divestment protests at JP Morgan Chase facilities, one of which took place during the USSF, also involved protesting foreclosures and predatory lending. Activists thus see—and challenge—a complex web of corporate involvement in the economic crisis and in social inequalities more broadly.

## The Economic Crisis as Opportunity

While the economic crisis has affected the daily operations of USSF organizations in diverse ways, the economic crisis does not appear to be radically redefining social justice activism. Indeed, about 88 percent of USSF workshop descriptions made no mention of the current economic crisis, and, reflecting that proportion, most of the workshops we attended made no mention of it. Likewise, most activists who we surveyed, particularly those with more mainstream political beliefs, reported that their organizations had made no change in their political priorities or alliances in response to the economic crisis. Thus, while many activists are feeling the effects of the economic crisis, the effects of the downturn do not yet appear to be significantly diffusing across arenas of social justice activism.

Simultaneously, the devastating impacts of the ongoing economic crisis on individuals and families have unquestionably affected

the agendas and mobilization efforts of many social justice activists in the United States. The 2010 USSF provided an ideal opportunity for examining how grassroots activists and organizations pursuing a wide range of social justice activities have responded to the crisis. Our analysis suggests that although the economic crisis has generated intense pressures on social justice activists and their organizations to respond to growing material hardships, they may be more tightly constrained financially than ever before. Rather than indicating a tendency to “throw in the towel,” most participants acknowledged the constraints social justice advocates currently face, and struggled together to craft ways to improve difficult conditions.

Policy ideas generated at the USSF contradict many of the dominant neoliberal and conservative discourses about how to resolve the economic crisis. Those discourses claim that the government needs to reduce regulation of banks and other businesses and reduce taxes among the wealthy and businesses in order to stimulate economic growth, while simultaneously reducing government expenditures to curb rising deficits. In contrast, discussions at the USSF instead highlighted the importance of increasing governmental funding for public schools, social services, housing, and job creation by redirecting public expenditures on prisons and foreign wars towards social needs. Reflecting the perspectives of grassroots constituents and left-leaning activists, the discourse at the USSF also supports increasing taxation of corporations and the wealthy. Likewise, many groups at the USSF were targeting Wall Street bankers with various demands for economic justice and highlighted the need for greater governmental regulation of the credit card and home loan industries. As such, the USSF’s framework for understanding the economic recession represents an important counterbalance to neoliberal and conservative understandings of how to resolve the recession. Notably, the core values of the USSF as a whole emphasize long-term policy changes that will significantly redistribute opportunities, income, and rights in the US.

The Great Depression of the 1930s paved the way for the New Deal and the introduction of Keynesian economic policies in the United States and Europe, and ultimately lent important credence to social democratic policies in Europe. The current recession could serve as a similar catalyst for a major rethinking of economic and social policies. Activists such as those involved with the USSF are currently at the forefront of advocating for such changes, and the recession could, in fact, lend them the necessary traction to influence political trends and policy processes.

Of course, significant political conflict marks the current American landscape, and a major challenge facing progressive social

justice activists is that the economic crisis has mobilized the right as well as the left, as the rise of the Tea Party movement and resurgence of nativist organizations attests. Republicans also gained Congressional seats in the last election, overturning Democrats' control of Congress at the time of the 2010 USSF. Nevertheless, protest movements are underway among students, unemployed workers, evicted homeowners, and social service clients. This was perhaps most visible in Wisconsin and Ohio, where thousands of demonstrators mobilized against proposed cuts in public services and efforts to strip public employees of their collective bargaining rights. Whether or not such popular mobilization will continue to rise and lead to major progressive policy shifts as they did during the Great Depression, or simply attempt to stave off further efforts to dismantle the public sector and workers' rights, remains to be seen.

### Appendix

Our survey provides us with information both on the kinds of activists attending the 2010 USSF meeting and how attendees perceived the impacts of the economic crisis on their political work. A comparison with a similar survey carried out during this meeting by researchers Michael T. Heaney (University of Michigan) and Fabio Rojas (Indiana University) found similar results in terms of the distribution of gender, age, and educational attainment.

**Table 1. Survey Respondent Characteristics, UC Riverside and University of Michigan/Indiana University studies**

	UCR study	UM/IU study
Number of respondents	564	691
Average Age (in years)	36.5	37.4
Gender (%)		
Female	56	54
Male	41	46
Other	3	< 1
Race/Ethnicity (%)		
White	55	59
Black	11	14
Latino	14	10
Asian	5	8
Other	15	9
Highest Level of Education (%)		
< High school diploma	3	3
High school diploma	7	7

	UCR study	UM/IU study
Some college	17	16
Associate/technical degree	4	5
Bachelor's degree	32	30
Some graduate education	7	9
Graduate/professional degree	30	31

Note: On the question of race/ethnicity, the University of Michigan/Indiana University survey allowed for multiple responses, and we calculate percentage share by adding up the total number of responses for the denominator.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Social movements do not develop simply because people are unhappy and aggrieved. Rather, certain social, economic, and political conditions stimulate people and groups to come together to form and maintain social movements.

<sup>2</sup> Despite our best efforts to obtain a representative sample, it is likely that certain sampling biases resulted. We may have under-sampled attendees who were under time constraints, who could not read or were not literate in Spanish or English, or those who were simply uncomfortable completing written surveys.

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*Is the Economic Crisis a Crisis for Social Justice Activism?*



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