

**2010 United States Social Forum  
Boston Freedom Rides- Goals and Outcomes**

**Report from the Boston Scholar-Activist Research Collaborative (BSARC)**

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**Executive Summary**

Introduction

The United States Social Forum (USSF) has been characterized by two unique qualities: its focus on movement building and its insistence that the process be led by grassroots, low-income communities of color who are most affected by the social, economic, racial, and environmental injustices confronted by the forum. This was reflected by the Boston-area organizations which came together to mobilize locally for the Detroit Social Forum in 2010, and resulted in the “Freedom Rides” caravan of five busloads of grassroots organizers and members, including three buses of young people and two buses of adults- roughly 250 largely low-income people of color. The organizations leading the Freedom Ride process included Alternatives for Community and Environment, the Boston Youth Organizing Project, the Chinese Progressive Association, Project Hip Hop, Reflect and Strengthen and City School (youth organizing projects), and the Providence-based Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE). This report suggests activists largely met their goals for the USSF, coming back with new knowledge, skills, contacts, and inspiration to continue building their campaigns and organizations.

Goals/Expectations

The goals and expectations for the 2010 USSF expressed in pre- and post-forum interviews with activists associated with the Boston Freedom Rides included the following: create energy, facilitate learning, development, and experience sharing, build organizational cohesion and community, strengthen local organizational relationships and movements, and strengthen national level movements. One of the consistent themes was the expectation that the forum would create new energy for organizing projects and that Freedom Riders would experience personal development at the USSF. Another important goal of organizers and base members was to strengthen their organizations, and build community within those organizations. Many of the people we spoke with anticipated not only stronger relationships within their own organizations, but also between organizations. While enhancing their own local work was a priority, organizers were quick to acknowledge that engaging in national alliances bolstered this goal and allowed them to see the bigger picture of social change.

USSF Outcomes

During our follow-up interviews with Freedom Ride participants, one of the most powerful impacts of the forum was the energy to continue organizing collectively for social justice that the forum provoked. In addition to strengthening particular organizational dynamics, the Boston

Freedom Rides also contributed to the forging of mutual awareness, connections, and relationships among grassroots base-building groups working across different issue areas and generational divides. Their personal development facilitated by the USSF, as well as the exchange of ideas, strategies, experiences and contacts reflect the notion and practice of open space that is central to the social forum process. Another clear outcome of the USSF was the building of cohesion and community within particular organizations. This was especially notable within youth organizations such as REEP.

Post USSF, we found that participants expressed significant desires to support Detroit and its local movements, which was not seen in pre-interviews. People's experiences in Detroit stood out as crucial in terms of helping people to understand how broader socio-economic inequalities and injustices are experienced in the everyday lives of people, not only in Detroit but at home.

### Conclusion

The USSF largely met the goals and expectations of Freedom Ride participants and organizers, particularly those from ACE and REEP who were most directly involved in coordinating the process. The forum generated a great deal of energy, excitement, and inspiration that has led to ongoing organizing and movement building at local, regional, and national levels. However, there were fewer relationships forged between members of grassroots base building organizations and activists from other movement sectors including mainstream peace, environmental, and labor movements and more informal collectives and direct action groups. Given scarce time and resources it makes sense to focus on building those relationships that are most directly related to your ongoing organizing and most relevant to the goals and experiences of your membership. The major complaints expressed by the Freedom Ride participants pertained to logistical issues, particularly the impersonal, corporate feel of the Cobo Convention Center and the difficulty of traveling between workshops. Tellingly, when we asked our interviewees whether they would attend another U.S. Social Forum, almost everyone gave an enthusiastic affirmative response.

## Introduction

The World Social Forum began in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2001 as an open space for movements and civil society organizations to share ideas and experiences, develop strategies, and communicate and coordinate around specific campaigns and initiatives related to the global struggle against neoliberalism. In addition to the subsequent global events in cities such as Porto Alegre, Mumbai, and Belem, which have drawn hundreds of thousands of activists from around the world, the social forums have blossomed into a truly global process involving hundreds of forums at local, regional, and global levels. The first-ever United States Social Forum (USSF) was held in Atlanta in 2007, bringing together 12,000 grassroots activists and organizers for the largest social movement gathering in U.S. history. Since its inception the social forum process in the U.S. has been characterized by two unique qualities: its focus on movement building and its insistence that the process be led by grassroots, low-income communities of color who are most affected by the social, economic, racial, and environmental injustices confronted by the forum.

Building on energy generated in Atlanta in 2000 several organizations from in and around the Boston area came together to mobilize locally for the Detroit Social Forum in 2010. Ultimately this process brought five busloads of grassroots organizers and members to Detroit, including three buses of young people and two buses of adults- roughly 250 largely low-income people of color, in a caravan dubbed “the Freedom Rides” The organizations leading the Freedom Ride process included Alternatives for Community and Environment, the Boston Youth Organizing Project, the Chinese Progressive Association, Project Hip Hop, Reflect and Strengthen and City School (youth organizing projects), and the Providence-based Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE). Numerous other organizations also helped organize and/or travelled to Detroit with the Boston Freedom Rides, including grassroots youth and membership organizations from Providence RI and Springfield, MA. Planning for the Freedom Rides began in January 2010 and culminated with report-backs in July and August. The effort to mobilize for the Freedom Rides included not only securing transportation, but also making hotel reservations, public education and outreach regarding the USSF, and coordinating logistics and activities for delegation members and groups while in Detroit. As this report suggests, organizers and members largely met their goals for the USSF in Detroit, coming back with new knowledge, skills, contacts, and inspiration to continue building their campaigns and organizations.

This report is part of the effort to document local planning for the USSF conducted by The Boston Scholar-Activist Research Collaborative (BSARC). BSARC is a group of politically engaged researchers and graduate students from the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Northeastern University that participated locally as part of a larger Documentation and Evaluation Committee associated with the USSF National Planning Committee. As a part of this process, we worked with teams of engaged researchers throughout the U.S. to help record and assess the experience and impact of the 2010 USSF through participant observation. Locally, we worked with the Boston Freedom Rides during the planning, mobilization, and report-back phase of the process. We also conducted several dozen interviews with organizers, members, and activists from Boston who attended the Detroit Forum, most of whom were associated with the Freedom Rides before and after the forum, with the goal of assessing the impacts of the forum with respect to organizational goals and expectations. This report represents our initial findings based on those interviews. Most of the voices represented here are from the base building and youth organizations that led the process of mobilizing the Freedom Ride caravan to Detroit.

Additional reports and articles based on a larger sample of interviews and observations will be forthcoming over the next couple years. An initial report from the larger Documentation and Evaluation Committee has already been presented to the NPC and can be made available upon request.

### Goals/Expectations

The specific goals and expectations for the 2010 USSF expressed in pre- and post-forum interviews with organizations and members associated with the Boston Freedom Rides included the following:

- Create Energy
- Facilitate Learning, Development, and Experience Sharing
- Build Organizational Cohesion and Community
- Strengthen Local Organizational Relationships and Movements
- Strengthen National Level Movements

As this list suggests, organizers and members expected outcomes from the forum across multiple levels of movement building: for individuals, local organizations, and national movements.

### *Create Energy*

During our interviews before the USSF one of the consistent themes we heard was the expectation that the forum would create new energy for organizing projects. Long-time organizers recognized that at events like the social forum, grassroots activists can experience, many of them for the first time, what it feels like to be part of a wider community of activists and movements struggling for social justice. They thus anticipated the social forum as an opportunity to foster commitment to life long struggle and to learn from a previous generation of activists. As Grace,<sup>1</sup> a youth organizer with Project Hip Hop, pointed out, the forum was an opportunity for young people “to see people that are at a deeper level of commitment than they are” and “to connect to people who have been in struggle for 50 years.” Sandra, another youth organizer with the group Reflect and Strengthen and City School, had this to say about the creation of energy:

It’s that spark you can’t catch, that spirit that can’t be arrested...it’s the spirit that happens, that’s the connection. It’s the rejuvenating spirit, the gas station of the movement. So you go to get some gas. And that’s the connection, it’s going to help you. You’re going to get a ride from there, that’s just how I see it. It makes you realize, damn, I can’t give up because this person’s been fighting for sixty years! And they haven’t given up yet!

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms in order to protect individual anonymity.

Many organizers and members spoke about the impact of the 2007 USSF in terms of energizing them to increase their organizing efforts once back in Boston. Joe, a member of ACE and TRU, reported that he saw the forum as a place to build energy and a personal commitment to organizing activities: “Another thing that I’m really hoping to get out of the USSF, to come back with these people and have new ideas and fresh approaches and tons of energy to really get this thing off the ground.” Thus, the energy created at the USSF was expected to be personally rejuvenating, facilitating fresh work around both nascent and long-term projects.

### ***Facilitate Learning, Development, and Experience Sharing***

Another key goal or expectation among organizers and members was that participants in the Freedom Rides would experience personal learning and development at the USSF and that they would develop contacts and share experiences that would benefit them not only in terms of their political organizing and work with a specific organization, but also in terms of their own individual capacity and growth.

Organizations such as ACE specifically planned to have their members and organizers participate in certain thematic tracks, such as Right to the City, Movement Generation, youth organizing, transit justice, and environmental justice workshops. However, there is also a less directed, more exploratory nature of an event such as the forum where participants are exposed to new people, ideas, movements, and projects from around the country and the world. For many low-income base members of color, some of whom have never left Boston or the Northeast, the chance to experience another part of the country and to meet so many new people and be exposed to so many new things is potentially transformative. Dan, from ACE/TRU, expressed this sentiment prior to the 2010 USSF in this way:

We will be prioritizing certain things but also leaving some flexibility to our members to do what they want and then come back together and share their experiences and learning. We're trying not to saturate our program, we want to make sure there is free/open space to meet people and go to cultural events, to be exposed to new experiences. This isn't a goal, but maybe an expectation: okay, go, meet ten people, start to get some information from people not even connected to environmental justice, and it may be something we can talk to members about.

Another important element of development and learning was identified by Alex of Boston Workers Alliance (BWA). He reported that he felt the forum process was an important experience in the development of his member’s political consciousness and sense of belonging to something larger than themselves: “For me I hope it will help my members to be more politicized and feel connected to a broader movement.” Other interviewees expressed the belief that organization members would deepen their political consciousness at the social forum. In addition to general politicization, the social forum was also viewed as a place for people to develop concrete skills. Many of the youth we spoke to emphasized “learning new ways or organizing” and meeting new people from across the country. An important component of this development included networking. Alex saw the forum as a place for leaders to learn from and connect with others: “for me what’s most valuable is for our leaders to be able to meet other leaders.” Malika, a youth organizer and member of REEP, defined her goals for

the forum in terms of sharing ideas, experiences, and skills with similar organizations from around the country, and spreading the word about the work REEP is doing. As she put it:

For me, I wanted to go to let others know what we do here in Boston with REEP, like how we do stuff, just to learn other skills that other people all over the world have and come back and let them know how Oakland does it like this, and Cali does it like this, you know, and so and so does it like this, to learn new stuff. I wanted to outreach as much as possible, for everybody to know about REEP. I wanted people to know there were REEPers in Detroit: we're here, we're gonna let everybody know what we do in Boston.

Related to the above statements is the goal or expectation of leadership development, particularly for young people. Mike described the critical importance of youth leadership in the forum mobilizing process in this way:

One point where they [the young people] were really together was at that first info session [publicizing the USSF in Boston] knowing that to put young people's leadership at the forefront of our planning so they can lead a process like this. For us it was how do we make sure we have a space where their leadership is gonna be built up big time, and then also, how do we have a space where young people can be developing these real relationships and be freed to have their own experiences.

Overall, the new learning, skills, experiences, and contacts picked up at the forum can translate into the increased knowledge and capacity needed for ongoing organizing and movement building, particularly at the local level.

### ***Build Organizational Cohesion and Community***

An important goal of organizers and base members on the Freedom Rides was to strengthen their organizations, and build community within those organizations. Strengthening internal relations, cohesion, and community within particular organizations and groups is a vital dimension of movement building, and the experience of mobilizing for, travelling to, and experiencing together an event such as the social forum can greatly enhance and transform internal group dynamics. This was a specific goal for Dan who explained that for the core group of ACE members and staff across programs and ages, "building stronger relationships that will be lasting and will strengthen is what we want to do as an organization and as a local movement here in Boston and the MASS area- I hope that that happens as a result of the ride, as a result of our coming together collectively a couple times and doing the ride there and back." As Maya, a youth organizer with BYOP, pointed out:

This is all love and faith, and I hope that really comes out. I think people have learned what they can do. For young organizers and young people in this process they've seen another thing in their organizations, themselves, their activism. Like "wait a second, we can do this? We can do anything!" So we've done a number of things together and I think we're going to continue to do a number of things together but it will be more meaningful,

it's just going to be stronger. To me that's just called solidarity. We'll probably see new relationships come out of this. I think it's going to change the nature of our outside work.

As we shall see, this was among the clearest and potentially most significant impacts of the USSF experience for many Freedom Riders, particularly for young people.

### ***Strengthen Local Organizational Relationships and Movements***

Many of the people we spoke with anticipated not only stronger relationships within their own organizations, but also between organizations. A major goal of the organizers of the Freedom Rides was to use the USSF mobilizing process as a way to strengthen relationships between organizations working on similar issues that have a similar base among largely low-income communities of color. Dan thus praised "the relationships we are building: across issues, across organizations, across differences" and anticipated long term impacts based on such relationships: "we're gonna see the benefit of that for years to come."

In this regard, the process of getting to the forum was viewed as important as being there. Linda, an organizer with DARE in Providence, explains this strategic significance of the Freedom Rides:

I think everyone talks about the social forum once you get there as a place where all sorts of networking and relationships are built, but I think the fact that Boston has used the process leading up to it and even the ride and the process of going there as an opportunity to do that has been brilliant, and really good strategically. And it's really been this build up. Fifteen hours that we're all gonna spend on a bus together there and back. The relationships are really gonna grow some teeth.

This was a particular goal of the youth organizers, who were not developing new relationships so much as cultivating relationships they have been building for years. In this context, organizing for the social forum took on particular significance. Maya put it this way:

I hope the alliances and our solidarity will deepen, especially for those groups that have been working together. We're not going to see each other every week when we come back. We'll go back into our own corners in some ways but I think there's going to be a difference when you know that person. Our emotions, our relationships, our feelings towards each other are going to be stronger in solidarity for a better world. We have some core agreements and I think we'll know more about each other than we did before and we can learn from each other a lot more, particularly for populations that were like, "I don't know if I can go over there or cross that line." You know, in Boston we have boundaries. I think we've learned from these rides, and we are going to continue to learn, different ways of crossing them for social justice.

These local and regional relationships can then become longer-term networks of communication, coordination, and mutual support that can strengthen specific actions and campaigns and help achieve concrete victories.

## ***Strengthen National Level Movements***

In addition to strengthening local relationships another key aspect of movement building is the development and expansion of networks and coalitions at the national scale. National networks such as the Right to the City coalition came out of the 2007 USSF in Atlanta, and organizers with ACE and other Boston area organizations were keen to participate in Right to the City events and strengthen those relationships. While enhancing their own local work was a priority, organizers were quick to acknowledge that engaging in national alliances bolstered this goal and allowed them to see the bigger picture of social change. Mike explained that ACE and REEP were making a strategic decision about furthering their work, "In certain struggles the time is now to build nationally. Before we would have gone to do a workshop, but now we're deep into stuff and we're well organized and strong, so we're gonna hold some space to move things forward nationally." Linda likewise discussed the strategic importance of making national connections at the social forum, emphasizing that DARE isn't "just working on issues in our little corner of Rhode Island, we're trying to affect things on a much larger scale and trying to get to the root causes, and in order to do that we need to build our movements in very careful and intentional ways. The social forums provide really good space for that."

ACE and REEP organizers in particular also expressed strong interest in sharing experiences and developing strategies, contacts, and relationships with other environmental and transit justice groups around the country. As Dan explained, "I want to see that movement grow and become organized, so people across the country are starting to connect and strengthen each other so we can win more and more." This kind of national networking and movement building is linked to the goal of building power, leveraging political strength, and winning victories beyond the local level.

## USSF Outcomes

### ***Create Energy***

During our follow-up interviews with Freedom Ride organizers and participants after the 2010 USSF one of the most powerful and deeply felt impacts of the forum was the energy, inspiration, and desire to continue organizing collectively for social justice that the forum provoked. Mike stressed the importance of getting away from everyday life where you are "overwhelmed with these awful inputs" and to be surrounded by positivity and creativity.

Dan expressed a similar sentiment, emphasizing in particular the impact of participating in the opening march, especially for newcomers to grassroots organizing. As he explained:

During the opening march we walked and chanted together. Folks who had never taken part in this kind of thing loved it. They were taken back by the scale- thousands of folks. They had never seen that before. This is why we had members go, particularly folks who had never been to a social forum or a big rally. Part of it was giving them a new perspective on what the movement really is. They got out there, laughing, smiling, they just couldn't help it. They started carrying signs, making noise, and chanting in ways you never heard them before. At least four from the group I was hanging out with reminded me that people who were kind of quiet here have it in them. They understand what is



going on in the neighborhoods, they understand the need to do something about it, but I don't know if they saw the breadth of the movement and how we connect up with other places, other states, other countries, and that march helped do that for folks, it was a big eye opener.

The energy, excitement, and inspiration generated is about more than personal transformation, however, it also translates into longer-term learning, organizing, and movement building, which was particularly evident for the young people who went to the forum. Grace, of Project Hip Hop, emphasized that the youth she worked with now had a new sense of what a movement could look like "so there is less a feeling of aloneness." Regarding the impact of the USSF on the young organizers and activists with REEP, Mike commented on the youth he works with "feeling urgency around struggle, feeling powerful around struggle." Jermaine talked about bringing such energy back to their work at home: "We came back here with that same energy we had in Detroit, because in Detroit we had energy out of control, since we came back we have been like on our stuff." For her part, Malika had this to say: "Now there's nothing stopping me, I'm gonna make change whether anyone likes it or not, no matter how much the government wants to stop it, we gonna go hard, it's like go hard or go home. I'm just fired up. Like nothing stopping me."

### ***Facilitate Learning, Development, and Experience Sharing***

The personal learning and development facilitated by the USSF, as well as the exchange of ideas, strategies, experiences and contacts reflect the notion and practice of open space that is so central to the social forum process. Here too the goals and expectations of Freedom Ride organizers and participants were largely met. Several of the people we spoke with commented on significant networking experiences where true exchanges took place in which their members shared their work and learned important lessons from the work of others, as when ACE members met from groups around the country about their public transportation organizing.

Jermaine explained his experience of learning and sharing experiences during a workshop with other youth organizing projects as "real deep and real powerful and I learned a lot, even about Boston, about the problems we have here." Mike captured the pedagogical impact of the forum as he described the daily experiences of the young people he helped to coordinate as part of the freedom rides:

We sat down each morning and said "hey, here are a bunch of workshops that have been recommended to us, both in the youth space, or recommended by Right to the City, or recommended by Movement Generation, or different groups ACE feels a lot of solidarity and does work with. And we said, "alright, so out of these, which ones fills some of our goals? Who are the two or three folks who are excited about going to that one, and that one, and that one? And then they took mad notes and they would report back to the group at the end of the day. I felt that they brought back a lot of information, a lot of things in terms of improving their ability and their knowledge of organizing, but mostly through stories from other folks and inspiration.

In relation to the notion of leadership development, the very experience of being at such a massive event with so many people, particularly at the opening march, inspired and motivated

members and organizers to want to take action they might otherwise not be willing to. As Jermaine from REEP explained about his feelings of excitement during the opening march, "It made me want to be like, 'Give me a microphone, let me say something,' and just start a chant. It was a good sense of leadership, it was a good lesson in how to be a leader and how to lead."

### ***Build Organizational Cohesion and Community***

Another clear and beneficial outcome of the USSF was the building of cohesion and community within particular organizations. Carol summarized this benefit of the USSF by saying, "It bonds relationships together which is really important. I mean, I feel a lot closer to the women I went there with." This was especially notable within youth organizations such as REEP. Mike had this to say about the effect of the forum on REEP as a group, "our young people connected so deeply during the trip, they came back solid as a group and with a ton of energy for the struggle." Malika talked about another key moment that really brought REEP members together as a group in which "there were alumni shedding tears, and it was just so deep." Althea further reflected on the importance of such transformative moments with respect to internal cohesion within REEP in the following terms:

I think as a group they were doing really well but they were still defining group dynamics, just learning who each other are and interacting without always getting pissed off about something. They had a couple of sessions where they had all night long conversations and just shared more about who they are. There were some tensions building up in the group and they talked with each other and just sort of had it out. And that was really powerful for them. When they came back to Boston they were tighter, really supportive of one another. I've seen how they work better together, I think it helped the group gel.

In terms of the larger ACE delegation, one of the particular moments that stood out in people's minds as having contributed to a sense of group cohesion was a BBQ that was held at the home of an ACE member's relatives, which also provided an opportunity to learn about issues related to food justice in Detroit. Joe confronted a unique situation when a family member passed away during the forum. His experience in Detroit was shaped by the support he received from other Boston activists: "I really felt their [other Boston-based participants] presence a lot was when I was going through my personal thing. I feel a lot closer to them because I was with them."

These kinds of moments provided an opportunity for members to get to know one another and to build strong inter-personal, intra-organizational, and cross-generational bonds. As Dan continued regarding the experience of the forum, "What stood out, I think, was the sense of people starting to build closer relations within the group. Youth and adults and people who never really spent a lot of time together started to hear each other and listen and learn from each other."

Beyond the strengthening of personal relationships, this kind of internal group cohesion can translate into ongoing organizing and organization building, which Mark feels was perhaps the most important outcome of REEP's participation in the forum:

They built tightly with each other. To organize you have to have so much trust built, and you have to have real genuine relationships with the organizers, real friendships, deep

appreciation for the people you are organizing with. Real deep trust and love and care and we built that in big ways, and probably for our group that's the biggest benefit. I feel like we're on the cusp of building a big membership, just doing tremendous youth organizing work in the coming couple years and it's sort of launched by that experience at the forum. So I mean if nothing else happened in terms of movement building, and we got to build our own group and our own struggle that much in that venue, it was worth it for us.

### ***Strengthen Local Organizational Relationships and Movements***

In addition to strengthening particular organizational dynamics, the Boston Freedom Rides also contributed to the forging of mutual awareness, connections, and relationships among grassroots base-building groups working across different issue areas and generational divides. For example, Lucy from Freedom Road noted, "I've made an effort to seek out people who I might not have known as well before, and different types of conversations. I knew folks well before the forum process, but I feel like it could add some dimension and I think I see some organizational building." More broadly, Dan suggested that groups that knew each other before hand now "are more open and interested" and "are looking for opportunities to come support each other."

This building of local relationships and movements across organizations was particularly notable among the youth organizing projects that came together within the Boston Freedom Rides. Mark noted the important realization that "we can't do it on our own" and went on to describe how the youth groups are starting to understand their own strengths and work together more closely in a large part because of relationships developed at the forum.

It was not only the experiences on the buses or in Detroit that strengthened group solidarity. The planning process itself also played an important role, especially given the satisfaction of pulling off such a large venture. This allowed groups that had previously worked together to develop a deeper sense of trust. As Grace explains:

There is a level of synergy and a level of relationship that had never been. Organizing the social forum trip helped us see the beginning of what is possible together. No single one of us could have pulled off the logistics ourselves, raised the money ourselves, none of it. I really feel like for me, I see it as the first major act of a coalition and a collaboration I believe has more potential than I've seen before. It has more of the ingredients necessary to actually work together than before. I think we felt ourselves being powerful together. There's a lot more work, but I feel like we felt close to each other. We were part of the Freedom Rides, and not our own individual organization.

Malika pointed out that since the USSF the connections built in Detroit have become ongoing relationships of mutual solidarity and support. As she explained, "every time we've had a big event, they [the folks from Boston and Providence they met at the forum] were there, they came to the youth summit, they came to some of the rallies, every time we've had an event we would outreach to them and they was there, like REEP, we're there [for them]."

### ***Experience and Support Detroit and Detroit-Based Movements***

Though it was not voiced as an expected outcome by organizers and participants of the Boston Freedom rides, learning about Detroit and supporting local Detroit-based movements was an important goal of forum organizers. However, in our interviews after the USSF, we found that organizers and members alike expressed significant desires to support Detroit and its local movements. People's experiences in Detroit and what they learned about the social and economic conditions in that city stood out as crucial in terms of helping people to understand how broader socio-economic inequalities and injustices are experienced in the everyday lives of people in a city such as Detroit. It also helped people to appreciate their own struggles in Boston. As a grassroots member of ACE pointed out during a sharing circle at the organization's report back after the forum, "They have no public transportation in Detroit, there's no way to get around, I guess what we have isn't so bad." An ACE organizer reminded everyone that we still have important issues to work on here, and the base member added, "Yeah, I'm still down with the struggle, I know we still have to fight."

Organizers and base members expressed similar thoughts about the lack of supermarkets in Detroit, recognizing how bad it is in that city but also wanting to continue the local struggle for food justice in Boston. Learning about Detroit thus helped people understand how issues such as environmental, transportation, housing, and food justice play out locally in Boston.

In addition to strengthening in-group cohesion, the BBQ mentioned above that Freedom Riders attended also provided an opportunity to talk to local Detroit Activists and, although not a formal part of the USSF, the experience of meeting local leaders left an impression on Joe: "A Boston activist set up a meeting for us with local leaders, and that was really informative."

The young people from REEP also learned a great deal from their exploration of and experiences in Detroit, particularly around the meaning and lived experience of environmental justice. Mark recalled their participation in a tour organized by a Detroit-based youth group:

We're driving around in this van and I said at one point, "Everybody yell out every time you see an environmental injustice." And then they're just like, "environmental injustice, environmental injustice." It would be like, "Environmental injustice, look at that building, environmental injustice, look at that thing and the houses right next to it, environmental injustice, look at the train station boarded up, environmental injustice, over and over and over. They're like, "I bet that's a brown field, I bet that's a brown field." Just the number was stunning, that was stunning. They made a really good choice to have it in Detroit, in my opinion, we needed to see that.

Jermaine talked about his experience of seeing Detroit on the same tour, and how it affected his outlook, concluding that "just to know that like 'cause people got it bad it showed that sometimes you gotta, not necessarily accept what you have, but you gotta be grateful and not just be so unsatisfied with what you got; that's what it taught it me."

### ***Strengthen National Level Movements***

At the national level, the Detroit USSF also had a significant impact in terms of helping participants in the Freedom Rides make connections and build relationships with their

counterparts around the country working on similar issues related to housing, transportation, environmental justice, and other social justice issues. Connections and relationships were developed through specific workshops as well as in the context of new and/or emerging national networks and coalitions such as Right to the City or Transit Riders for Public Transit. In terms of national movements facilitated by the USSF, Dan explained, "I'm thinking in terms of networks we're not connected to as much as we should be. Right to the City is a good example, or maybe the Push Back Network, maybe the Movement Generation folks. I think about those groupings of organizations across the country, and that it [the forum] just sort of reminds us that those are folks we really need to pull from and who we have a lot to learn and gain from."

The young people at REEP have been working on youth-related transit justice issues, and they organized a workshop at the forum that brought together young people from around the country facing similar challenges. As Maya explained, "groups from LA, New York, Chicago, New Orleans and Milwaukee are mounting this national campaign and just made this agreement with the youth groups coming out of the story circle that we can have youth priorities and youth organizing as a part of that larger national battle. That's huge." These conversations led to the idea of building a national-level youth platform to fight for federal legislation in support of transit justice. Mark talked about this outcome of the forum as historic: "our young people held a workshop in the youth space and invited any young people who had been working on public transit from across the country to come together and to talk and to build and to share...this was the first time ever that such a conversation has happened."

Regarding a broader, more identity-related meaning of movement building, Dan described connecting with other groups that work on similar issues but often don't connect:

I think people identify at ACE with the environmental justice movement, so that's how we started the conversation, but we let them know that there is something broader, that there's something about social justice, economic justice, and it goes on from there, and what we were trying to get across to people was that it doesn't matter what the name of it is, it's that people are facing similar struggles, are organizing, are learning similar skills, and for similar reasons are fighting in their local neighborhoods.

Thus, beyond specific networks, platforms, and coalitions, the USSF has also contributed to a more general sense of movement building on a national scale.

## Conclusion

The USSF largely met the goals and expectations of Freedom Ride participants and organizers, particularly those from ACE and REEP who were most directly involved in coordinating the process. As we saw, the forum generated a great deal of energy, excitement, and inspiration that has led to ongoing organizing and movement building at local, regional, and national levels. The USSF also provided an important space for learning, personal development, and the sharing of ideas, experiences, and strategies among organizers and grassroots members. This was particularly the case with respect to workshops, assemblies, and other events organized by particular networks relevant to the work of Boston-area member organizations such as ACE or REEP, including Right to the City, Movement Generation, and Transit Riders for Transit Justice.

In each of these cases, organizers and base members brought back knowledge, skills, contacts, and information to share with their organizations.

One of the most important outcomes of the USSF was the strengthening of internal cohesion and relations within organizations, as we saw most clearly among REEP members. In addition, the Freedom Rides also reinforced inter-organizational relationships and connections at the local and regional levels in Boston and between Boston and Providence. The USSF also provided a space for building national level movements, including the strengthening of specific networks and the promotion of a more general sense of belonging to a larger national movement around issues such as housing, environmental, transit, food, and youth justice. An important outcome of the forum that was perhaps less expected by Freedom Ride organizers was the positive impact of learning about the socio-economic situation in Detroit and how it relates to peoples everyday lived experiences in Boston. Learning about Detroit also provided an opportunity to work with and support local Detroit-based organizations, which was an important goal of the National Planning Committee. Finally, the USSF also allowed grassroots base members and organizers to broaden their horizons and develop frameworks linking local, regional, and global scales.

One movement building dimension that was not addressed by the Freedom Ride organizers and participants we interviewed from grassroots base-building groups was the building of relations and ties across movement sectors. In other words, Boston Freedom Riders shared their ideas, strategies, and experiences, developed personal relationships, and planned specific campaigns and initiatives with their counterparts with other grassroots base building groups associated with networks such as Right to the City, Movement Generation, or Transit Riders for Public Transit and around issues such as housing, environmental, transit, food, and youth justice.

Indeed, building these relationships within the grassroots base-building sector was an expressed goal of the organizers we interviewed. However, there were fewer connections built and relationships forged between members of grassroots base building organizations and activists from other movement sectors including mainstream peace, environmental, and labor movements and more informal collectives and direct action groups. Given scarce time and resources it makes perfect sense to focus on building those relationships that are most directly related to your ongoing grassroots organizing, and that are most relevant to the goals and experiences of your membership, yet the social forum process also provides an opportunity to build wider links across movement sectors at the local as well as wider regional and national scales. The major complaints expressed by the Freedom Ride participants we interviewed from grassroots base building organizations pertained to logistical issues, particularly the impersonal, corporate feel of the Cobo Convention Center and the difficulty of traveling between workshops at Wayne State University, Cobo, and other USSF sites.

Overall, however, the USSF clearly met and even surpassed the expectations of Freedom Ride organizers and participants with respect to movement building goals at the personal, group, inter-organizational, and inter-scalar levels. In this sense, the forum contributed to the personal learning, growth, and development of individual members; sparked excitement and enthusiasm for continued organizing; and helped forge crucial relationships and connections across base-building groups and grassroots social justice projects led by low-income people of color at local, regional, and global levels. Consequently, the organizations that attended the USSF and took part in the Boston Freedom Rides are clearly stronger and more cohesive, more connected to their

local and national counterparts, and more in tune with the hopes and dreams of their grassroots members than before the forum.

Tellingly, when we asked our interviewees whether they would attend another U.S. Social Forum in the future, almost everyone gave an enthusiastic affirmative response. Perhaps Jermaine, a youth organizer with REEP, put it best: "Absolutely, because of everything, the fun, the trip, the experience, just REEP doing what we do there. The social forum needs us. It wouldn't be complete if we weren't there."