

## Connecting the Dots: Roots Causes of Inequality Memoria



On an icy Saturday morning community members joined NIAAS and United for a Fair Economy for the first part of a conversation on the root causes of inequality. Community members at the workshop represented groups such as the New Start Project, Project Hip Hop, Boston College Center for Human Rights & International Justice, bringing residents locally from Jamaica Plain to as far away as the Cape. After a welcome and introduction from Luz Zambrano, a co-coordinator of NIAAS, the session started with individuals sharing a bit about themselves, their work and what brings them to this space. The facilitators, Jeanette and Riahl, then began by highlighting the methodology of the session – a Popular Economics Education. Popular Economics Education meant drawing from everyone’s experience to create a conversation around economic justice based in our daily lives. To begin this collective process, Riahl invited everyone to pair-up with a partner, grab a couple sticky notes and to talk about signs of the



economic times. Our task was to write general themes about our experiences of the economy on sticky notes. After discussing in pairs, we shared our thoughts with the group. Themes shared ranged from:

- increasing rests and falling wages
- to the cost of war
- to the wealth gap and individuals born into debt.

This launched into a conversation around how the economic system is not serving the needs of everyone. One member mentioned how we often talk about the economy and poverty but do not put a face to the discussion, yet in our sticky notes shared we talked about race or age. Others commented that

the conversation about economic justice often lacks a racial lens, and how we must talk about how economic inequality connects with the oppression people of color face. Jeanette shared that others have mentioned similar trends in growing insecurity, greater burdens, and stress, isolation and scapegoating. With this, Jeanette began a conversation around defining what wealth is and the common reactions people have around wealth and income. She shared that wealth is what you have minus what you owe. We began discussing house ownership and how for many when they are paying off a mortgage they think that they may own their house, they have equity. Yet, Jeanette reminded us that with what they actually have paid off, their “equity is the equivalent of the windows.”



To help us have a conversation around wealth and private wealth we moved into an activity entitled “The Ten Chairs.” Ten brave members volunteered to sit in a ten chairs lined up against the wall. Each person was told that they represent 10% of the population and that each chair represented 10% of wealth. A world with equal wealth distribution would resemble the one person in each chair. As the volunteers were getting comfortable in their seats, and with their wealth, Jeanette, revealed that in 2010, the top 10% of the population owned 71% of the wealth, and that the 6 people next to the end were evicted from their seat so Mr. top 10% can enjoy his 7 chairs. As Mr. Top 10% became comfortable with his expanded wealth, the 6

displaced people had to join the 3 people at the end and join them on their chairs. All 9 people needed to share 3 seats, a task that proved to be difficult. While 9 people were busy figuring out how to sit on just 3 chairs, Jeanette shared that within the top 10% there is difference, and that in 2007 the top 1% (let’s say Mr. 10% arm) owned about 35% of the wealth, or 3 and a half chairs – the equivalent of what the 9 people at the other end were struggling over!



After much commotion, everyone returned to the circle to reflect on the activity. The first reaction by one member was that not enough people are aware about this phenomenon. Yet, another member disagreed saying that since Occupy many people are aware, that they just have not been taught strategies on what to do about it. Moving from awareness to strategies, other members added that the system does not allow people to have the energy or spaces to push against the wealth divide. That because those 9 people are struggling over those 3 seats, through the daily grind of multiple jobs, bills, family life, they do not have the energy to counter the wealth divide. Another voice chimed in moving beyond energy, saying that people have learned that pushing against the system has dire consequences. Pointing to experiences in Guatemala to stop the United Fruit Company and the growing privatization of natural wealth like their fruits, led to massive demobilization and killing. The rhetoric about being part of those who push against the system means that people question themselves, their allegiances, their motivations and it encourages people to be alienated from their knowing. Yet, another participant intervened questioning that if people indeed did know about this wealth divide, why do they vote people in power that do not change the systems. The group questioned how legitimate voting was as a process for change. Returning to the conversation about wealth and the divide, another participant shared an experiment done with monopoly where a group of people were



invited to play, the only difference was that 2 players were allowed to start, play 2 rounds, then the next 2 players could join, continuing as such until all players were playing. By the time that later players were able to join, most of the properties had been bought, and they were left playing the fees associated with landing on owned spaces; the players that joined later preferred to stay in jail then continue to go around and be driven into debt. In hearing this example, one person reflected how they have benefitted from their parents getting started earlier; his parents bought a house in the '40s and he benefited from inheriting that wealth to be able to buy his own property. These reflections led us into a discussion of how policies, like the GI Bill and others, have benefited some and not others. One member mentioned the both the inability for African Americans to create wealth and then the loss of wealth over different historical moments and highlighted the need for restorative strategies. One such example is the recent article "Case for Reparations." One member pointed to indigenous rights movements in Ecuador, Guatemala and other countries that claim land and property as conceive of collective rather than an individual ownership and how it provides an example of how we need to think outside the current systems to look for solutions. Another member, mentioned the Land Trust of the Dudley Street Initiative as an example of a strategy.



Riahl guided the conversation from wealth to income, asking, what is income? Members gave examples of salary, wages, interest on saving accounts, social security, dividends from stocks, etc. Riahl explained that economists like to talk about the population in quintiles, or fifths and asked for 5 volunteers for the Walking Quintile Activity. Another 5 brave volunteers walked up to the front of the room, where Riahl gave them cards labeling them as one of the 5 quintiles and their corresponding incomes. The Riahl told each quantile that we are going to examine the percent change income change from 1979 to 2009, and that for each 5% change the quantile will take one step. A step forward is a positive 5% change, and a step backwards is a negative 5% change Beginning with the bottom quintile (\$0-27,794), we discussed who would be part of that category, members suggested retail workers, part

time workers, and the unemployed among others. As the top quintile heard his change, he grinned as he walked ten steps forward, more than 5 steps past anyone else.



Yet, Riah had some more information to share – he wanted to break quintile to just examine the top 5%. Mr. Top 5% took 15 and half steps forward, zooming past the top quintile. Riah was not done, he asked

for a volunteer to represent the top 1%. The room wasn't big enough for Mr. Top 1%, he had to take 34 steps, right out the door into the hall, leaving Mr. Top 5% and the other quintiles staring at his back as he walked merrily along.



We regrouped to reflect on the activity and the changes in income from 1979 and 2009. Many remarked that the activity was very powerful and demonstrated the underlying structure in the wealth gap. Many noted how politicians and others say they are "middle class" but that we need to question how people label themselves after this activity. Another participant shared how the time period, '79-'09, represented a generation passing and that it ended during the recession. People remarked that the activity would be worse if we included the change up to now. Jeanette asked why we thought that they choose the period of 1979 to 2009. In thinking about what was happening in 1979, the group recognized that this included the Reagan administration years and the rise of the "trickle-down economics" model. The discussion moved to how shifting

policies have impacted the economy as well as different communities. The question arose about race and poverty and the tensions between recognizing the white poor and holding up how privilege and racism

play into poverty. Members referenced that poverty evokes the black faces and that many rarely acknowledge poverty in white communities. Other referenced how its more important to talk about how racism creates situations in which the health of people of color is poorer, and how access to wealth is much more difficult due to race. As the workshop moved to lunch the conversation settled on focusing on the issue of massive inequality.

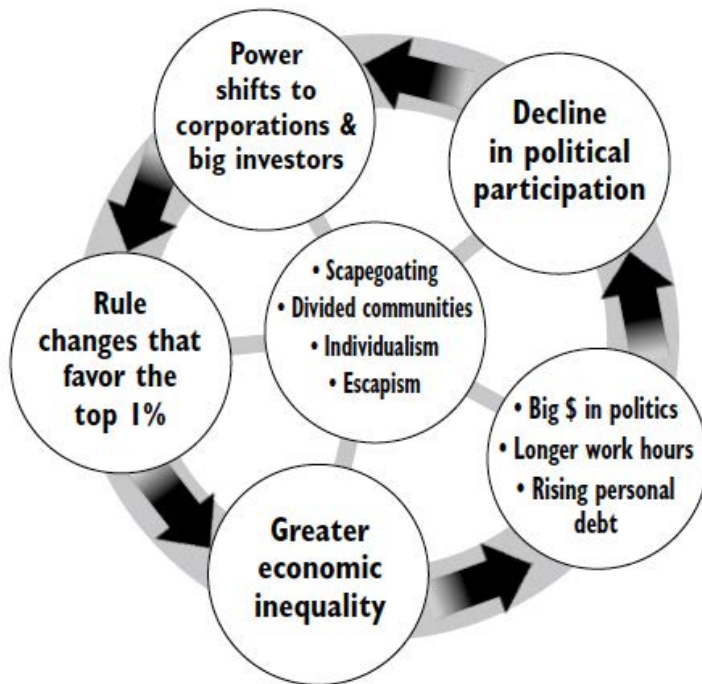
As a delicious lunch with platanos, empanadas, rice and chicken was served, people broke off to continue conversations and make new connections. After lunch, Jeanette reconvened the group to talk about the history of the power workers have had through unions and the subsequent impact of anti-union policies.

She described the wheel of misfortune. As people began describing frustrations with the system and recent policies, such as the recent Supreme Court Citizen United decision, Riah and Jeanette moved us into our last activity.

We returned the Walking Quintile activity, but this time we were going to examine the period from 1949-1979. For this version each step in this version represents a 10% gain or loss. The five brave volunteers returned to

their places at the front of the room. Riah began asking each quintile to take a step: the bottom quintile 12 steps forward, the second 10 steps, the middle 11 steps, the fourth 11.5 steps, the highest 10 steps.

## The Wheel of Misfortune



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Riahl invited Mr. Top 5% back up, and everyone held their breath wondering what would happen to what looked like relatively equal growth among quintiles. Riahl asked Mr. Top 5% to take 8 steps forward.



One of the first responses as we came back to the circle was, "What happened to us?" Jeanette enthusiastically remarked that if it happened once, it can happen again. The conversation moved into how the myths of "pulling up your bootstraps," and working hard have carried over between the two time periods, but that the systems have changed. We began to discuss how we can change the system. One person remarked that we need a movement, we need to educate each other about this and we need to mobilize. We took this opportunity to split up into pairs to talk about how movements have benefited us individually. One person shared that the woman's movement has shaped his life because living with a single mother that meant she had the opportunity to support and raise him. Another remarked how the

labor movement, and being a negotiator in the labor movement, help her and others keep benefits that sustained them.

The workshop wrapped up by sharing the wheel of prosperity and by emphasizing how movement building can help us address economic inequality. Before ending everyone had a quick conversation about what worked and what could be improved. Many expressed that the activities reinforced by the charts and diagrams really were a powerful way to talk about the issues that allowed for both emotions and specifics to come forward. In talking about what could be improved, people remarked that they wished everyone could have stayed the whole time. An idea arose that NIAAS should ask if people needed child care in advance, as that was a reason a couple mentioned for having to leave early. People also mentioned that making the initiation emails more specific and provocative would help attract more people to come.

Luz ended the workshop by thanking everyone for taking the time to build relationships and discuss these issues. Everyone was invited to the second session of the workshop on January 24<sup>th</sup>.

## The Wheel of Shared Prosperity

