

## Building Power on the Path to Post-Pandemic Recovery and Beyond<sup>1</sup>

How—and why—could this possibly be the time to contemplate “recovery”?

No one can even say *when* it will begin. Over the coming months, experts’ most frequent answer will be, essentially, “*not yet.*”

In this moment, the upward swing of new COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths sends cascading waves and ripples of all sizes through our lives, our environs and our economy. We struggle to cope, to adjust and go forward. Some struggle just to survive—or to fight on to—another day.

But if there’s a family or a team, a community, or an organization looking to us for leadership, visualizing recovery is an obligation we must undertake. Though we feel generally powerless to hasten its arrival, we do have opportunities to build the collective power that can be applied to shape whether recovery will benefit the few or the many.

### The core assumptions and strategies for action

- **Assumption:** The recovery will be gradual and halting—not a quick bounce-back—especially if there is a “second wave” of COVID-19 cases in the fall. Two of the key prerequisites to recovery are massive testing and ample personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care workers.  
**Strategy:** Incorporate into existing advocacy the message “*we can’t recover without testing and PPE.*”
- **Assumption:** CARES Act implementation will take weeks or months for many millions. The nearly **universal hunger for practical information and guidance on accessing benefits will remain a huge opportunity for community engagement** and for reinforcing and deepening our bonds with those we serve and organize.  
**Strategy:** Make “Lived Relief” (“*it’s not relief until it arrives*”) the lead message in most all community interaction and assist/advocate quicker relief delivery.
- **Assumption:** The November 3<sup>rd</sup> General Election *will take place* nationwide as scheduled. **Expanding “vote at home”** (formerly known as “vote by mail”) is now a top priority policy campaign and GOTV imperative—and it should be ours, too.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay expands and amplifies ideas articulated in two recent essays: *Organizing in a Time of Approaching Pandemic: Campaigns and Contingency Planning Amid the Effects and Fear of Coronavirus*, (March 7, 2020) and *Moving Through Contagion Fear, Preparing for Recovery* (March 17, 2020). Both are posted in the Larry Kleinman’s Writing page of [www.pcun.org](http://www.pcun.org) and on [www.forgeorganizing.org](http://www.forgeorganizing.org).

Larry Kleinman is a co-founder and former Secretary-Treasurer of PCUN, Oregon’s farmworker union, and an adviser to CAPACES Leadership Institute ([www.capacesleadership.org](http://www.capacesleadership.org)), PCUN’s sister organization, both headquartered in Woodburn, Oregon.

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**Strategy:** Remove impediments to getting a ballot safely into every voter's hands and dial up the motivation to "*vote like our health depends on it*".

If our forces and allies, writ large, take nothing for granted and pursue strategies like those above, **we will defeat Trump for re-election**, ushering in a process to restore, repair, and rebuild that will dominate the rest of the 2020's.<sup>2</sup>

### **The pandemic compounds societal inequity**

It's necessary to acknowledge that, like every other cataclysm that befalls our world, a pandemic surfaces and puts into sharper relief the inequities embedded in our social and economic structures.

The bulk of acute and elevated risks are borne by health care workers, first responders, and other "essential" workers—mostly in food-related jobs—whose labor "keeps the nation from going into civil unrest" as a UFCW union official in New York put it. The vast majority are working class and skew heavily non-white (less so among medical doctors) and disproportionately immigrant.

Immigrant and African-American communities will bear an inordinate share of the illness and death in this pandemic. They're overrepresented in prisons and detention facilities. They are generally less healthy due to dangerous working conditions and insufficient health care access. They carry greater social stress and rely on inadequate and ill-timed information on the pandemic threat. Though immigrants dominate the food production workforce, they will get relatively little of the CARES Act financial support. In those communities, a higher infection rate in the pandemic's early phases would, in theory, also result in proportionally greater numbers who become immune sooner than later.

Those who survive will be on the front lines leading our economy into recovery. They will remain "essential" and, for most in farm labor, deportable. All in all, it's enough to give a new meaning to "PTSD": pandemic trauma stress disorder.

If progressive forces and receptive media can cement an accepted narrative of recognition and appreciation for essential workers, that may help to open pathways to eliminating some structural inequities.

### **This is a test**

Testing, actually, and on a massive scale for both infection and for post-infection antibodies, the evidence of immunity. How massive? At least 750,000 tests per week, a threshold goal not likely to be achieved until well into May.

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<sup>2</sup> The 2020 election and the run up to a change of administration on January 21, 2021 is the subject of a January 2019 essay by Larry Kleinman, *One to One to One for 1-21-21*, also posted at [www.pcun.org](http://www.pcun.org)

Experts seem to agree that:

1. **To chart a path to recovery, we must have macro-data on who has achieved immunity** and who is still vulnerable. Our individual and collective paths back to work depends on it.
2. **“Shelter-in-place” alone will not stamp out Coronavirus contagion.** For one thing, “shelter-in-place” has practical limitations, even when combined with mask wearing. There’s some continued physical interaction via food shopping, medical treatment, performing essential work, and inconsistent personal discipline. There’s also the effects of willful disregard, stoked by right-wing media, by some high profile evangelists, and by Trump’s stream of contradictory signals, e.g., his vision of churches “packed with congregants” on Sunday, April 12<sup>th</sup>, a monumental blunder which would long have been remembered as the 2020 “Easter Mass Contagion.”<sup>3</sup>
3. **At most, “shelter-in-place” sets the stage for containment protocols,** ones the federal government should have initiated in late January: identifying and quickly isolating new cases, tracing the chain of people potentially exposed and quarantining them. Physical distancing for those over 60 and/or with chronic health conditions will continue until—possibly beyond—mass vaccination.

### **The three phases of recovery: indicators and expectations**

We strain to visualize the road to recovery at a moment when much of the **economy is in a medically-mandated coma—temporarily unable to breath on its own without the ventilator of federal disaster relief**<sup>4</sup>—and more of the economy will soon be added.

Medical and economic experts increasingly agree that the recovery, “phase one”, can begin if/when shelter-in-place get us to containment mode, and if testing can confirm and quantify a sufficiently sizeable population of “known immunes”.<sup>5</sup> **As soon as this summer, limited and unevenly distributed economic activity can revive.**<sup>6</sup> To head off

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Trump has thus far declined to issue a national “shelter in place” directive, as have some pro-Trump governors such as Greg Abbott in Texas. Some evangelical mega-churches have openly defied city-level orders and held in-person religious services; one such minister, Rodney Howard-Browne, was arrested in Tampa 3/31/20. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carlieporterfield/2020/03/31/florida-megachurch-pastor-arrested-for-defying-coronavirus-stay-at-home-order-and-holding-services/>

<sup>4</sup> Like many of the actual medical ventilators in the federal stockpile, key components of the federal government’s economic ventilator, like the Small Business Administration, are broken, nonfunctional or quickly breaking down.

<sup>5</sup> Some estimates put the immune population in the U.S. at only 5% (around 17,000,000) in June; in early April, Iceland reported that 50% of those who tested positive were asymptomatic, affirming massive testing as essential.

<sup>6</sup> Examples include resumption of nonemergency medical activity and small social gatherings. Hotspot areas like New York City, Detroit and New Orleans may see higher concentrations of immune population and therefore greater latitude to increase economic activity sooner than other areas.

an infection resurgence, nonlocal travel may be restricted, and a 14-day quarantine imposed upon arrival on those who travel, especially from hot spots.<sup>7</sup>

Phase two of recovery would take hold when medical science and practice can deliver major risk reduction (effective anti-viral treatment), greatly reducing the mortality-rate. That's likely no sooner than this fall. **Consumer spending will remain cautious and stocks/property value recovery slow.**<sup>8</sup>

Recovery, phase three, begins when the bulk of the populace has been vaccinated. **Only then does the economic return to “normal”, projected no sooner than summer 2021.**

And could “Recovered” be upended by “ReCOVID”, a pandemic resurgence in the fall? That would send the economy back into a coma, but we'd hopefully respond more effectively, applying hard-earned lessons from these early days.<sup>9</sup>

In short, we should not expect any definitive “All Clear” for recovery and renewal this year, regardless what Trump and other hucksters declare.

### **Delivering “Lived Relief”: An urgent need and powerful organizing opportunity**

These three words may crystallize the core elements of an opening to transformational organizing and politics emanating from the pain, loss and anger of pandemic times.

The CARES Act may promise financial rescue or relief, but **people don't experience it until they actually receive it.** The Administration is just getting started in bungling the delivery. The confusing/contradictory structures leave businesses and nonprofits unclear about whether they should continue employees on payroll and medical insurance (and apply for forgivable loans) or send them into the purgatory of an unemployment benefit system which has neither the human nor the technological capacity to handle a twenty-fold (and growing) influx of applicants practically overnight.

Workers and small business owners will feel and see value in community organizers reaching out with detailed information about qualifying, navigating the process and joining collective demands for quicker action.<sup>10</sup> This engagement must begin immediately and be continuous, as the “CARES Act” becomes widely experienced more like the “CURSE” Act (Complicated Untimely Relief Sinks Everyone).

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<sup>7</sup> On 3/29/20, Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo briefly imposed just such a limit on travelers from New York.

<sup>8</sup> Consider that the U.S. stock markets took 22 months to back fill the 36% losses of the 2008-09 financial collapse. It took four years to move past similar losses from the 2000 “dot.com” bust and post 9/11 recession.

<sup>9</sup> See Nicolas Kristof column, *What's Next in the War on Covid-19?*, New York Times, April 4, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/04/opinion/sunday/covid-whats-next.html?referringSource=articleShare>

<sup>10</sup> How about demanding return of National Guard units from border wall duty and assigning them to unemployment claim processing?

**Such an outreach and advocacy campaign should complement—not eclipse—other urgent campaigns** such as including mixed status families in Disaster Relief #4, demanding mass testing and PPE, Census participation, DACA recipient protection, and voter engagement. **We lead with Lived Relief and pivot to such other messages.** And there are natural political synergies: a fuller Census count will channel more resources to our communities for long-term recovery. We can take the opportunity to prepare eligible folks to vote to remove the leaders who are responsible for corrupt, racist, reckless, incompetent and unjust governance.

A Lived Relief outreach campaign can greatly expand our social media and cellular lists which we should assume will be our primary organizing channels through November.

Finally, Lived Relief is solidarity in action, the experience of helping each other survive.

### **The Power to Win the 2020 Election: “*Voting like our health depends on it*”**

We have just over 200 days to ensure that a ballot is received by—and returnable from—every voter, prioritizing the states and localities where margins could be close. In all but a few states, this means **dismantling legislative, bureaucratic and disability-related obstructions to vote by mail.**

This is not a new idea<sup>11</sup> but it has obvious new urgency. In some places, we will have to overcome the kind of political opposition we’ve just seen in Wisconsin.<sup>12</sup> There, and in many more places, a combination of legislative, regulatory, technological and resource changes will be required, and quickly. And we’ll need to **mount a massive outreach and education campaign to activate voters**, especially where impediments remain, such as voters having to make a request or file an application to receive a ballot.

To meet this challenge, we can draw on experience from peer organizations and allies. Oregon, where I live, has conducted all elections solely by mail since 1999. Organizations like PCUN have honed effective tactics that they can share. Organizers in states or localities that more recently or selectively converted (e.g., local elections only) have expertise especially relevant to those in states now just embarking on—or resisting—reform.

To cite a few, specific challenges include re-registration (bad address, no ballot forwarding), ballots or support for the visually impaired, or ballots in languages other than English. Our outreach to voters unfamiliar with the vote at home mechanics can build political and social capital, in tandem with Lived Relief engagement.

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<sup>11</sup> A good resource is [www.votebymail.org](http://www.votebymail.org)

<sup>12</sup> Republicans who control the state legislature, backed up by conservative majorities on the state and US Supreme Courts, blocked executive action to postpone the April 7<sup>th</sup> Primary election and relax absentee ballot restrictions that Republicans had enacted under Gov. Scott Walker.

Though the challenge of making change state-by-state seems daunting, it's also a better match for our organizing, political and litigation leverage. We can re-purpose and expand local coalitions and activate our relationships with elected and appointed officials. "Relational voting" strategies, successful in 2018 and expanded for 2020, also fit right in.

As a message, "*vote like our health depends on it!*" unites our individual physical safety, a system that doesn't compromise it, and the broader politics of pandemic response, the democratic process and the social compact.

Finally, we must anticipate that we will encounter voters heartbroken, dispirited, and preoccupied by the wrenching loss of life and illness in their midst.<sup>13</sup> It's a weight that could break even the fiercest will to make one's electoral voice heard.

### **On the way to Election Day: United Front, Big Reckoning, October Surprise?**

Here are brief descriptions of consequential events we may see before November 3<sup>rd</sup>:

United Front for National Salvation. Now that Bernie Sanders has just suspended his campaign, Joe Biden is become the putative nominee and will clinch the nomination on June 2<sup>nd</sup> (Super Tuesday II, thanks to eleven states postponing primaries). The Democratic Party should hold a virtual convention in late June (not mid-August) to give Biden and his running mate<sup>14</sup> four full months to build the widest possible united front. Biden should **assemble and announce in July a broadly representative "cabinet in waiting."** Its members would each take every opportunity to counter specific policies and actions by the respective officials of the Trump Administration. One overarching theme would "*facts, not falsehoods.*"

The Big Reckoning. As the pandemic's toll plateaus but its cumulative effects broadly raise anger above sadness—right about the time the presidential debates take place—**judgments will solidify about how and why we were woefully underprepared and horribly led.** Trump's lethally toxic mix of lies, delays, obstruction, intimidation and retribution, endless grievance, and my-credit-their-blame might well be summed up in the plainspoken statement/frame: "*Trump Isn't Working For Me*". A companion judgment would uplift the value of competent, in-time public service and the collective efforts that can move mountains when the stakes are high enough.

October Surprise. We should **count on Trump to declare the country open for business and back to normal**, seeking to make the election a referendum on bold action to address popular frustration rather than a judgment on his fitness for office and disastrous record. We should assume that demoralization spawned by the slow pace of recovery create fertile ground for Trump's entreaties. His maneuver will require a quick

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<sup>13</sup> Consider the disproportionately high number of deaths in African American communities in Detroit, Milwaukee, and New Orleans, among others.

<sup>14</sup> I'm hoping that Stacy Abrams is his choice for Vice President.

and forceful response, leading with personal and public safety. We can lay a foundation starting now by stressing that successful health emergency response inevitably requires what seems at the time like overreaction. We'll add that **we mustn't repeat the mistakes of January and February** which, by then, will have been responsible for tens of thousands of avoidable deaths.

### **Community, Solidarity, Sustainability<sup>15</sup>**

These three values can serve as a guiding frame to re-ground our core thinking and forge the popular will to re-work social and economic structures. Some areas for promising opportunity might include worker rights (especially for “essential workers”), alternatives to mass incarceration, widening digital access and participation, and a re-boot on climate change.

**Restore, repair, and re-build** will be the overarching challenge of this entire decade, as we deal with the scale and variety of the Trump Administration's destruction, compounded by the pandemic's profound impacts. This will require and, in turn, fuel community, solidarity and sustainability.

We must organize space well before November 3<sup>rd</sup> to align forces on a few priorities for immediate action in each major policy area (e.g., measures that reduce immigrants' pain and fear). If we don't, even our most urgent needs will submerge unaddressed in the immense post-Election swirl of demands.

**Sustainability also includes staying in the fight.** Social change leaders and organizers will falter if we fail to fashion a personal rhythm in this disorienting reality. That will require finding new ways to define and practice down time—for each of us, our families, and our teams. Solidarity calls on us to develop contingency plans for the prospect of leaders stepping away due to illness. Our community is counting on us to do that.

For the vast majority of the world's populace, coronavirus will trigger our bodies' capacity to achieve immunity. Hopefully, pandemic response and recovery will activate the powerful, positive forces of our *humanity*. Many lives—and quite possibly our own—depend on it.

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<sup>15</sup> A phrase passed on to me by my friend and colleague Victor Quintana, longtime activist in New York City. In an upcoming essay, tentatively titled *Purge, Surge & Emerge*, I will detail ideas on the topics mentioned here.