



**FUNDERS FOR  
A JUST ECONOMY**  
NEIGHBORHOOD FUNDERS GROUP

# **BUILDING POWER IN PLACE**

**Las Vegas: Confronting Corporate Mirages,  
Visioning and Winning from the Ground Up**

## CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION: THE PROJECT</b>	<b>3</b>	<i>The Mining Mirage</i>	<b>19</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION: THE PROCESS</b>	<b>4</b>	<i>Banished to the Tunnels: Corporate-Created Crises</i>	<b>20</b>
<i>OUR METHODOLOGY</i>	<b>4</b>	<i>Weeklies &amp; Everyday Vulnerability for Low-Income Tenants</i>	<b>21</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION: LAS VEGAS</b>	<b>7</b>	<i>Building Renter Power</i>	<b>22</b>
<b>THE BUILDING BLOCKS: GEOGRAPHY &amp; DEMOGRAPHICS</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>POWER IN PLACE: GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE</b>	<b>25</b>
<i>Las Vegas' Sacred Indigenous Lands</i>	<b>8</b>	<b>POWER IN PLACE: MOVEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>Protecting Each Other, Protecting the Land</i>	<b>9</b>	<i>Building a Base to Shut Down Caesar's Palace</i>	<b>29</b>
<i>An Oasis for BIPOC Communities – or a Mirage of Equity?</i>	<b>9</b>	<i>Coalitional Change and Generative Conflict</i>	<b>30</b>
<b>THE BUILDING BLOCKS: CAPITAL &amp; CORPORATIONS</b>	<b>11</b>	<i>Centering – and Valuing - Stories &amp; Strength of Members</i>	<b>33</b>
<i>Corporate Cartels, From Mining to Retail</i>	<b>11</b>	<b>POWER IN PLACE: WHERE FUNDERS FIT</b>	<b>33</b>
<i>Alternative Economic Visions &amp; Narratives</i>	<b>12</b>	<i>1. Seeding Local Progressive Funding</i>	<b>33</b>
<i>The Stations Struggle and Casino Power</i>	<b>13</b>	<i>2. Advancing Indigenous &amp; Worker-Led Funding Models</i>	<b>34</b>
<b>THE BUILDING BLOCKS: LABOR</b>	<b>15</b>	<i>3. Breaking Beyond Election Cycles</i>	<b>35</b>
<i>A Union Built by Room Attendants, Servers and Bartenders</i>	<b>15</b>	<i>4. Doing the Research and Educating Each Other</i>	<b>35</b>
<i>An Unprecedented Infrastructure for Workers</i>	<b>16</b>	<i>5. Going from Cyclical to Sustained Civic Power Funds</i>	<b>36</b>
<i>Vulnerable Workers, from Health to Heat Islands</i>	<b>17</b>	<i>6. Turning to Collaborative Funding</i>	<b>36</b>
<b>THE BUILDING BLOCKS: LAND</b>	<b>19</b>		



# WHO WE ARE



**Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG)** is a network of national and local grantmakers throughout the U.S. We bring together funders to learn, connect, and mobilize resources with an intersectional and place-based focus. We create inspiring organizing spaces for funders to explore shifting power and money in philanthropy towards justice and equity. Our member network includes donors, philanthropic institutions, and their staff interested in supporting racial, economic, gender, and climate justice movements across the US.

Leading the Building Power in Place project, **Funders for a Just Economy (FJE)** is a program of NFG committed to advancing the philanthropic conversation around intersectional economic justice and workplace power. We are committed to placing organized labor, worker centers, worker justice campaigns, policy efforts, and organizing strategies at the center of our efforts. Partner groups address the disparate impact of economic policies on people of color, women, migrants, and low-income individuals and families. Two of our key programs include (1) Meeting the Moment, creating collaborations for a just future of work(ers) that also addresses long-term racial, gender and climate justice and (2) Labor's Evolution, strengthening ties among labor unions, community-based organizations and philanthropy and charting new directions in worker-led organizing.

**Writing & Research Team:** Robert Chlala, PhD (UCLA Labor Center & Cal State Long Beach), Syma Mirza (NFG's Amplify Program Consultant), and Neda Said (NFG's FJE)  
**Thought Partnership & Project Development:** Manisha Vaze & Melody Baker (NFG)  
**Report Designer:** Karla Flemming (karlaflemming.com)  
Special thanks to NFG communications & administrative teams for all they do!

Our BPP work in Las Vegas is only possible thanks to long-term foundational work from and FJE's partnership with NFG's Amplify Fund. Launched as the first grantmaking fund at Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG), **Amplify Fund** believes that community power is the key driver of just and equitable development. As a funder collaborative, the Fund supports Black, Indigenous, people of color and low-income communities to build power and to influence decisions about the places they live and work.

Amplify centers racial justice and believes in following the wisdom and guidance of local leaders. In addition to guiding our strategies and grantmaking, Amplify is committed to living these values through internal operations, administrative functions, and behavioral norms to the fullest extent possible. They fund in 8 places -- Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Tennessee and in California (via the Fund for an Inclusive California). Amplify selected these places because of: 1) the prioritization of power building work led by people of color and low-income people, and focused on equitable development; 2) the relative absence of national philanthropy; 3) the potential to mobilize local philanthropic dollars. In each place Amplify follows the guidance of local advisors and the wisdom of those with lived experience to develop context-specific strategies.



**FUNDERS FOR  
A JUST ECONOMY**  
NEIGHBORHOOD FUNDERS GROUP

## INTRODUCTION: THE PROJECT

The newest uprisings for Black lives, accelerated in 2020, not only put Black-led organizing at center stage, but it also remapped the ways philanthropic and other institutions think about power to incorporate the South and Midwest. So too has the success in shifting state-level power and national electoral results in states like Georgia and Nevada. Yet such a headline-driven view obscures both active changes and the seeds of long-term transformation to build power.

More broadly, the impulse and intention to direct new resources to the South and Midwest and to “purple” regions can often be met with confusion on where to even begin - or with rapid action wrapped in assumptions on what works where. This can translate into frustration in these underfunded areas as local movements for change are bypassed for more well-resourced groups with national reach, or are asked to replicate one model that may not fit local geography, history, and power relations.

When it comes to expanding the geographic reach of funding to support lasting change on inequality, in other words, mobilizing resources must be met with a deeper knowledge of and partnerships with Black, Indigenous,

migrant, and people of color-led movements rooted in place. Local funders, too, must also be considered in this landscape and as potential partners.

Building Power in Place emerges from a recognition that there is no “one size fits all” solution to addressing low-wage worker issues and economic inequality in the US, especially if we want to pay attention to race, gender and climate. In fact, many challenges workers and low-income communities face are place-based or geographic. Think about how local policies like a \$15 minimum wage can be undercut by state pre-emption, or the power that corporate forces like Amazon or agri-business exert in rural and exurban places. This has never been more clear than under COVID-19, where essential worker protections are a complex patchwork, and often include battles among local cities and state governments in intervening in dangerous industries like meatpacking.

We ask: How are low-wage workers and organizations that represent them addressing unequal economic, health conditions, given the complex geography of power in the US? Where are their connections among places in terms of both what low-income Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities face and how they organize? What role are funders playing – and where can they shift - to best respond to the specific place-based conditions related to economic justice?



This project is as much a research process rooted in community voices as it is an active process to help forge a shared understanding among funders, community, and labor organizations, and other key stakeholders through listening, learning, and building together.

Generously funded by the Public Welfare Foundation, BPP has **3 goals**:

**#1** Identify specific urban and rural communities with organizing, policy advocacy and other efforts regarding economic justice for low-wage workers and understand how conditions are shaped by place-based factors such as state preemption. Deepen knowledge of the ways in which organizations respond to geographically-specific conditions and the ways they tangibly shift power and the economic prospects for low wage workers.

**#2** Bridge donors, funders, and organizations engaged in related areas - including workforce development, community health and equity - regarding building power for workers. Share more information about worker-led strategies shifting precarious conditions and creating new visions of the economy in places that have not traditionally received significant funding for movement-building and grassroots organizing.

**#3** Build and strengthen relationships with local and regional funders in the identified communities through larger events on issues facing marginalized workers, and facilitate a deeper relationship to national funders, community groups, and NFG.

## INTRODUCTION: THE PROCESS

### OUR METHODOLOGY

BPP is driven by interviews, public conversations and informal dialogue as qualitative research. Each site was selected in partnership with our member organizations, with community groups where we have partnerships, and with our NFG programs. They were narrowed down through a process where we mapped places (1) outside the more conventional sites of significant foundation funding; (2) where NFG programs had active ties, in order to build on our prior commitments and ensure longevity of work; (3) where there was active worker organizing and/or locally-specific manifestations of anti-worker policy (for example, state preemption.) Sites were then filtered to include a diversity of rural-urban or state/local relationships, and to ensure spread across South, Midwest, and rural regions.

At each site, we interviewed local community, family, and collaborative grantmakers, as well as state/national funders with a strong and active





presence in a location. Interview outreach for foundations was conducted via existing NFG networks and community partner recommendations. We then snowballed to map out a wider network of funders and to determine which officers and staff would be the appropriate interviewees. Questions included what the interviewee viewed as the most pressing economic justice issues; how foundations supported work to change these conditions; what challenges they faced in distributing funding; and what gaps they see in local and regional funding related to economic justice. Interviews lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour, and were recorded with transcripts.

We also interviewed and held open info-gathering conversations with labor and community organizations, an approach designed to both gather data and foster new connections among these movements and foundations. Partners for this are selected based on analysis of active worker-led organizing; groups were selected that (1) are led by BIPOC, including in management, (2) work across labor unions and community organizations, and (3) include an emphasis on intersectional organizing. Outreach was conducted to interview leadership of these groups through various networks, including other NFG programs. In the case of St. Louis, we conducted more than a dozen in-depth interviews.

Quotes are anonymized to protect confidentiality. Qualitative data was supplemented and fact-checked with secondary source academic literature, labor and economic statistics (most significantly from the University of Southern California Equity Research Initiative (ERI)/PolicyLink [National Equity Atlas](#)) newspapers, and other media.

## OUR ANALYTICAL APPROACH

How do we begin to get a grasp on the local economy? To start to address this, we turned to a longer tradition of theory that views the economy as underpinned by **land, labor, and capital** (where corporations are subsumed). These three planks are not fixed containers, a long history of political and economic research tells us, but in fact, there is significant tension between the drive to commodify these and the social destruction reaped by free market ideas and practice. **Indigenous, Black radical, decolonial and/or feminist scholars and activists** have driven this point home repeatedly, **showing how we value land, labor and capital is never a given**. How we conceive of property or work can be transformed to better serve all life and reflect broader visions beyond the destructive, extractive market – as it has been historically in certain indigenous, Black and other cultural traditions, and many strive today to make possible at a community level in many ways. While (racial) capitalist transformation has sought to



make land, labor and capital solely profit-driven, there have been key moments of political transformation that have pushed back to redefine these economic elements more responsive to and rooted in social needs like care. In other words, these *Building Blocks* of the economy **not only shape power but are active sites where power is contested and challenged**. The terms of labor, land and capital (from the local on up) must be up for debate if we are to shift the systemic, historical inequalities that shape worker's lives. To highlight place dynamics tied to people and environment, we also look at geography and demographics as building blocks influencing the local economy.

In what ways then, do movements practically shift power on this complicated terrain? Significant new work has been done linking movements, funders, and practice in place. Focusing on the possibilities for progressive governance at the US state level, the **University of Southern California Equity Research Institute (USC ERI)** [\*Changing States framework\*](#) **lays out six key arenas for contesting and wielding governing power**. The research shows the electoral, legislative, judicial, administrative, communication, and corporate must each be addressed to make change last. The USC ERI framework offers a critical intervention in both recognizing the specific ways power plays out at different geographic levels, but also where and how movements develop multi-issue, multi-faceted strategies

that can take them from building bases and influencing decision-making towards wielding governing power. These arenas of governance thus form one leg of how *Power in Place* is enacted.

Frameworks like *Changing States* and related movement research helps address what capacities are necessary, such as a diverse coalitional and leadership development structures, to change arenas of governance. To understand more precisely how the specific economic landscape fits, we brought in a third area of research by scholar Beverly Silver and others on **the ways workers historically have shifted economic power**. First, workers can build associational power with political or community groups via legally-recognized forms. Second, they can wield their position in the market, such as striking when there are few options to replace them. Finally, they can leverage their position in a key industrial area or production process. Merging these complementary vantage points on progressive movement and worker power under *Movement Ecosystems*, we paid attention to **both the forms and strategies power-building takes** - and how these respond to and reshape local (and state, national, and global) economic building blocks.

Foundations are, of course, inseparable from movement capacities and strategic orientations to the economy, so we also include them in Power in



Place. Our findings across these **lead to our roadmap on ways forward for philanthropic partners in change, *Redefining Power***. As all of our research is rooted in local realities, each of these recommendations will look different by place – though we anticipate commonalities that we will also use to inform our own responsibilities as a funder network.

Components	Key Elements	Key Questions
Building Blocks	Geography & Demography	What key contextual elements shape the landscape of economic & political power?
Building Blocks	Capital Labor Land	Where is economic power contained & sustained locally?
Power in Place	Arenas of Governance	Where and how do government and other institutional actors enact power over land, labor, and capital locally?
Power in Place	Movement Ecosystems Where Funders Fit	Where and how do movements organize and strategically wield power in the economic building blocks? Where do/how can funders play a role in this?

## INTRODUCTION: LAS VEGAS

In November 2022, attention once again landed on Las Vegas as the last midterms ballots were counted, and the Democratic control of the Senate was saved by mere votes in Nevada. Yet as *American Prospect* and other reporting<sup>1</sup> suggested, this victory came from a massive union-led grassroots

<sup>1</sup> <https://prospect.org/politics/can-the-hotel-workers-union-save-the-democrats/>



campaign and other progressive 501(c)(4)s not just speaking squarely to *what* issues working class or people of color residents face – chief among them rising rents – but also *who* benefitted from such inequality, including Wall Street dominated real estate. But escaping notice were the ways that trust in worker-led organizations and grassroots groups knocking doors came from longer fights at the front lines to confront elite power, realize progressive policy, and build mutual support far beyond the election cycles.

As this report will explore, power is being built in not just millions of election season conversations but hundreds of *daily* conversations in Las Vegas’ social movement organizations, where real challenges are brought to the table, and confronted in collaborative organizing. The city is at the heart of a statewide, networked model bridging unions and community groups, urban and rural, Black and brown, and indigenous and migrant in winning ways. Movements are tackling pressing issues like uncontrollable rent, including in short-term “weeklies”; a fragile but massive tourist sector; climate-killing extractive capital; transphobia and xenophobia by electeds; and more. The opportunity for funders to listen, learn, collaborate and win with movements is even more clear – and makes Vegas a place where the terms of a shared urban future is being redefined from mirages of prosperity to concrete infrastructures of care and collaborative power.





Figure 1: Las Vegas Paiute Tribe (LVPT) Annual Snow Mountain Powwow. In 2021, the LVPT have organized to expand the Snow Mountain Reservation in exchange for allowing federal land development for more housing. (Source: Tomás del Coro)

## THE BUILDING BLOCKS: GEOGRAPHY & DEMOGRAPHICS

### Las Vegas' Sacred Indigenous Lands

Nevada was settled in the interconnected lands of four main indigenous groups - Washoe, Northern Paiute, Southern Paiute and Western Shoshone – each of which continue to be fundamental to understanding the region's present and future. Las Vegas stands on Nuwuvi (or Nuwu) lands, part of the Southern Paiute people who share common roots with the Uto-Aztecan or Uto-Nahualt indigenous groups extending into Mexico.

Most visible among these is the Las Vegas Paiute tribe, who were deeded 10 acres from a settler in 1911 (though) near the heart of the city. It took some 60 years for the federal government to recognize the Las Vegas Paiute, which now is also tied to the Snow Mountain Resort area to the far northwest.<sup>2</sup> Recently, the city had sought to extend development into the region, and the LVPT organized to obtain at least 3,800 acres of federal land for Snow Mountain in exchange for this encroaching development.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unlv.edu/about/statements-compliance/land-acknowledgement/nuwuvi>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/las-vegas/las-vegas-wants-to-expand-so-does-the-paiute-tribe-2337367/>



ongoing struggle against the Air Force’s expansion of a bombing range into the Nah’gah Kai sacred lands – settled as the Desert National Wildlife Refuge – speaks to the continued battle by local indigenous tribes against colonial violence, being waged for mutual survival of all life.<sup>4</sup>

## Protecting Each Other, Protecting the Land

Among other tribes, the Reno/Sparks Indian Colony, Pyramid Lake Paiute, Walker River Paiute, McDermott Paiute, Decker Pass/ Duck Valley Shoshone have all been part of a concerted struggle with the US Bureau of Land Management (BLM) regarding the creation of a lithium mine at the Oregon-Nevada border’s Thacker Pass. The land Paiute call *Peehee mu’huh*, or rotten moon, is one of the few remaining places where tribal citizens can still gather traditional foods such as chokecherries and wild potatoes and medicines, such as *toza* root.<sup>5</sup> It is also scarred with the memory of the massacre of thirty-one Paiute people by US soldiers in 1865. Yet Thacker Pass or *Peehee mu’huh* has been targeted by Lithium Americas for one of the only open-pit lithium mines in the US – a highly destructive ecological process that the company claims is worthwhile to supply electric vehicles.

<sup>4</sup> <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/the-desert-refuge-is-sacred-dont-bomb-it>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.oregonlive.com/environment/2022/04/proposed-lithium-mine-near-oregon-nevada-border-stirs-concerns-among-tribes.html>

Organizers with Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN) have also built solidarity with tribal coalitions like the American Indian Movement (AIM) and local tribes including those gathered under the People of the Red Mountain, as well Black and other people of color communities.<sup>6</sup> Together they have refuted the continual claims by Lithium Americas and the federal government regarding the prospects for jobs. “We don’t need jobs that hurt,” is the message one organizer conveyed. Basic organizing efforts like tabling and door-knocking have been a significant part of these coalitional efforts. Such statewide but still grassroots organizing is showing the ways that rural-urban, Black-indigenous, and other intersecting activism can be mobilized to fight for a shared environmental and social future.

## An Oasis for BIPOC Communities – or a Mirage of Equity?

Clark County, home to Las Vegas, has seen the largest period of population growth since its settlement in the last decades, in the 1990s seeing 86% growth regionally, and later 42% (2000-2009) and slowing to 12% (2010-2019). Yet population is steadily increasing as residents flock for relatively cheaper housing from other regions, and is expected to reach from 2.3 million in 2021 to 5 million in 2055. This growth is significant because it has

<sup>6</sup> <https://sierranevadaally.org/2021/06/14/indigenous-peoples-rally-against-thacker-pass-lithium-mine/> and <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/were-just-somebody-little-rural-indigenous-communities-on-the-frontlines-of-energy-transition-amid-plans-to-mine-major-lithium-deposit>



cemented the populations’ status as majority-Black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) as early as 2010 and only set to steadily expand. By 2030, residents in the County are expected to identify 32% as Latinx, 11% Asian and Pacific Islander, 13% Black, and 4% Mixed-Race, and 35% white. (Note that indigenous populations are larger in adjacent, interconnected tribal lands.)<sup>7</sup>

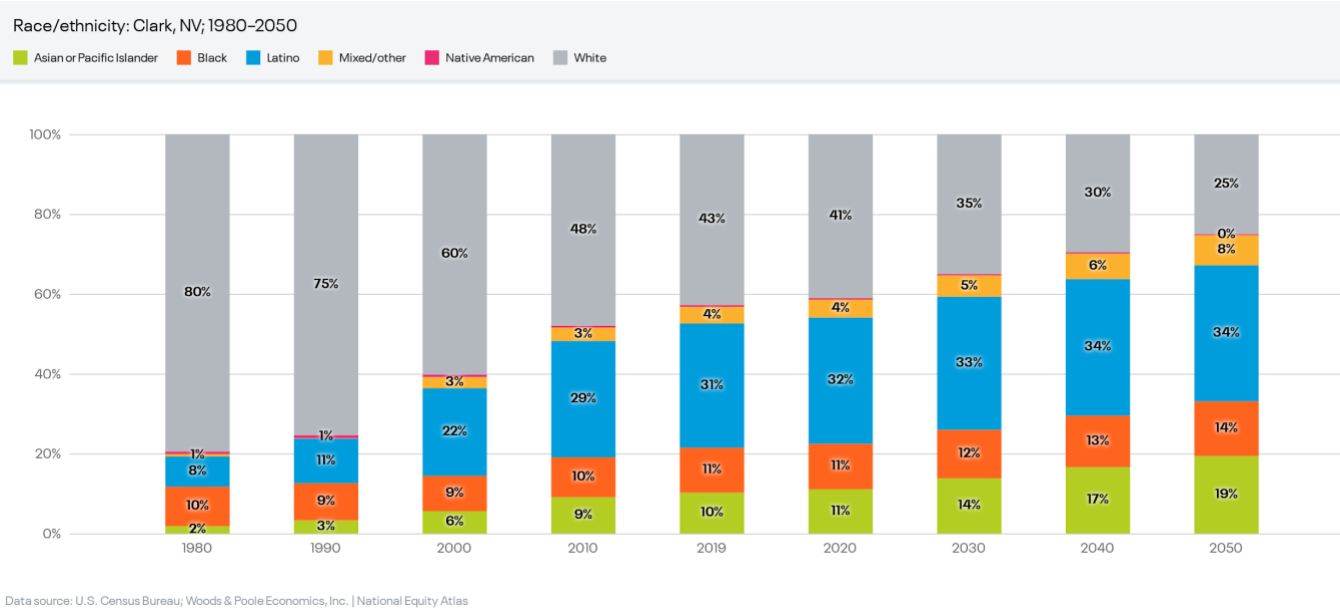


Figure 2: Race/Ethnicity Demographic Shifts, Clark County, NV. 1980-2050 (projected). USC ERI & Policylink National Equity Atlas.

<sup>7</sup> Demographic data in this paragraph from USC ERI & PolicyLink’s National Equity Atlas: <https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/Race-ethnicity#/> and [https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/People\\_of\\_color#/](https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/People_of_color#/)

Early waves of this growth, like many other Southwest cities, included much immigration, particularly among Latinx and Asian-American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) populations. In the 2000s, the split of each population was almost even among US-born and immigrants, but since then migration has slowed somewhat (and US-born internal migrants grown). Among Latinxs in 2019, 12% of the population were immigrants and 19% US-born, and among Asian and Pacific-Islanders, 6% were immigrants and 4% US-born. Yet even so, the percentage share of migrants far outpaces the US average (at 22%), making continued efforts at immigrant rights and to protect working class and poor residents a critical plank in the organizing defining the region.<sup>8</sup>

Many of the changes fueling this growth are fundamentally tied to the questions that define the lives of working class and poor residents – including drawing residents seeking promised affordable housing and the desire for a place to build roots. Many came from places hit by globalized, race-to-the-bottom deindustrialization and the wipeout of middle-class pathways for communities of color.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, much of the growth in jobs that attracted many BIPOC residents is tied to the expansion of the city as a destination in a global tourist landscape, and the ways the city was

<sup>8</sup> Demographic data from USC ERI & PolicyLink National Equity Atlas: <https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/Nativity-and-ancestry#/?breakdown=2&geo=04000000000032003>  
<sup>9</sup> Michimi, A., & Berentsen, W. H. (2008). Small business establishment profiles and rapid population growth in Sunbelt metropolitan areas, 1995-2005. *Urban geography*, 29(6), 526-555.



sold to the world as a (racialized, gendered and colonized) paradise for escape.<sup>10</sup> And in these last decades, the affordability promised in housing purchases and rents has also been wiped out by the foreclosure crises and waves of dispossession.<sup>11</sup>

Black, Indigenous, Latinx, AAPI and marginalized populations are often erased from the story of Vegas' expansion, and they have made themselves visible through the kinds of organizing interviewees shared and documented in this report. And movements built, led and generated by the communities most affected by these painful cycles of inequality have worked tirelessly, as this report also shares, to move beyond the “mirage” of a desert of a city of glitz and fun without consequences – and even a picket fences dream for Black and Brown working class. They have even challenged the narrow version of politics that sees Nevada as a chess piece on a national electoral map to fighting for a genuine vision of a sustainable, diverse community that has created reverberating change on issues like housing, climate change, and worker's rights by building power in place.

<sup>10</sup> For more, see Brown, L. A., & Webb, M. D. (2012). Home ownership, minorities, and urban areas: The American dream writ local. *The Professional Geographer*, 64(3), 332-357.

Ortega, D. H. (2014). Nosotros (“We”): Two Cultures of Sustainability and the “Present City” of Las Vegas. In *Now Urbanism* (pp. 123-135). Routledge.

## THE BUILDING BLOCKS: CAPITAL & CORPORATIONS

### Corporate Cartels, From Mining to Retail

An extractive model of concentrated power has defined Nevada since its early colonial settlement as the “Silver State,” one that has constantly extracted resources of all kinds to benefit wealthy elites mostly beyond the state. These have kept strongly organized voices across the hospitality, retail, gambling and, of course, mining industries. Nevada ranks among the lowest in terms of scores for lobbying protections and transparency, meaning that these large corporate bodies have amassed significant sway over decisions through their campaign and other financial contributions.<sup>12</sup> Nevada has no corporate or income tax, instead only a gross receipts tax, thanks to the influence of these forces. The state ranks as one of the “terrible ten” most regressive in the US – taking from working people via sales and other direct taxes and leaving corporate and private income literally untouched.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2022/02/25/coalition-welcomes-nevada-moving-the-needle-on-affordable-housing/>

<sup>12</sup> See rankings notes in <https://changingstates.org/arenas.php?state-selection=NV#electoral-arena>

<sup>13</sup> <https://itep.org/whopays/>



The Nevada Chamber of Commerce and Nevada Retail Association have been persistent, powerful voices against basic labor standards, in session after state legislative sessions. The other major voice, the Nevada Resort Association, has significant lobbying power and notorious ability to kill bills to support workers, earning the latter’s reputation as the “other NRA.” Despite their best efforts, the Chamber and NRA have failed to eradicate some basic protections won in the state, including the fact Nevada is one of the few states that does not allow “tip credits” or counting tips as part of minimum wage calculations. Nevada also maintains a slightly higher \$10.50 (or \$9.50 if health benefits are provided) hourly minimum wage.

## Alternative Economic Visions & Narratives

These cartels of corporate power have helped treat Las Vegas as a place where global corporations can amass tourist dollars at a significant price to workers and the land or – more broadly in the state – extract tremendous wealth from the earth with little regulation, taxation, or consequence. Important to countering these massive lobbying blocks is the integrated power of labor organizations like the [Culinary Workers Union Local 226](#) (Culinary Union) and cross-cutting bodies like the [Progressive Leadership](#)

[Alliance of Nevada \(PLAN\)](#). Both PLAN and the Culinary Union have gone head-to-head with the Chamber of Commerce on multiple bills, and the NRA on issues like minimum wage, and won. Culinary Union has taken on “Big Pharma” and won historic laws about insulin and transparency to prevent price gouging in 2017.<sup>14</sup> Their victory to create some of the strongest drug pricing laws in the country necessitated taking on more than 70 lobbyists in the state’s capitol, a court challenge, and an expansive dark money PAC.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 3: Culinary Workers Union Local 226 worker-members knock doors in the 2022 midterms (Source: Culinary Union)

14

<https://www.culinaryunion226.org/blog/happy-one-year-anniversary-of-taking-on-big-pharma-and-winning>  
<https://truthout.org/articles/big-pharma-can-be-beaten-this-union-proved-it/>

15 <https://truthout.org/articles/big-pharma-can-be-beaten-this-union-proved-it/>



**FUNDERS FOR  
A JUST ECONOMY**  
NEIGHBORHOOD FUNDERS GROUP



Of course, these victories do not discount the fact that every battle is hard-fought and that the odds are stacked against working people's organizations. Critical to elite power is corporate media domination in the region. *The Las Vegas Review-Journal* was bought by the recently deceased casino mogul, conservative kingmaker and relentless businessman Sheldon Adelson in 2016.<sup>16</sup> Adelson's new management instituted mass firings and restricted reporting regarding the realities of corporate and casino power in the city<sup>17</sup>. Adelson's newspaper was the only major US newspaper to endorse Trump, and as one organizer explained, "opinion became chief" with columnists representing themselves as investigative journalists. It became a mouthpiece counter to "issues workers care about," espousing anti-immigrant, anti-union, anti-transgender rhetoric. Over time, organizing within the LRVJ by journalists (including after Adelson's death) has led to subtle shifts to include coverage of issues like environmental justice.<sup>18</sup> Other more progressive voices have also proven an important source of alternative perspectives grounded in the realities of BIPOC and working class communities, including the *Nevada Current*.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/06/30/the-brass-ring>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.thewrap.com/sheldon-adelson-las-vegas-review-journal-warns-staffers-disloyalty-fired/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/ODN/ReviewJournal/shared/ShowArticle.aspx?doc=LVRJ/2021/09/22&entity=Ar03201&sk=DA754027&mode=text#&undefined>

## The Stations Struggle and Casino Power

The heated, decade-plus campaign led by the Culinary Workers Union Local 226 – with support from community allies – to organize the Stations Casino starting publicly in 2010 exemplifies the kind of power located in corporate casinos who have until recent history enjoyed anti-worker laws and policy in their favor. The third largest private sector employer, Stations Casinos is owned by the Fertitta brothers, a billionaire local family that has made its fortune partially from the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) franchises and from their father's businesses – and flaunts their wealth in \$160 million 285-foot mega-yachts.<sup>19</sup> Station Casinos employees discussed workplace exploitation and stress like the demand to be 24-hours on call, video surveillance of employees to assess performance, use of employees for family functions, and more. Station Casinos is one of the only gaming companies to narrowly avoid a union contract for its properties, including the Red Rock Casinos, across a decade-long fight. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) found over 80 separate violations by Stations in 2012 – the largest unfair labor practices fine against any gaming company – much as surveillance, illegal firing, and using benefits to influence the

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.thedailybeast.com/billionaires-frank-and-lorenzo-fertitta-are-in-hot-seat-over-union-busting-claims>



process and led to rare 10(j) injunctions utilizing the federal courts to demand protection for the unionization process.<sup>20</sup> The latest federal injunction in 2021 was mandated a public reading; it had to be shared out loud with all the employees. According to the administrative law judge on the case, this was “appropriate here given the serious nature and scope of Respondent Red Rock’s unlawful conduct and that most of its numerous unlawful statements and threats were made orally to employees in mandatory and captive-audience meetings by high-level managers.”<sup>21</sup>

As a *TIME Magazine* investigation found, when the Culinary Union tried to organize the Red Rock Casino Resort Spa in Nevada, casino executives allegedly ordered supervisors to prepare a “MUD list” to indicate which employees were pro-management (M), pro-union (U), or don’t know (D), and threatened workers with the loss of benefits if they supported a union, according to the administrative law judge’s decision.<sup>22</sup> The judge found that the casino committed 20 unfair labor practices before the union election, including serving branded “VOTE NO” steaks to employees in advance of the union vote, and assigning a worker who served on the union committee since 2009 to clean floor drains even though she had been placed on “light

duty” assignment after an injury. The judge found that Red Rock engaged in unfair labor practices and ordered the company to cease and desist from threatening employees with reprisals if they select union representation. Red Rock appealed the decision, and the case is still open at time of writing.

The Stations’ owners meanwhile have donated to Republicans and the Trump machine, ostensibly as political protection for their anti-union agenda. Despite the magnitude of the fight, organizers note that the local press has shied away from reporting on these numerous violations and stunning orders by the court, and there has been relative silence that speaks to the “company town” realities of Las Vegas. Media like the aforementioned *Las Vegas Review-Journal* has been often bought and paid for by the largest mining and casino companies, who position themselves as local philanthropists, top employers, and so on, while running billboards and other self-funded media. So, too, have the largely immigrant staff of color often been ignored due to their ethnicity and background, though the Culinary Union has persisted in putting these workers at the center. Even faced with the ways Station Casinos has manipulated media and policymakers, embattled front-line workers have refused to relent against

---

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2021/07/14/how-despite-losing-multiple-rulings-station-keeps-fending-off-a-culinary-contract/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://m.culinaryunion226.org/news/press/station-casinos-loses-judge-orders-fertitta-owned-company-to-negotiate-culinary-union-urges-gcb-to-investigate-stations>

<sup>22</sup> <https://time.com/6221176/worker-strikes-employers-unions>



the years of illegal tactics, even as they struggle to make ends meet. “It’s not a matter of if, but when,” a labor organizer shared. “We will outlast [the company’s anti-union campaign]. It’s been rewarding to work with workers at Station Casinos who refuse to give up.”

## THE BUILDING BLOCKS: LABOR

### A Union Built by Room Attendants, Servers and Bartenders

[Culinary Union’s](#) relentless power against Station Casinos stems from a long history of organizing led by workers themselves, many of them Black and Latinx women working as attendants and in service positions. These include Ms. Hattie Canty, Culinary’s president in the 1990s who herself started as a room attendant. She was leading the Culinary Union during numerous well-publicized, powerful strikes – the longest in the history of the US – against New Frontier Hotel and Gambling Hall. She also helped create the Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, a project to train unemployed and marginalized communities to access better-paying service work, which she saw as part of challenging racial inequality. The Frontier Strike also helped shape and

expand the leadership of subsequent Secretary-Treasurer Geoconda Argüello-Kline - a guest room attendant, Nicaraguan refugee and mother.<sup>23</sup> During Argüello-Kline’s tenure, the Culinary Union cemented itself as one of the fastest-growing in the country, doubling its membership in some years, and making tremendous gains.<sup>24</sup>

Today, the union reflects the workforce in hospitality. The average Culinary Union member is a 44-year-old Latina who is a guest room attendant, and this is alive and present across the members, leadership and organizing in the union – with women representing 55% of the members, Latinx workers 54%, Asian workers, 15% and Black workers 12%. In total, the Culinary Union represents more than 60,000 workers in Las Vegas and Reno, nearly half of whom are immigrants. Leadership also continues to reflect front-line workers: current union President Diana Valles is a 34-year member of the union hailing from Chihuahua, Mexico, having started a guest room attendant also moving through the ranks to support a longstanding organizing campaign at the Stardust Casino, and eventually helping drive essential worker protections during COVID-19.<sup>25</sup> The Secretary-Treasurer,

<sup>23</sup> <https://newrepublic.com/article/165407/geoconda-arguello-kline-culinary-union>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/02/26/how-the-maids-fought-back>  
<https://www.culinaryunion226.org/union/officers/geoconda-arguello-kline>

<sup>25</sup> <https://culinaryunion226.org/union/officers/diana-valles> At time of interviews, the Secretary-Treasurer of the union was Geoconda Argüello-Kline, who retired in 2022. She came to the US a Nicaraguan political refugee and also worked as a guest room attendant for over a decade, including helping lead strikes. During her





Ted Pappageorge, started working as a bartender and the Vice President, Leain Vashon, is a current Bell Captain who cut his teeth in multiple strikes.<sup>26</sup> These leaders, one interviewee stressed, are democratically elected and held accountable by their members and feel a significant weight of managing member's dues that support this work.



Figure4: Culinary Union's Citizenship Project provides free services to help members, their families, and communities apply for citizenship, supporting more than 18,000 immigrants since 2001. (Source: Culinary Union)

tenure, the union jumped from 18,000 members in 1987 to 60,000 in 2021.  
<https://www.culinaryunion226.org/union/officers/geoconda-arguello-kline>

## An Unprecedented Infrastructure for Workers

Culinary Workers Union Local 226's organizing has not relented across the span of the last decades, whether it's the multi-year Stations Casinos organizing campaign, its tripling in size in the last decades, or its creation of one of the most robust benefits systems for working class people in the U.S. This includes a historic Culinary Union-run health insurance system with no monthly premium and no deductible; two free pharmacies (the busiest in the city); a 2% guaranteed pension; \$25,000 in free down-payment assistance towards a worker's first home; free job training to help encourage upward mobility; a legal fund for free legal defense including bankruptcy, immigration, and adjustment of status.

The COVID-19 pandemic devastated the Las Vegas hospitality ranks, but during this time the Culinary Union stepped in to deliver 430,000 packages of food and other mutual aid, offering comprehensive assistance even to laid off workers to navigate the pandemic. While most casinos with contracts had union-negotiated recall language to allow workers to return to their job when the economy and closures shifted, the Culinary Union still fought and won an expansive Right of Return law in mid-2021, which allows

<sup>26</sup> <https://m.culinaryunion226.org/news/press/culinary-union-announces-new-leadership-ted-pappageorge-and-diana-valles>



for workers in non-union hospitality jobs throughout the state to have first rights to return to their positions as the economy recovered.<sup>27</sup>

## Vulnerable Workers, from Health to Heat Islands

Early in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis, it was clear that Las Vegas would be hit exceptionally hard by closures and slowdowns in hospitality and leisure. While the efforts of the Culinary Union provided an important stopgap for some, in other sectors and businesses like retail, domestic work, construction and restaurants, the impact was more brutal. But like in many cases in Las Vegas, those workers without a union to protect their interests have been particularly hard hit by economic insecurity and health inequity. According to community-level research by Make the Road Nevada, only 24% of respondents received unemployment insurance, and Latinx and Black respondents were far less likely to have received it (or federal stimulus).<sup>28</sup> This has shed light on the essential work to organize informal labor that undergirds Las Vegas' growth – especially construction and domestic work – advanced by Make the Road NV and [Arriba Las Vegas Worker Center](#).

The pandemic, in the words of one interviewee, “blew everything open. It moved front and center how many in Las Vegas are living paycheck to paycheck, and how those most affected are often the last to access the resources needed.” Like many places, a stark contrast emerged between those who could “comfortably be working at home” versus those who put their life at risk to work in person, or whose jobs disappeared overnight worsening food insecurity, rental instability and other basic protections. Organizations like [Make the Road NV](#), [Faith in Action Nevada](#), and [Make It Work Nevada](#), alongside PLAN, have thus organized to ensure that there is a broader safety net that answers to questions that cut across unorganized workers like healthcare, sick days, and equal pay – radically exacerbated by COVID-19's crises.

[Make the Road NV](#) (MRNV) has been a critical advocate in understanding the larger worker justice issue and safety net for migrants in the context of health and environmental equity. Their advocates have raised the ways Vegas has been built as an “urban heat island” with minimal greenspace and tree cover. Given that Vegas is one “the fastest warming cities and its air quality is toxic,” migrant workers across sectors have been put at risk of

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.culinaryunion226.org/blog/victory-right-to-return-sb386-bill-has-been-passed-by-the-nvleg>  
<sup>28</sup>

<https://maketheroadnv.org/immigrant-justice/covid-19-nv-community-impact-report-2020/>





extreme heat injuries and illness.<sup>29</sup> Day laborers, street vendors and construction workers have organized through MRNV for further protections. The organization has mobilized local media to expand awareness of this issue, opening up a bigger debate linking climate change and its real, unequal effects on working class communities.<sup>30</sup> The “Eros Project” (a play on heroes) particularly mobilizes street vendors to advocate for improvements in local and state investments to reduce the heat island effect and decriminalize this trade. Through this, MRNV seeks to present legislation to decriminalize street vendors in the 2023 state legislative session, and at time of writing, the Project’s organizers are meeting with stakeholders such as local health district officials and other street vendor advocates nationally, while attempting to educate the opposition. MRNV hopes to enshrine protections in 2023 for these mostly-undocumented, highly-vulnerable informal entrepreneurs who bear the brunt of accelerating climate change.

Such an approach bridging climate, racial and economic justice is also critical to interconnected farmworker organizing happening in other parts of the state by the organization.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/04/las-vegas-population-growth-climate-crisis>  
<https://www.reviewjournal.com/business/nevada-workers-at-risk-for-heat-illness-get-new-protections-2592870/>



Figure 5: Make the Road Nevada and PLAN December 2022 vigil on the Las Vegas Strip supporting permanent protections for migrant workers and calling for US Congress to pass legislation for a pathway to citizenship during their “lame duck” session. (Credit: Make the Road Nevada)

<sup>30</sup> <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/an-urban-inferno-awaits-street-vendors-in-las-vegas>  
<https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2022/05/03/with-nv-workplace-injuries-deaths-outpacing-nation-activists-push-for-more-safety-measures/>

## THE BUILDING BLOCKS: LAND

### The Mining Mirage

“Vegas makes things look better than they are – a mirage,” one organizer shared. There are few places the Vegas mirage or fantasy becomes clear when looking to the politics of land in Vegas – tying climate and housing – from initial colonization to today. This is especially true considering how Vegas boosters have sought to make it a haven for affordable rent and home purchases.

Extractive capitalism has been fundamental to the state’s relationship regarding land and resources, and with it brought tremendous environmental damage through the mining industry. Mining unfortunately has appeared as a best possible job option for working class rural families interconnected to Las Vegas, where, per one organizer “it’s either Wal-Mart or a mine.” Yet the profits borne of destructive gold extraction - \$6.7 billion in profit from Sept 2019 to 2020 – go straight into hedge funds and ultra-

wealthy investors.<sup>31</sup> Under the banner of Nevada Gold Mines, these include the \$49 billion dollar Van Eck investment firm; \$9.7 trillion BlackRock, the world’s largest asset investor; \$6.2 trillion Vanguard and \$5 trillion Fidelity.

Since the state’s legal incorporation as a state in 1864, the mining companies have maintained a 5% cap on taxation on their net (versus gross) proceeds. Years of organizing to see this shift paid off in 2020, with initial proposals calling for the first mining tax increase that would raise the rate to 7.75% on gross (versus net) taxes. These would bring the rates more in line with those in other states and for the gaming industry. As expected, after years of endless lobbying by Nevada Inc. and other companies, lawsuits and more pressure ensued after the state legislature passed this exploratory measure.

Ultimately, a compromise bill emerged that would tier the tax rate based on firm size, but would provide funding directly for public education.<sup>32</sup> The additional excise tax of 0.75% on mines that report gross revenue of \$20 million to \$150 million and 1.1% on mines that report any higher is expected to bring in more than \$85 million for public education.<sup>33</sup> It’s important to

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2021/02/24/nevadans-demand-action-on-mining-tax-to-meet-a-growing-states-needs/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/tax-regulators-approve-mid-year-start-to-new-mining-tax>

<https://www.8newsnow.com/news/politics/after-decades-long-fight-nevada-lawmakers-raise-mining-tax/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/nv-state-wire-nevada-environment-and-nature-government-and-politics-business-b811b74b8ead8f28f1764c5656d06f28>



note this organizing – while a large policy item – came from groups like PLAN doing massive individual outreach to residents (some 37,000 in the first days) who all were ready to see taxes increase.

## Banished to the Tunnels: Corporate-Created Crises

Las Vegas’ expansion into an ever-growing service and hospitality destination has not been followed with growth in housing to support those actually working to keep this paradise afloat. Part of the Las Vegas “mirage” per organizers is the increase in housing insecurity and unhoused populations. While public camping was banned, many unhoused working poor have been living in storm tunnels under the city. These are at constant risk of flooding and represent the kinds of precarious life created by a combined affordability and services crisis.<sup>34</sup> Even as the numbers of unhoused people increased, in 2019 the city passed one of the most draconian criminalization bills in the US that pushes six-month jail times or \$1,000 fines for unhoused people sitting, resting or “lodging” unless they move to a cruelly-named “Corridor of Hope” of services at the outskirts, among industrial plants, cemeteries and tow yards.<sup>35</sup> The law echoes the

kinds of plans spouted by the Trump resurgent campaign in July 2022 to violently assault the unhoused and force them into tent-cities in city outskirts.<sup>36</sup>

Over the course of the last decades, Las Vegas has seen exponential growth and demand for housing (from the 1970s to 2020s growing 700%), contributing to a significant housing crisis. But what is really an affordability crisis is not simply about the number of units – especially considering the expansion of new developments in a short period of time as Las Vegas has sprawled in nearly every direction since the 1980s. Much construction has been for luxury and other high-end housing. Affordability is also compounded by a privatized water and electricity system where utility bills are excessively high, especially given the need for constantly running A/C to survive high heat.<sup>37</sup> In many ways, affordability and sustainability have been inextricable as the region has become the 12<sup>th</sup> most polluted in the US and despite its size, has more greenhouse emissions than the US.<sup>38</sup> One interviewee noted that even the promise of solar investments in state bills has been taken from working class people, who were traded out of receiving affordable access to these infrastructures.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.insider.com/homeless-people-are-living-in-storm-tunnels-underneath-las-vegas-2019-9>  
<https://www.reviewjournal.com/local/local-las-vegas/advocates-go-underground-to-help-homeless-in-las-vegas-tunnels-2160746/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/feb/13/las-vegas-homeless-sleeping-ban-no-lodging>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.curbed.com/2022/07/donald-trump-homelessness-rick-caruso.html>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.fox5vegas.com/2022/07/28/why-your-energy-bill-may-be-higher-this-month-southern-nevada/>  
<https://www.reviewjournal.com/local/henderson/henderson-water-bills-to-increase-next-year-2403948/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/04/las-vegas-population-growth-climate-crisis>







Figure 6: 2022 Nevada Housing Justice Alliance takeover of *Las Vegas Sun* homepage to challenge the ways real estate companies, developers and PACs have repeatedly blocked tenant protections and affordable housing. (Source: Culinary Workers Union)

The state overall has less than 20 affordable and available homes per 100 extremely low-income renter households, with an affordable housing shortage of nearly 80,000 homes, making it the state with the most severe shortage of available and affordable rental homes, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition.<sup>39</sup> With rents overall increasing 25% – the second highest jump in the country in 2022 – the Las Vegas metro

region also has the dubious distinction of having the second fastest rent increases in the US compared to before the pandemic.<sup>40</sup>

Las Vegas and surrounding jurisdictions like North Las Vegas have no rent controls and an eviction process that is rapid and with few limits. Judges will often rule against a landlord if a case makes it to court, but many cases were not making it that far due to a lack of awareness of tenant’s rights and pressure from landlords.

## Weeklies & Everyday Vulnerability for Low-Income Tenants

One of the ways that low-income renters have survived in Las Vegas (and increasingly Reno and Sparks) is “weeklies,” short-term hotel rentals, which exemplifies the dire price of increasing rents, corporate landlords who refuse low-income tenants, and lack of protections.<sup>41</sup> Weeklies, like an increasing number of Las Vegas housing types, are corporate controlled, in this case by companies with notorious records like The Siegel Group (TSG), which holds more than 4,000 units in the Las Vegas region.<sup>42</sup> TSG is “a privately held real estate investment firm which manages rental properties in multiple states, including Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas and

<sup>39</sup> <https://nvhousingcoalition.org/>, <https://nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state/nevada>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.reviewjournal.com/business/housing/las-vegas-area-facing-fast-rising-rents-ranks-no-2-2578983/>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/20/magazine/extended-stay-hotels.html>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.reviewjournal.com/investigations/their-landlord-got-millions-in-rental-assistance-they-faced-eviction-2382800/>



Louisiana.”<sup>43</sup> The legal status of these hotels allows companies to often “skirt the law,” per a *Las Vegas Review-Journal* report, in regards to tenant protections, a situation which worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>44</sup> Conditions are unsafe and unsanitary, with the lack of investment in maintenance by the companies, and many families have to live crowded into one unit. The companies also use the weekly payment structure to accumulate penalties or raise rent arbitrarily in ways that hit renters hard. Tenants have spoken to government agencies, numerous organizations and media about harassment, intimidation and threats from the weeklies’ managers to enforce payment penalties or illegally remove tenants using “no cause” evictions during the COVID-19 moratorium on these removals.<sup>45</sup> Lockouts in weeklies - with digital cards and key systems - are easier, and many tenants are unaware of their rights or unable to access legal help.

While Catholic Charities and Legal Aid have provided some assistance and legal programs, progressive groups like PLAN, MRNV, Make It Work Nevada, Faith in Action Nevada, Culinary Union, and others came together as the

[Nevada Housing Justice Alliance](#) and organized to help bring the dire situation with weeklies to the attention of the US House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis.<sup>46</sup> The committee found TSG had “particularly egregious” and “deceptive” practices to lock out residents illegally in the worst days of the pandemic.<sup>47</sup> Even further, TSG brought in millions in COVID-19 federal rental relief which was never used for this purpose.<sup>48</sup> At time of writing, both Clark County and the State of Nevada had launched their own further investigation into TSG, to the complaints of local GOP members, though the resulting action for tenants remains to be seen.<sup>49</sup>

## Building Renter Power

To shift the unified, relentless power of corporate landlords and developers, organizations have sought to bring tenants together to stop the eviction machines and develop rent control measures. The Nevada Bar Association launched an Eviction Mediation Program in 2020 to help move more cases into mediation to prevent eviction, and to link to rental

<sup>43</sup> <https://thisisreno.com/2020/05/life-in-the-suites-amid-a-global-pandemic/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.lacsn.org/who-we-are/legal-aid-in-the-news/some-weekly-las-vegas-renters-are-facing-eviction-even-with-a-freeze>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.reviewjournal.com/investigations/their-landlord-got-millions-in-rental-assistance-they-faced-eviction-2382800/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bRfuwdLpddCXMolqghZzMqDYskKjlgxM/view>

<sup>47</sup> Full Report:

<https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2022.07.28%20SSCC%20Staff%20Report%20Examining%20Pandemic%20Evictions.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.reviewjournal.com/investigations/their-landlord-got-millions-in-rental-assistance-they-faced-eviction-2382800/>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.reviewjournal.com/investigations/the-siegel-group-under-new-scrutiny-by-county-ag-office-for-evictions-2616849/>





assistance.<sup>50</sup> While this was seen as an important move, as one organizer said, the goal is “not to make evictions more pleasant.” There is an urgency to keeping people housed and to prevent people being unable to afford decent shelter. [Faith in Action Nevada](#) started confronting housing crises in Reno, when many Silicon Valley companies like Tesla and Panasonic started using this as a tax haven - driving housing prices through the roof starting in the early 2010s.<sup>51</sup> Their work on tenant organizing also helped make the links among the particular racial and gendered effects of these housing shifts, on Latinx and Black households, and the impact on health.<sup>52</sup> They have expanded their work to Las Vegas over time, to support affordable housing investment, rent control and tenant protections.

Prior to the pandemic, MRNV's housing committee member leaders had advocated for increased tenant protections during the 2019 state legislative session along with key community partners such as PLAN, Make It Work Nevada, and Faith in Action Nevada, but were met with fierce opposition from powerful industry interests. During the early days of the pandemic, housing committee members turned into an eviction protection outreach team, contacting over 10,000 members as well as tenants in key zip codes to ensure Spanish speaking tenants were aware of the rental assistance

funding that was available to their families. Through direct outreach efforts, they helped hundreds of immigrant families fight their evictions so they could remain in their homes. They were not always successful in preventing evictions, which meant staff would go into emergency rehousing mode to assess resources available for each tenant who needed support. MRNV had to rehouse dozens of members and community tenants in 2020. Largely thanks to its housing and emergency support efforts, MRNV added a little over 1,000 new members to the organization, speaking to the demand and value of this housing agenda. Housing has rapidly become a critical intersectional campaign that touched the lives of many of MRNV and allies' members and staff at the height of the pandemics, now a central plank in advocacy, research and civic engagement campaigns across these organizations.

Culinary Workers Union Local 226, to this end, developed a Neighborhood Stability rent control ballot initiative in North Las Vegas in 2022, but every member of the North Las Vegas City Council, except one, voted to not allow residents to eventually vote on the ballot measure. The Culinary Union secured the support of every member of the federal delegation, and the Democratic Governor signaled they would take up the rent control in the

<sup>50</sup> <https://evictioninnovation.org/2022/01/07/eviction-mediation-program-in-nevada/>

<sup>51</sup> <https://communitychange.org/changewire/reno-do-we-want-to-be-the-new-silicon-valley/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://irleaders.org/team/a-study-of-the-influence-of-housing-instability-on-health-and-well-being-for-latinx-families-in-washoe-county-nv/>



2023 session.<sup>53</sup> It is important to note the critical role of an agenda on countering Wall Street-backed speculative landlords in the Culinary Union's highly-successful get out the vote operation during the 2022 midterms. Widely hailed as supporting the victories sealing Democratic control of the Senate in November 2022, less mentioned is the way Culinary Union's get out the vote did not just simply go to the streets and asked people to vote, but shaped a Neighborhood Stability Slate to take on Wall Street Landlords.<sup>54</sup> This sign-on for 10 high-ranking offices, including newly re-elected Senator Catherine Cortez Masto, promises to develop legislation that prohibits rent increases for the first year of tenancy, guarantees that rent increases are tied to the consumer price index with a 5% yearly cap and requires landlords to give 90-day notice on future rent increases.<sup>55</sup> Having pushed for this slate, union members knocked on more than one million doors in Nevada, more than half of Black and Latinx and one-third of AAPI voters, and engaged in a massive post-election ballot cure initiative to ensure votes were counted.<sup>56</sup>



Figure 7: Make It Work Nevada members support tenants at a Nevada Housing Justice Alliance resource fair in June 2021.  
(Credit: Make It Work NV)

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.ktnv.com/news/north-las-vegas-rent-control-measure-blocked-by-city-clerk-hurting-chance-for-november-ballot-appearance> <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/indy-explains-can-nevada-adopt-rent-control-state-counties-point-fingers> <https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2022/06/30/sisolak-legislature-may-take-up-rent-control/>  
<https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/culinary-union-backs-down-from-north-las-vegas-rent-control-battle>

<sup>54</sup> <https://m.culinaryunion226.org/news/press/culinary-union-neighborhood-stability-slate-canvassers-have-knocked-on-half-a-million-doors>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.neighborhoodstability.org/>

<sup>56</sup> <https://m.culinaryunion226.org/news/press/statement-senator-cortez-mastos-re-election>



The Nevada Housing Justice Alliance has also been advocating for a multi-pronged platform.<sup>57</sup> In the 2021 legislative cycle this included policies to “prohibit source of income discrimination, overhaul the eviction process, create a registry of landlords and speed up the process for returning security deposit.”<sup>58</sup> Within this time, they were able to win a set of continued protections for tenants after the federal COVID-19 eviction moratorium was lifted, offering a path if the tenant seeks assistance (a limited but still important version of what advocates presented).<sup>59</sup> Yet, like many areas in the state of concentrated elite and corporate power, these organizers are doubling down on efforts to “change the narrative” on landlord-tenant relationships and to move at multiple scales, state and local, to build tenant power and seek protections for the state’s vast majority of renter-residents.

## POWER IN PLACE: GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

The state legislative cycle leaves only 120 days for actually engaging with representatives over a two-year period. The geography of Nevada also presents a complicated map of power. Everything between Las Vegas and

Reno/Carson City is largely rural. The populations lean white and historically vote more conservative. But as noted above, the overall population is concentrated in Clark County, meaning that the other 15 counties hold a radically smaller (and whiter) portion of the population. This leaves what looks like a stark electoral map with two counties at the North and South end (Washoe and Clark County respectively) that read “blue” but that can overwhelmingly move statewide and national races. But it also means that many organizations noted here carry “Nevada” in their name because to shape the potential in Las Vegas, they must also be supporting communities of color and working-class people throughout the state all at once – a tough, tiring and resource-intensive route.

With a very limited legislative cycle, low pay for legislators, and relatively lax lobbying, there is a perfect storm for corruption and decision making favorite corporate donors and power.<sup>60</sup> This is why a relentless agenda of accountability and mass and member mobilization by many of the groups noted in this brief have been fundamental to pushing back. These interconnected movements have set forth and won on issues that may feel

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2021/06/21/outmaneuvered-housing-justice-advocates-reflect-on-session-look-to-future/>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2021/06/21/outmaneuvered-housing-justice-advocates-reflect-on-session-look-to-future/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2021/05/21/last-minute-legislation-would-prevent-evictions-if-tenants-seek-assistance/> <https://www.reviewjournal.com/local/local-nevada/how-new-eviction-ban-works-in-nevada-remains-unclear-2415314/>

<sup>60</sup> For these indicators and more see the USC ERI Changing States database: <https://changingstates.org/arenas.php?state-selection=NV#electoral-arena>



like unlikely victories in questions like drug price reform or certain labor laws. Yet the stubborn blockages against movement on housing affordability or mining taxation continue to remind of the influence of corporate power in Nevada’s limited legislature.

These tensions and the hard work of organizing in a vast state landscape with complex politics was in full view in the 2022 Nevada Governor’s Race – a position that holds tremendous weight given the part-time legislature. In 2022, Clark County Sheriff Joe Lombardo launched a campaign for governor, after boasting about his record of 10,000 or more deportations direct from the Clark County Jail and via the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (both headed by the Sheriff). While organizing helped eliminate the 287(g) program collaboration between these entities and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the department then opened the door to staff reaching out directly to ICE about any migrants and releasing them directly into ICE’s hands for deportation proceedings after one’s sentence is over. This move avoids the paperwork and process of 287(g) by claiming custody is not transferred. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, speaking to ACLU and other advocates, exposed Lombardo’s back-door deportation machine.<sup>61</sup>

Make the Road Nevada has meanwhile organized in longer-term efforts to stop this anti-immigrant policing machine, helping fight to drop 287(g), to block police from showing up to public health spaces, and more recently, winning a million-dollar deportation defense fund in the city.<sup>62</sup> MRNV worked with PLAN and the Culinary Union to lead this collaborative effort that also included the Nevada Immigrant Coalition and national partners, the National Immigration Law Center and the Vera Institute. Organizers with the Nevada Immigrant Coalition also pushed the state to approve licensure for non-citizens for more than 330 professional categories, from “mammography technicians to court interpreters to dental hygienists,” allowing taxpayer identification as an alternative to social security numbers.<sup>63</sup>

This organizing alongside PLAN, Arriba Las Vegas Workers Center, and others to build civic power for immigrants is critical given that Lombardo narrowly won the governorship by about 16,000 votes.<sup>64</sup> Lombardo has espoused a confusing set of policies more broadly edging on the far right, including support for homophobic and transphobic “Don’t Say Gay” Florida

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.nevadaappeal.com/news/2021/nov/30/report-vegas-police-quietly-give-jailed-immigrants/>

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.nevadacurrent.com/blog/following-metro-las-vegas-ends-its-287g-agreement/>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2019/06/14/state-opens-up-occupational-licensing-to-non-citizens/>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.rgj.com/story/news/politics/elections/2022/11/14/donald-trump-backed-nevada-governor-elect-joe-lombardo-victory-speech/10700609002/>





measures, for blocking any state income taxes, but also at times supporting restricting development for water crises and reinvesting in mental health services.<sup>65</sup> He has also committed to a hardline policing agenda and privatizing school choice.<sup>66</sup> News reports suggest part of his victory came by distancing himself from Trump in the last weeks before the election and from a focus on inflation, COVID-19 shutdowns and small business; Democrats kept several other executive positions including the attorney general, secretary of state and treasurer (and the state legislatures), suggesting a far from total mandate for Lombardo's agenda.<sup>67</sup>

Fundamental to limiting Lombardo's power and a deeper right agenda is progressive, grassroots power-building efforts that have taken on right wing and Democratic Party machines alike. The fact that the prior Democratic governor has moved transformative issues such as public health insurance option and gun control in a state often depicted as libertarian is due to relentless organizing and willingness to get down on the ground, listen and directly speak to and confront officials to move policies. One organizer describes how the smaller legislature and environment lends itself to

possibilities for moving power. "What is exciting in my state is the accessibility to it - access to our officials, to making change."

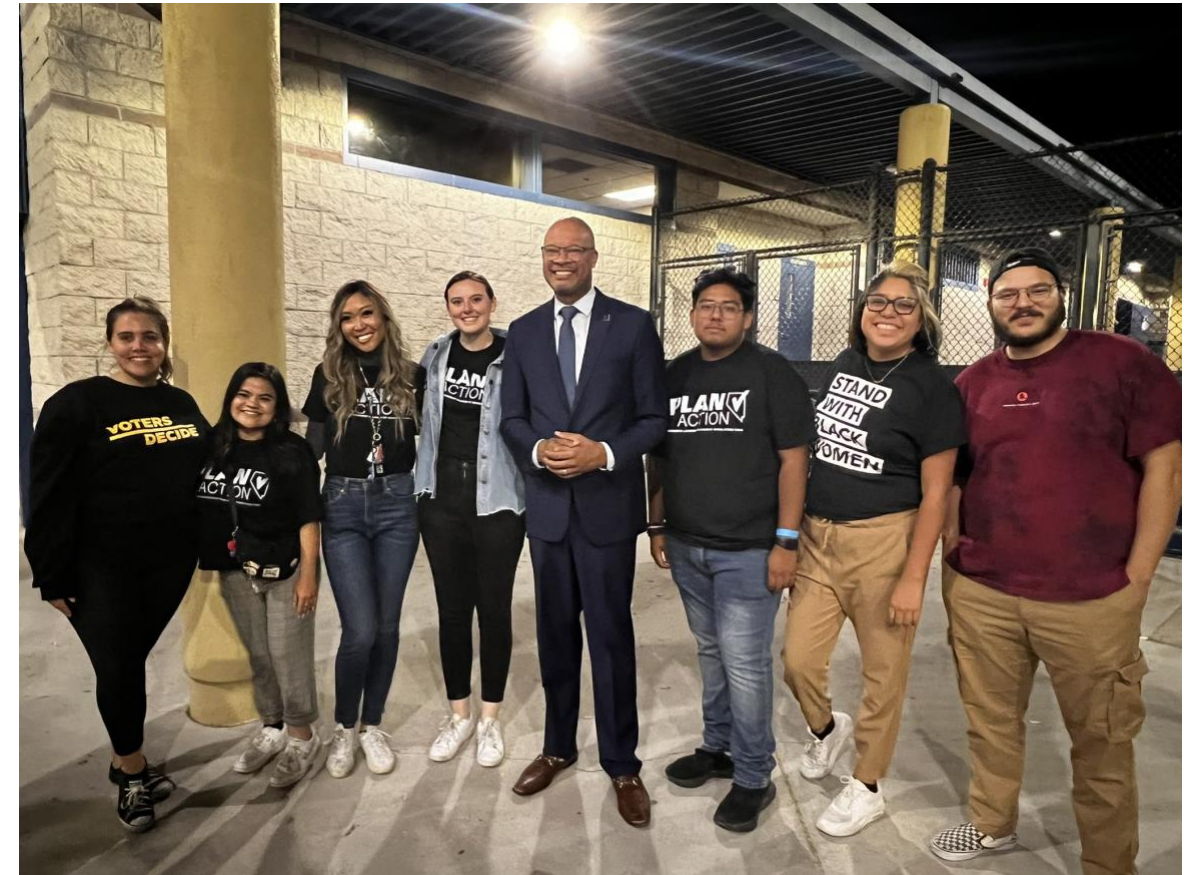


Figure 8: Young PLAN Action organizers after a day of canvassing that included connecting with, Democrat Attorney General Aaron Ford (center), who helped spearhead progressive justice shifts. (Source: PLAN)

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2022/06/14/lombardo-prevails-in-crowded-primary-for-governor/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.rgj.com/story/news/politics/elections/2022/11/14/donald-trump-backed-nevada-governor-elect-joe-lombardo-victory-speech/10700609002/>

<sup>67</sup> <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/lombardo-defeats-sisolak-democrats-win-attorney-general-secretary-of-state-races>





Meaningful change has also meant confronting a “powerful democratic status quo,” which has not thought of movements and grassroots power in a systemic way. That challenge “is not welcome,” but interconnected movements have seen that they cannot afford to move in ways that simply appease institutional Democratic machines. This was often called the “Reid Machine” after former US Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, through which the establishment Democratic party exercised control of different positions and policy directions. (It’s important to note that the rhetoric on the Reid Machine often conflates the resources and decision-making centralized in the Democratic Party with the long-term power built by unions that has helped engage and mobilize Latinx voters). This strategy is often deployed by racist and pro-corporate forces to dampen the real grassroots interest across Nevada in worker and immigrant rights, and blunt the potency of the base built by workers themselves.<sup>68</sup> Put bluntly by another leader, given the costs to workers, to environmental justice, to housing, and to the environment, “ordinary folks are constantly pinched and even murdered by the status quo,” and there is a constant need to keep mobilizing and moving a more comprehensive agenda.

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/election-2016-nevada-harry-reid-clinton-trump-early-vote-latinos-214426/> For a more questionable version, see: <https://brownpoliticalreview.org/2017/04/viva-las-vegas-political-machine/>

<sup>69</sup> <https://dhhs.nv.gov/PublicOption/>

Towards this work to build a new normal, intensive dialogue and organizing, and a strong “inside-outside” strategy to work with but not be beholden to elected officials, has led to significant changes on issues like health care. Thanks to organizing by groups like MRNV and in collaboration and conversation with Culinary Workers Union Local 226, in 2021, Nevada legislators moved to authorize a plan and rollout of a health insurance public option by 2026. This relatively quiet victory is a significant move forward “values-based health funding” and a plan to widen healthcare access radically.<sup>69</sup> This came in part from efforts by Make the Road Nevada to make immigrant perspectives heard on healthcare access, and ensure that the relatively new State Senator Fabian Doñate could amplify these voices in the legislature. Consistent, deep engagement also meant that undocumented communities were not left out or traded out, even when this surfaced as an option. These transformative policies speak to a developed, diverse community that has actually managed to move local Democratic politics to be far more responsive and engaged on issues that have fundamental effects on residents’ lives, sometimes in direct counter to national efforts.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Other more public disagreements including the ways that PLAN, MRNV and other organizations came to support the local staffers of Mi Familia Vota, who alleged an abusive environment encouraged by national organizers. These efforts represent a rare moment where local coalitions have stepped in to support frontline staff in a way that supports their rights as workers and vulnerabilities (in this case as undocumented migrants)





Figure 9: Bea Duran (in gray suit), Assembly Member District 11, meets with Culinary Workers Union members; Duran was a former Culinary Union food server and won re-election to her seat in 2022. (Source: Culinary Union)

## POWER IN PLACE: MOVEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

“Real civic change is power building,” one organizer shared in their interview. “It is in deep, intimate relationships that come together over time.” And if one thing is clear it is that Las Vegas organizations have taken minimal resources and applied maximum physical and emotional labor and sweat into developing the relationships that lead to transformative change beyond just one electoral cycle or blue/red map. Across the different cross-cutting organizations – whether it is Culinary Workers Union Local 226, Make the Road Nevada, PLAN, Make It Work Nevada, or Faith in Action NV – is a model that has fundamentally valued grassroots, member-based organizing, leadership from affected communities, and an intersectional vision that sees ways to align values in coalition.

### Building a Base to Shut Down Caesar’s Palace

Movement-building organizations came far before funders and political machines entered Nevada, and have historically been defined by the working-class Black, Latinx and indigenous women who helped build the

and aligns values over expediency. <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/disgusting-actions-nearly-all-nevada-staffers-quit-mi-familia-vota-2494765/>



**FUNDERS FOR  
A JUST ECONOMY**  
NEIGHBORHOOD FUNDERS GROUP

region. This includes, as mentioned, Culinary Workers Union Local 226's Hattie Canty and the different union stewards, captains, officers and organizer-members that followed. But it's also exemplified in the history of work by Dr. Ruby Duncan. Featured in the book and new documentary *Storming Caesar's Palace*, Dr. Duncan and 8 other Black women and mothers took on the lack of welfare and social supports in Nevada.<sup>71</sup> In the early 1970s, Dr. Duncan worked as a room attendant and been injured, finding that the only jobs program tied to Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in West Las Vegas was a 40-hours a week sewing job paying \$25 a week. Organizing with other women in the class, they built a larger campaign to push for more expansive welfare supports in Nevada, including bringing the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children to the state. Among the heated campaigns to push the state and city to action, the Black-women led organization effectively shut down the Las Vegas strip and would also organize "eat-ins" at casinos telling the owners to charge the government the bill. They won expansive job programs, a daycare center, extended benefits and more to serve working poor households, alongside other programming under the banner of Operation Life.

Projects like Operation Life reveal a movement infrastructure and history of the kinds of expansive possibilities when those most affected and at the front lines of inequality redefine the terms of policy conversations and organize for transformation. A Las Vegas model enshrined in the Culinary Workers Union and other labor organizations was best explained by one organizer as "a no short-cuts, no bull- style of organizing - back to basics, working class people organizing working class people in their workplace, doing the hard work of learning and connecting with members." The real measure of progress shows up in house visits, knocking doors, building power, creating relationships, and in labor, building worker organizing committees. They caution that "if you don't do the deep organizing you don't get the results" and cannot develop future leaders. While Dr. Duncan or Ms. Canty may have been important figures, they were because of the way they built through daily organizing to build a vision and developing diverse leaders from the ground up, and seeding movements that are as much a part of Las Vegas as Caesar's Palace.

## Coalitional Change and Generative Conflict

As such, today, Las Vegas is also a critical site for movement building for the working poor, whether it is the organizing happening by casino workers or

---

<sup>71</sup> <https://garamondagency.com/work/storming-caesars-palace/> and <https://www.stormingcaesarspalace.com/>



for more expansive basic social supports and rights to housing and relief from climate inequality. The success of these individual base-building and leadership development efforts are also equally hard-fought, long-lasting coalitions that come together across different issues and in different ways. Beyond some of the organizations already mentioned, other partners in these efforts include Mass Liberation, Battle Born Progress, and others that participate in 501(c)(3) or (c)(4) spaces. The latter is focused on electoral efforts, while [Mass Liberation NV](#) has been a critical anchor in new organizing to end mass incarceration, led by systems-impacted folks and has been a vital voice for those inside mass criminalizing institutions.

As one organizer shared, today the challenges of wage inequality and unemployment once taken on by the 1960s and 1970s Black mother-led welfare movement are in the 2020s compounded by “no landlord regulation, no rent controls, eviction papers at any moment that place people in the streets or itinerant motels, with fees after fees, stuck in these cycles.” New coalitions and organizing are linking Las Vegas and rural regions around these common concerns on housing. In housing work it is clear that there are multiple levels of overlapping focus, including rental assistance coalitions and those focused on broader visions of housing justice, such as landlord and real estate accountability. These come together around different legislative and other efforts, including

coordinating mutual support, and are part of a larger field of power building regarding housing and tenants’ rights.

Las Vegas is also a place where – related to this – newer models of faith-based organizing like [Faith in Action Nevada](#) are growing. These diverge from what can often be (well meaning) white protestant-led organizing for economic and social justice. Faith in Action NV (FIANV) instead strives to “meet progressive movement folks and faith-based folks where they are at.” This includes grappling with tough questions around religion and gender or sexuality or other points and finding ways for cooperation. Aside from aforementioned housing work, FIANV’s newer work includes transforming criminal justice, increasing voting rights (with an emphasis on tribal communities), and other organizing with immigrant and budget coalitions.

As noted above, part of what defines deep-base Las Vegas organizing is the fact that the movement infrastructure is erected in such a way that makes room for conflicting positions and for dialogue across issues. In many ways, this has meant an ability to confront the complacency of institutional Democratic politics with corporate power. PLAN’s origins are tied to this challenging of institutional power and its board, made up of majority women and local indigenous tribes (and anchored in anti-racist perspectives). Their early work involved enshrining abortion in the state’s





constitutions, an uphill battle of little interest to centrist Democrats, and since they have stood up for critical transformative issues like ICE, transgender rights, and of course, anchoring coalitions to challenge gaming, mining and real estate power.

Critical to moving these larger coalitions, which can sometimes involve actors who are not initially aligned, is Black, indigenous and migrant led organizations who are often the first to raise critical equity and racial justice issues. Like the earlier work of PLAN with tribal leaders on mining and extraction, these can be uphill battles, but many of these organizations like PLAN and Make It Work Nevada have made tremendous inroads in sometimes white coalitional spaces, and built consensus. Work by organizers at Make It Work Nevada and Make the Road Nevada, for example, are helping show the climate conversation extends beyond just air and water issues to a larger set of questions like food deserts (for Make It Work) and heat islands and worker heat protections (for MRNV). At times too, organizations representing front-line BIPOC communities have also been unafraid to call out unfair, not values-aligned practices: for example, most recently the Nevada Immigration Coalition, including organizations noted in

this report, removed Mi Familia Vota for documented labor abuses and for threatening to call the police on undocumented workers.<sup>72</sup>

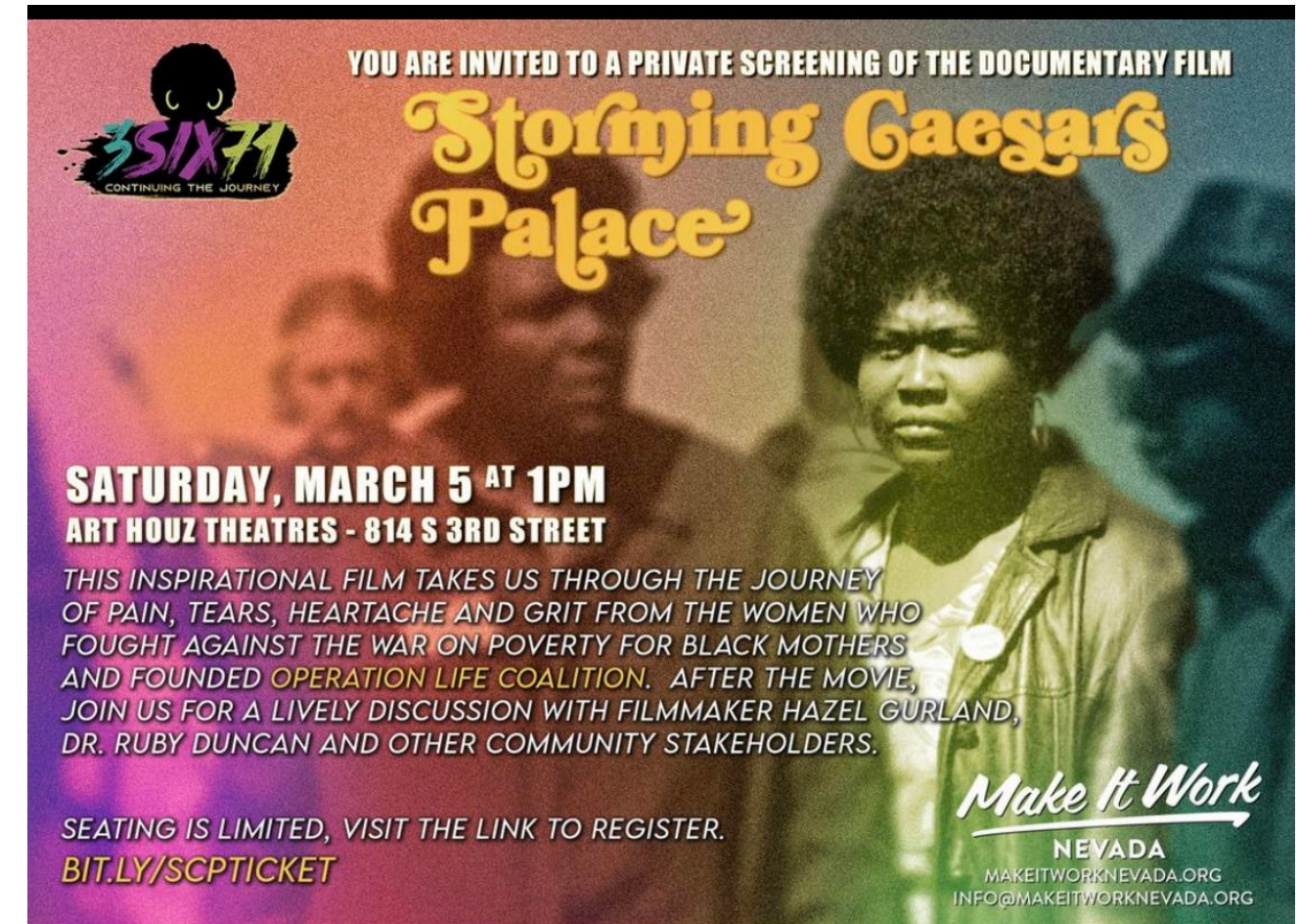


Figure 10: Make It Work Nevada event featuring the history-making campaigns to transform welfare by Dr. Ruby Duncan and other Las Vegas Black mothers, documented in the film *Storming Caesar's Palace* (2022). (Source: Make It Work Nevada)

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/disgusting-actions-nearly-all-nevada-staffers-quit-mi-familia-vota-2494765/>



## Centering – and Valuing – Stories & Strength of Members

There is no underestimating the challenges to individual workers and BIPOC, low-income communities in intersectional, transformative organizing in the Las Vegas region – and no victory outlined in this report was not hard fought. The success of many of these campaigns has been in part the space created and the training and support given to help workers, renters, and others “to tell their stories” and get it to the media, policymakers and most importantly, each other. As one organizer shared, “there is no amount of propaganda” that can replace workers’ real experiences. Opening up about these stories – for example, on the strike line in front of Stations Casino or facing down TSG’s empire of weeklies – can come “at great costs,” and base-building organizations have sought to create the kind of power that protects and supports each person standing up against dominant interests like the casinos, real estate and mining.

Again and again, interviewees stressed just how much the core model of the organizations featured in this report centers Black, indigenous, migrant, women, and other directly-impacted workers and residents in Las Vegas (and more broadly). “Members are our north star,” one interviewee stressed. And many organizations are deepening the kinds of projects – like Make the Road Nevada’s [Community Leadership Academy](#) making communication and data training accessible and offering critical skills on

leading campaigns, which organizers also hope could mean potential employment opportunities on political campaigns. One academy was aimed at older Spanish-speaking members, and a second geared towards MRNV’s youth committee (the Youth Power Project). Over 70 members participate in these academies, and a large majority of the participants of leadership academies knocked on doors and made phone calls to mobilize voters during the 2022 election cycle. Make It Work Nevada’s [“kitchen table conversations”](#) model seeks also to create authentic relationships that truly learn from and engage with the hardships their women of color members on the hardships they face, and has created their own media vital to amplifying issues like maternal mortality and childcare as focal areas. Such transformative leadership models advance power and further a regional movement history of indigenous, Black and Latinx women led organizing.

## POWER IN PLACE: WHERE FUNDERS FIT

### 1. Seeding Local Progressive Funding

Funding for long-term transformative movements to address concerns like inequality, climate change, civic power and immigration in Nevada – and tied to broader national change – was widely cited as scarce and cyclical. Given the small number of local progressive foundations, it merits re-



**FUNDERS FOR  
A JUST ECONOMY**  
NEIGHBORHOOD FUNDERS GROUP



iterating how impressive it is to understand the infrastructure and depth of base organizers have managed to build with little resources, and important to imagine what significant more investments can help realize. Organizers noted that most of their funding comes from national sources, and one shared, “I don’t have many local foundations I can talk to about this work and instead have to move through national foundations and tables” - which can be a complex, time-demanding process. One of these few local foundations dialoguing with movements is [Nevada Community Foundation](#).

Many local foundations – and individual and corporate donors tied to the oligopolies outlined above - fund more short-term charity and service models. Organizers interviewed do not diminish these, and in fact in many instances see some of this work, as part of broader coordinated strategies on issues like housing, when it comes to legal services for eviction prevention. But where the real, systemic change has happened – for example, creating a widespread shift in casino jobs that has uplifted wages, created one of the best healthcare systems in the US for workers, and ensured in the devastation of COVID-19 a pathway back to jobs – came through sustained movements led by those most affected.

## 2. Advancing Indigenous & Worker-Led Funding Models

Alongside local funders, the Culinary Workers Union Local 226 has also supported organizations directly, and tried to help move foundation resources to Black and brown-led partners that focus on those most directly impacted by issues. Coordination with the Culinary Union and other major, worker-led and more democratic unions like Service Employees International Union (SEIU) can be integral to a funding strategy in Nevada, especially for those newer to the scene and developing pooled mechanisms. As noted above, it is also important to recognize these unions as democratic mechanisms for workers that should not just be supplanted by a 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(4) model.

It is also essential, several organizers noted, to ensure funding for indigenous movements and tribal infrastructures. Nevada indigenous groups have received support from [The Grove Foundation](#), funding small indigenous civic engagement strategies in part through organizations like Native Voters Alliance Nevada and National Urban Indian Family Coalition, as well as supporting PLAN, Silver State Voices and Four Freedoms.

For the sparse local and national civic and campaign-oriented funders operating in Las Vegas and Nevada, organizers shared the challenge of “translating the power building work and base building that leads to



shifting structural systems.” Many foundations look to deliverables and policy shifts, or visible social media communications campaigns, rather than to the “level of sophisticated organizing” that matters with one-on-one outreach, research alongside participants, testing data and communications systems, list-building and much more intensive, long-term labor. “How do you think 300 people showed up to our event? It’s not a Facebook ad, it’s building our organizing consistently,” they shared.

### 3. Breaking Beyond Election Cycles

Integral to a sustained, comprehensive approach then is what another funder called the need to do “unsexy funding,” and move beyond the kinds of investments in campaigns that are in the news cycle or critical election drives. Instead, as noted above, there is much need for direct investment in the long-term, patient base-building, as well as in the inter-organizational coordination that drives the coalitions vital to changes in the landscape in Las Vegas. This of course can be solutioned with long-term, unrestricted funding, as well as being open to funding organizational collaborative spaces, including formations like the Nevada Immigrant Coalition and the Nevada Housing Justice Alliance.

### 4. Doing the Research and Educating Each Other

Relatedly, organizations also raised concern with the impetus or desire to build coalitions from funders’ perspectives first, versus supporting organic coalitions on issues like housing that are advancing from the ground up. One cannot simply, as one organizer explained, “drop environmental justice issues on a group that is not involved” in issues like mining. The answer is never for funders to bring people into rooms and say “here is the agenda that I created, go out and do it,” but instead to make sure that “ideas [for new funding and organizing directions] are rooted in community.”

One funder cautioned that as local foundations enter the space of housing, racial justice, immigration, or other interrelated social justice struggles – at the root of many of the questions like supporting the unhoused they seek to address - they must put in time to learn from other funders and do their research. The same holds true for national funders seeking to support Nevada. “We have to teach ourselves – it’s not just talking with constituents,” they noted. For local social justice-oriented funders, another shared, “It’s lonely here,” and spoke to the value of finding collaborative spaces to work and learn with local and national funders simultaneously. As such, more dynamic funder organizing spaces like the [Amplify Fund](#) have been a critical opportunity to bring local funders into a more integrated,





intersectional framework and offer peer-to-peer learning, while lessening the burden on future grantees who are already hard-stretched.

With small staffs and limited time, many organizers also have little time to answer to another complex proposal request. Instead, they suggest – and practices in other regions demonstrate – the value in streamlining applications and utilizing shared platforms, something possible in the smaller Nevada funding community and with common application resources like [JustFund](#).

## 5. Going from Cyclical to Sustained Civic Power Funds

National funding support is still welcome by many, given the dearth of local progressive foundations, but many operate with caution when it comes to accepting such support. Nevada has in electoral cycles – especially with its critical role on the national blue/red map - has been of interest to different funders who support either voting rights (c3) or electoral (c4) tables. It has been a focus area for multiple national civic engagement and related issue-based tables, like the [NEO Philanthropy Four Freedoms Fund](#) focused on immigration reform. The concern has been with the cyclical nature of such funding and how it pours in at distinct moments. In the months before elections, there is significant support and expectation for Get Out the Vote and voter-registration work, particularly for US Senate and congressional races; then, post-election, the resources disappear, leaving an anemic

organizing ecosystem that struggles to fundraise for long-term power-building based in a racial justice framework.

The success of electoral strategies and Nevada’s democratic wins, as noted above, hinge on their larger ecosystem upon which they rely, which include the deep connections and base built by worker-led unions and member-led organizations, as well as coordinating 501(c)(4) groups. Organizers point to the necessity of Integrated Voter Engagement investments that fund year-round work that may be visible during elections, but also ensures the relationships, leadership and accountability for elected officials that makes electoral wins possible and meaningfully translates it into change.

## 6. Turning to Collaborative Funding

Several organizations shared that – given many of the challenges like education and research outlined above - key models for Las Vegas include successfully-pooled funds towards long-term transformative organizing. The Amplify Fund is one such model. Another is the Esperanza Fund, seeded by Open Society Foundations and housed at the Nevada Community Foundation. Building from an initial \$750,000 investment, it was later supported by Amalgamated Foundation’s Families and Workers Fund and smaller public foundations, as well as individual donors. The Fund was meant to provide direct cash assistance to immigrant families left out of



COVID-19 federal aid and distributed more than \$1 million in funding by round 4 of its distributions.<sup>73</sup> It did so in intense coordination with Make the Road Nevada, Arriba Las Vegas Worker Center, PLAN and others who were rooted in the community, and as such was able to interrelatedly support other forms of migrant civic engagement and community building.



Figure 11: Faith in Action NV, PLAN, Nevada State Education Association, and other coalition members for the “Red for Revenue” campaign to transform the mining tax to fund education and other essential services. Their organizing led to a first of its kind mining tax increase in 2021 that promised to bring in tens of millions annually. (Source: Faith in Action NV)

The Esperanza Fund board itself was composed of numerous local first-generation immigrant leaders, including several elected officials. It is also unique in its coordination with state agencies, including the Nevada Governor’s Office for New Americans that organizers helped create and push to fund. Interviewees confirmed this was not an easy or obvious choice, to fund a massive mechanism for cash distribution through a community foundation, but the “uphill battle” of convincing, coordinating and increasing the donors for this project made a significant difference. And it speaks to the power of when funding staff invest their own time and labor in this kind of organizing alongside grassroots groups.

Las Vegas, and Nevada more broadly, is rife with examples that show a region that has the odds stacked against grassroots, worker, and community power in its concentrated wealth and power in the hands of mining, gaming, real estate, and retail monopolies. Yet worker and community-led movements – to the inclusion of indigenous tribes who have stewarded the land - have made the impossible possible time and again, and advanced an agenda in one of the largest tourist and service sectors in the US and where some of the most drastic housing and environmental justice crises persist. As one funder puts it, this should be the motivation

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.nevadacf.org/esperanza-fund-distributes-fourth-round-of-funding/>





for funders to organize, innovate and act boldly in moving resources to the critical movements that drive this work:

**“The pandemic should have helped us recognize, others live this struggle and fight for their lives every day here; we should have the courage to do the same and move closely with them and support them in collaboration with each other.”**

**Organizations Interviewed or Researched:**

- [Arriba Worker Center](#) [Could not be reached for interview]
- [Culinary Workers Union Local 226](#)
- [Faith in Action Nevada](#)
- [Make It Work Nevada](#)
- [Make the Road Nevada](#)
- [Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada \(PLAN\)](#)



Figure 12: Culinary Workers Union Local 226 workers rally outside their headquarters in advance of canvassing for the 2022 midterm elections and the Neighborhood Stability tenant protections platform. (Credit: Culinary Workers Union)

