

Speaker 1 ([00:02](#)):

Listeners, welcome to re-Imagining Tech Futures. In a world where innovation races ahead, sometimes communities are left behind. Our podcast seeks to bridge that gap and our mission is to empower voices that have too often been sidelined in the tech revolution. Re-Imagining Tech Futures is your platform a haven for sharing stories, ideas, and dreams about the relationship between technology and your world. It's where you, our cherished listeners become the storytellers, sharing your experiences and envisioning a brighter future. In our upcoming episodes, we invite you to explore your own utopia. How can we redesign and reimagine technology to better serve the needs of our communities? It's not just about conversation, it's about transformation. So lean in and prepare to embark on a journey where your voice matters. Together we can reshape the future of tech making it work for all. Welcome to re-Imagining Tech Futures. I'm your host, Tawana Dilla Hunt, an associate professor of information at the University of Michigan and on leave as an MLK fellow at MIT's Department of Urban Studies and planning.

Speaker 1 ([01:12](#)):

Today's episode of re-Imagining Tech Futures is our Labor Force Edition. I'm joined by Alex Lu, a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan School of Information. Alex is a social technical scholar and macro level social worker. We are here with Joanna Velasquez, a dynamic organizer from Detroit Action who is actively shaping a future where we not only survive but thrive. This vision places the most vulnerable communities at its core, influencing our work and policy initiatives. Joanna is passionately championing a world where we recognize each other's humanity, advocating for values that empower the black and brown work in class, not only in Detroit but across the globe. Join us in building a future that celebrates resilience, diversity, and the shared strength of communities. So before we really get started in the conversation, could you just tell us a little about Detroit action?

Speaker 2 ([02:10](#)):

Yes. So we are a grassroots membership-based organization where we launch and drive issue-based campaigns. So really thinking about the political arena from an issue point of view, not the kind of election focused candidate point of view. And the reason we approach the work that way is because we think that first things, first, people closest to the issue know the solution, they know their problem through and through and should be able to be at the center of that decision making. But most importantly, I think Detroit Action believes in leader development as well. So our organizing is really centered around making sure the right voices are a part of these decision making conversations, but also developing folks to step into their power to be in those conversations. I think that for a long time there's kind of, you know, in a lot of different ways the status quo impacts who and what voices are heard at certain times. And so we really exist to disrupt that and create civic engagement at all levels. From all perspectives, including all voices. You know, we're, right now we're doing some high school organizing, so we think beyond like the 18, you know, age of engagement like you know, it's like we wanna go as young as possible, right? Because I think there's something powerful when we're allowing folks to be agents of their own change. And so that's more my perspective what DA is. But like on paper we're a membership grassroots organization that drives issue campaigns <laugh>.

Speaker 3 ([03:48](#)):

And can you tell us a bit about what brought you to the work of political action?

Speaker 2 ([03:53](#)):

Yeah, so I always joke that I was just like this super aware high schooler, I guess <laugh> because I got politically activated as a teenager really. I was in high school from 2009 to 2013 and so that's right after the oh eight recession. And the world was just not stable and I could really see that in my own home. Like our stepfather had lost his home and my mom was a single income and then it just kind of became a rite of passage where because of his mental health and he wasn't being approved for disability, like maintaining jobs was a hard thing for him. And so then it became like a rite of passage that by the time you were 16 we were gonna get jobs to help support the household. And so all of this kind of politicized me because I was upset like, why is this like this?

Speaker 2 ([04:50](#)):

Why is it so hard for him to get the help that he needs? Why is it so hard for my mom to get approved for government aid? You know, like why are all these things like this? Right? And so that really politicized me to think about who were the decision makers. And then I had joined a club called Youth in Government. And in that space is where I learned that there are actual legislators that are, you know, signing off bills or supporting bills that are creating the life that I'm living right now. And in some spaces there's people that are saying the right things, but in most spaces there's a lot of people that are out of touch but making decisions that impact my life. So that's really like the root of what got me into like wanting to explore politics. But it actually wasn't until I found Detroit action that I realized I could organize in this way. And so I'm grateful that a lot of my development has actually been at Detroit action since 2018.

Speaker 3 ([05:48](#)):

I'd love to hear more about that and maybe speculations on why people become out of touch. Why do you think that happened?

Speaker 2 ([05:57](#)):

Yeah, I mean my first answer is that a lot of the people in positions of power don't come from communities that make up the majority of this country. So for example, we have these people that are throwing in their hats for presidential elections and you know, I won't list off who they're right, but when you think about where they come from, a lot of times they do try to tailor their lived experience to the working class. But when you dig deeper than that it's you know, their children or they themselves where CEOs and had access to money and maybe did pull themselves up by the bootstraps, but their bootstraps were already like pretty well off bootstraps. And so, you know, their starting point I think is what keeps them out of touch is that they actually aren't coming from the poor working class and they don't have relationships with the poor working class.

Speaker 2 ([06:58](#)):

And that's just thinking about class. And I think when you add the layer of race and other marginalized communities, your context to what you think the world should look like I think just looks different. So when you're able to grow up in elite spaces where you or parents have access to country clubs and you go on vacations at least once a year, that already sets you up to think about the world differently than the communities that have never been outside of Detroit, have never been able to explore even their own state. And so yeah, I think people live in different realities at all times. And if you're not in deep relationship with communities, you're not able to see new realities that might differ yours, that might contradict what you thought the world looks like. But I think like even more cleanly than that, especially our legislative system, our political system, it was set up for elites, it was set up for, and it has been

more accessible for folks that exist within the status quo that gives them the power to access that so much easier.

Speaker 2 ([08:10](#)):

And so then, you know, I don't like to say that being out of touch is a purposeful decision, but I think choosing not to learn from communities that you don't understand is an intentional decision that is made. And we could see it in the way that Detroit was redistrict, right? We don't have a single Detroit district anymore. We have districts that you know, blend Detroit into suburbs and that gives anyone who runs in those districts the ability to not even cross the mile border into Detroit to hear from their constituents in that area because they have the power to do so. They get to now only campaign in their suburbs. So I think it's an intentional decision not to learn, learn from communities you don't understand. But I think their position in being able to do so is just simply like privilege <laugh>, whether it's class privilege, race, privilege, an overlap with both their just reality isn't the reality that most Americans have. Or if we think about Michigan Michigans,

Speaker 3 ([09:12](#)):

What I heard maybe was that perhaps they were never in touch to begin with. Yeah. And so there's this exercise of becoming in touch. Yes. Or I don't even know if that exists anymore. <laugh>.

Speaker 2 ([09:28](#)):

I think that would require some humility that, I don't know, people in power are challenged to often humble themselves, at least I think at DA we'd like to think that we're building the power to make that a practice where they have to, you know, humble themselves when they're in relationship with us to understand that we need them to act a little bit differently and move a little bit differently. But yeah, I don't know if they're encouraged enough to humble themselves. <laugh>.

Speaker 3 ([09:56](#)):

Can you say more about that process? You know, how Detroit action is in a sense requiring that type of effort?

Speaker 2 ([10:07](#)):

Yeah, I mean we believe in a multiple strategies approach to power and that looks like building power with the state, building power without the state and then building power within our own communities. So the state really isn't involved here, but when it comes to building power with the state, we wanna be able to be in relationship with those that are representing our communities. And to be able to be in good relationship with these power structures is that we need you to act on the issues that we care about. So when it comes to building that relationship, if we're constantly talking and then you're not making the decisions that we need you to make, you know, that puts us in direct conflict with each other, right? But we have more to lose when they don't make those decisions that we need them to make because it's the the decisions that would make change in our lives.

Speaker 2 ([11:03](#)):

And so they may not have stake in that, but we do. And so then the thing that we ask ourselves is, so how do we make them feel that they have stake in not listening to us? And so very simply it's just about being able to unelect them the next time around, right? And so being able to have them believe that like we have the ability to either keep you in office or not. But I think also the second power of like building

power without the state, they don't like when their reputation is somewhat soiled, right? And so in the meantime of the four years that they're in their position, it looks like us calling them out and they don't often like that. But that seems to be the nature of where we're at now with a lot of folks. What it looks like when we are in good relationship with each other is that we have a, a co governing relationship is that they do believe wholeheartedly that their decisions should be decisions that are aligned with, you know, our membership.

Speaker 2 ([12:02](#)):

And so an example of that is like looking at district six in city council where we have Gabriela Santiago Romero and while she's new to office she is interested in figuring out how to change her position and her relationship with community. So that way it does build more of that infrastructure to be co-owning. And it's something that I think we don't know exactly what that looks like yet because the power structures currently have existed in a very status quo way. And so what we're asking to be created hasn't really been created yet, but we would much rather be in a trial and error position with someone than someone who, you know, consistently comes to our spaces, makes commitments and then doesn't follow up on them. So those are the folks that we unfortunately have to engage a little bit differently, but we don't find that as a fault of our own. Right.

Speaker 3 ([12:56](#)):

And so Joanna, you talked about Detroit action and engaging in a political way, right? Holding these leaders accountable. The other way that I see Detroit action is engaging the community, right? Mm-Hmm <affirmative> working with community to become more politically active. And I wanna hear about approaches that Detroit action uses to engage community members in political action.

Speaker 2 ([13:20](#)):

Yeah, I mean we are a deep organization and so what that means for us is that some tools work and don't need to be fixed. And so with some of that looks like canvassing, you know, we actually take time to get deep in the neighborhoods and you know, I think there's been some resistance to that in a post covid world to get back into the world in that way in a very direct contact type of way. But it is the best way to do it <laugh>. And so that just is true, you know, I think like especially when you live in the neighborhood and you get to tell someone, you know, I'm your neighborhood neighbor from three blocks down or just down the street, there's something really I like to say magical that happens on the doors when you can see in real time that like you can build trust with that person.

Speaker 2 ([14:05](#)):

So I mean like in terms of the way we outreach and the way we spend time in community, it's deep field time. Even myself, like my title is campaign manager, but I'm still an organizer and so I still have turf, I still make the phone calls, I still knock the doors. But when it comes to building the power, you know, I can only do so much. I can only reach X amount of people throughout the year. And so the development part of how do we get people to be politically engaged with us is that we ask them to do this work with us, whether it looks like phone banking with us or canvassing or training with us to learn how to put on a direct action, creating tension for that accountability or taking over the facilitation because they're more of an expert than I. There's sometimes where it's like I do step back and I make sure my leaders are the ones guiding the conversation because they're just more experts and I do better just note taking like you know, so it's just like kind of knowing where and when certain skills should be honed is I think the key in leader development.

Speaker 2 ([15:09](#)):

But it's also the key in building a political action group because you know, I'm thinking about a member leader right now, Dwayne, he's a retired vet and his discipline is just top notch. And you know, I have to say like sometimes when I'm holding the space and I'm facilitating space, I like things to flow. I like you know, everyone to get their voice out, but he keeps me on that agenda and so he's sergeant of arms. So I think it's even as little as just understanding that we all have a role to play, whether it's within our meeting space, whether it's out in the public and we're going to city council and making public comment or we're knocking doors. Like there's a role that we all have to play. But again, for us, like leader development is the key because we just define leader development as simply asking someone to take action.

Speaker 2 ([15:59](#)):

So however we learn that they wanna take action, it's our role to ask them to do that with us and give them the tools to be able to do that if we see the growth edges. So organizing can look different in a lot of different ways. Like we had to learn how to do it differently in Covid. But I always start with canvassing because there are just some foundational things that we shouldn't lose. And I think like the being present in neighborhoods is something that other political entities, especially in Detroit, don't invest in. They don't knock doors. Like we were one of the first programs that had a year-round field program in Detroit when we launched the field program in 2018. And last year we had worked with the polling group and they did some research in the city and Detroit action. About 60% of the participants recognize Detroit action as a trusted political organization.

Speaker 2 ([16:59](#)):

And for me that always is gonna go back to the camp, the amount of time we spend in the neighborhoods because that is the only way that we were able to build that trust. We could have sent all the mailers in the world without being in the neighborhood and that would not have built the trust that we needed to do, you know? So yeah, I think it always goes back to canvassing and building that first initial relationship out the doors and then following up on it from there and just kind of calling folks in wherever they fit.

Speaker 3 ([17:25](#)):

I love it. And so you know, when we met we were working with Detroit Action to collect the communities utopian futures and this aligned with what we were aiming to do as well outside of our collaboration from a couple years ago, which we'll talk about later. What methods and approaches have worked for understanding the community's utopian futures and why is this important to you? What

Speaker 2 ([17:48](#)):

Was your motivation for starting these efforts? Yeah, so we do these things called strategy sessions or power mapping and things like that. And these are all activities that we do with our membership for all of us to get like a shared analysis about what is the political arena. But one of the first things before we even get there that we talk about is what are our issues and what will the world look like if those issues did not exist? And we always start with those issues with those questions. We also ask questions like, who are your people? Like who do you know that has a similar issue or is impacted by the issue that you're talking about? Whatever the case. And we start with these, these basic questions because it really gets to the reality that we're navigating. And even in a room of 20 to 50 people, the same thing as I was saying earlier, there's different realities that are existing.

Speaker 2 ([18:49](#)):

And so some people might not even know that their neighbors are being impacted by this thing. And so we ask these questions 'cause you know, we wanna decipher what the issues are, what are the realities that people are having to navigate? Who do you know that's navigating this with you that has this shared experience? And then we always ask the question, what would the world look like to them without this issue? Because that's when we can start sitting out what do we want that solution to look like? Because we do believe that most issues we can find a solution to most issues are manmade. So we can always unmake them <laugh>. And so I think because the nature of our work has always had this like kind of visioning aspect to it, it's something that I feel passionate about not letting go because you know, say we do win like right to counsel for example, we were able to win, right to counsel for renters, now they have free legal representation, we still need to get it fully funded when it comes to being able to have them fight their evictions.

Speaker 2 ([19:48](#)):

But once we were able to win right to council, the imagination for renters in our space was able to grow because that immediate issue that they were navigating of like fearing holding their landlord accountable now is somewhat mitigated because they have that legal representation that they can lean on. We still gotta get it fully funded, but it exists, right? We passed this policy of the right to counsel and so now we have renters talking about a whole host of other issues that they would love to see addressed so they could live, you know, in better quality housing. And so yeah, I think visioning is just a really important key to keep in the work and why it's important for me, you know, to do activities like figuring out people's utopias because it gives us a sense of where people's imaginations wanna go. But it also gives us a sense of where the imaginations are currently kind of capped at because they need to get some of these issues addressed so they can feel more comfortable in imagining further further and that it feels real to obtain. So yeah, it's really just visioning for me just kind of breathes life into the work in a way where we can always come back to the drawing board and keep the work going.

Speaker 3 ([20:59](#)):

Got it. I think that's amazing that you passed the policy right to council and thank you. That's awesome. Can you speak to the futures that have been imagined and the caps right? Can you share I guess the voices of the community with others? Like what are the challenges that you're saying and what are the caps and how can we work beyond those caps?

Speaker 2 ([21:23](#)):

Oh, I mean kind of sticking on the renter focus, right? There's a lot of people that believe rent control is something we won't be able to achieve. And that for me speaks to the reality of how much, especially during covid and post covid developers and billionaires and Wall Street have been able to continue to just like suck the resources out of us. Like they are profiting at record high profits and creating such a large gap that we already knew existed before Covid, like the wealth gap already existed and now it's exacerbated and we have unions going on strikes in the automobile industry because of it. We have Blue Cross Blue Shield on strike, we have casino workers and restaurant workers going on strike right now Detroit is called Strike City because we have so many industries going on strike because corporations and developers on Wall Street are living in one world where the economy's great, we're making record profits, but the rest of us are like, we're hungry.

Speaker 2 ([22:33](#)):

Like we can't pay our rent. And there's no world where they believe rent control could happen because it's just, what do you mean? Like the playing field is set up for the other side to win at all times. You know, we don't have fair wages, they're taking away our healthcare, we can't pay rent. DTE keeps upping utility prices. Like there's so many examples where it's true for them that corporations are winning and they'll always be able to win. And I am not on the winning side of that. That I think causes a real cap on what they think could be possible. And so then that's what I feel, you know, my role as an organizer is to help disrupt that a little bit is to make like the playing field clear. This is why they're winning, this is who we could challenge to disrupt that.

Speaker 2 ([23:22](#)):

And I think once we're able to paint that shared analysis of what the pathway is, what our theory of change could be, we can organize a little bit better. But yeah, I think it's kind of like a balancing thing that we always have to do because when we're calling more folks in, they're coming in with that same cap and so constantly disrupting that and giving folks the tools to see that really we could change the system and this is how it's a hard thing to do, but it's one that I'm committed to do <laugh>. Yeah, no I appreciate that. Alex, I just wanna check in. Do you have follow on?

Speaker 4 ([23:59](#)):

Yeah, I do have a question. I think like everyone to hear a little bit about when you're saying, you know, envisioning you're talking about it really helps us to thinking about how the future will go and also thinking about where the imaginations are currently capped at. So one of my questions, I'm really curious to see like how you connect those two things together when we're doing, imagining is always like pointing towards the future, but at the end of the day, like we need to think about like what is said, like the ground for the present, how we can, you know, disrupt the current ground. And I wonder like what kind of strategies or what kind of things that Detroit action is doing and what you are doing to kind of connect this two things together, like the future and the present and probably even the history in the past as well.

Speaker 2 ([24:44](#)):

Yeah, that's a really great question because it's kind of, that is the work, you know, I think there's a science to organizing and that's what I refer to as like the outreach and the canvassing and the like the amount of times that we stay in communication with people. But there's a art to organizing and I think the art of organizing is that it is being able to hold space and validate where people's realities are, at the same time as encouraging them to feel hope and imagine, you know, imagine past their current reality as much as they can. So the way that we kind of bridge the two is very much by understanding that our values is what bonds us together and that we can get to that visioning that they have, that future that they have if we make decision very strategic decisions that act and defend our values very publicly.

Speaker 2 ([25:40](#)):

So an example of that is going back to housing. Currently we have, you know, a lot of renters but a lot of our renters were once homeowners. And so there's both like this current fight of being able to protect them as renters and tenants, but there's also this simultaneous fight as to get them compensation for why they lost their homes. You know, we had an over assessment crisis that led to foreclosures and so there's this whole strategy to try to bring people whole again. But outside of renting and outside of home owning, we also know that we just generally need better housing security. And so that's like the long-term goal. And so what we do with folks is that we figure out what is the solution for their



immediate need, but what's the actual housing platform that we wanna fight for? And so then we tackle that one step at a time acknowledging that maybe the current issue isn't where you wanna be, it's not enough and it probably isn't <laugh> and it's the step that we gotta take to get to that long-term goal that we have.

Speaker 2 ([26:45](#)):

So it's really like goal setting. But you know, I try not to say goal setting as like the only thing we're doing it is very much about developing that shared analysis that if we continue to defend our values publicly in ways that gets us closer, it's a much more, I think, palatable fight than thinking that you'll get one win and your problems will be over. Because I think that's also what feeds apathy in a way because wins will happen and people self false promises and then your reality didn't change much. And so then you're like, well why did I give all of my time and effort to something that didn't deliver? So we wanna make sure not to do that <laugh>. Yeah,

Speaker 3 ([27:26](#)):

I did wanna circle back to our session, you know, from a couple years ago, only because you talked about community values and I know in that session we talked about community values, we talked about the strengths of the communities and how we move forward, taking those into consideration. Could you share more about community values?

Speaker 2 ([27:48](#)):

I think they are shared more than people know. Like I think that's like the starting point. So one of the things that, you know, these oppressive systems do really well, it's thinking that the person down the block is the person that like I'm up against not the power structures at be. So whether they're dividing us based off of gender, race, ethnic group, religion, like whatever the case is right there, it's a very divisive approach that keeps people from, you know, building strong communities together. And why I think about that in terms of like values in that, why I think they're shared more than people know is because when you ask when my experience has been, especially when we're on the doors, when you ask people what they care about, they care about housing, they care about mental health, they care about fair jobs, they care about small businesses, they care about fully funded education systems and all these things are often the things that are on the table to divest from in these power structures and the power structures feed us, feed us so much propoganda you could say on why that decision is still a good decision, why divesting from X, Y, Z small business in certain areas is gonna be better for the development of this area.

Speaker 2 ([29:20](#)):

And that happens in Detroit a lot. And sometimes we eat that up, we think okay, yeah I have to trust that idea because they have inside knowledge. And then you end up where, you know, in my neighborhood for example, it's been historically divested from, but then just a few miles over you've got OI that started to get investment again and we wanted to see it continue to be invested. And then they stopped at a certain point once it got closer to my neighborhood again and it was just kind of like, wait, why? And then the reasons are, oh we can't keep funding businesses that won't be able to be sustained so we had to stop at a strategic point, whatever, you know, the conversation is. And so how that connects to values is that I firmly believe that if we are able to build a sharper analysis on how to defend our values very publicly and how to live into the values that we care about, that type of propoganda wouldn't be able to infiltrate us the way that it currently is.



Speaker 2 ([30:21](#)):

We would be able to have the discernment to say actually no actually I don't want you to remove all of the light in my neighborhood. I want you to rebuild these homes because it's cheaper to rebuild them than it is to tear them down. And that's a very thing that we're navigating right now is that they were able to pass the blight removal program but we weren't able to pass the charter that would've required homes to be restored. And that is the charter amendments that we had is what community really wanted. But because Propagandas, you know, was able to say like, crime will go down if we don't have these abandoned homes anymore, people passed it and then five years later blight hasn't really been removed, it was an expensive project, we are not seeing the turnaround on it. And so yeah, I think values are incredibly important because for me it filters out the smoke and mirrors, it filters out our ability to be bamboozled, you know, by <laugh> the system in a way that has serious consequences.

Speaker 2 ([31:22](#)):

And then I also think the most powerful part of it, and this is where I'll end, is like it builds community. Like when you actually realize that the person that you thought was the reason why you lost your job down the street is actually someone who cares about the same world that you care about and has a similar vision to what you care about. You don't have any more beef, you realize you can actually build with that person. You know, you can share bread with that person, you can come together and have black cup parties with that person or summertime hangouts and stuff. And so I think values are really key to like bring back into the conversation when we think about political action because you know, everyone approaches the work from different angles and when you realize that your situation wasn't caused because of another situation, actually both of those situations were caused because of this entity. There's a lot of power there. <laugh>.

Speaker 3 ([32:15](#)):

Thank you. I think what I'm hearing is we have shared values, maybe we should be asking what are the structures that might be leading to our conflict? You know, when we might have beef with a neighbor or the question should be, hmm, what structure in place might be eating me to have that beef? Because our values are more than likely the same than not.

Speaker 2 ([32:37](#)):

Yeah.

Speaker 3 ([32:38](#)):

So in the sessions, in the imagining sessions, there were I think amazing concepts related to alternative economies that built on community values In our sessions, I think the most salient ones were community capitalism, which was really a form of a, a circular economy where money is going back into uh, community. And we also saw village based childcare and childcare collectives, which were, you know, pretty well aligned. Do you wanna share what stood out to you from these concepts or other concepts from that session? We had, I know it was a couple years ago,

Speaker 2 ([33:11](#)):

These concepts still, you know, show up in our conversations. But kind of going back earlier to like the caps on imagination, I thought it was funny to see like the phrase, and I really appreciate it, like community capitalism because like it's almost like an oxymoron <laugh> like those two words directly somewhat contradict each other. However it was what they were actually talking about is what, you

know how you phrase this like a form of a circular economy, which you know, I don't think capitalism works that way however the community can. And so I really appreciated this notion even when it came to like the village based childcare or thinking about like collectives that meant childcare needs or housing needs or like, you know, the creativeness that we could actually redevelop our communities to support needs was really one inspiring for me and super hopeful in the ways that when people think about solving their problems, their individual issues.

Speaker 2 ([34:08](#)):

Never once did I think we heard in the conversation at all. Like if we gave one person the tools to figure it out, they would. I think everyone's position came from the point of view of like how can we call each other in to better support each other? And that to me was like, it was just music to my ears. 'cause I think like there's really no other way to do it. We can't solve our issues without calling people in to build that together. Like you know, if we only hyper-focus on one person's lived experience and then we create a solution for all people, we've missed so many people. And I thought like that shared understanding was so awesome to hear. And I think like going back to the community capitalism, I think there's a key understanding that we need a better flow of resources, whatever that system is, resources need to flow better into more people, to all people. And I think we could call it whatever we want, but that value there, right of shared resources and being able to meet all needs was really, yeah, inspiring I'll say.

Speaker 3 ([35:17](#)):

Yeah, it definitely was. Joanne, I feel like you've touched on this and I'll, I'll ask you know again is how have you all Detroit action worked toward reaching community members envision utopian alternative economies?

Speaker 2 ([35:30](#)):

Yeah, so the number one way that I feel we do this most intentionally is through our budget campaigns. So we have a year-round organizing model and in capitalist language quarter one and quarter two are really focused on our local and statewide budget fights. And the reason why we focus it there is because we could pass policies that just never get funded and you know, we could say we did the work, we made it legal for right to counsel, but if we didn't fight for the funding it wouldn't be implemented. So then the vision that people were having of how to have, you know, safer renter and tenant rights, it just wouldn't actually actualize like you know, if we washed our hands there. So budget campaigns is where we really see the power shift because we think of power, we simply think of power as the ability to act.

Speaker 2 ([36:26](#)):

And when we think about power in terms of the arena that we're playing in, it shows up in really two ways to organize people. And so that's the power we wanna have and we also wanna have organized money. And so that's where a lot of institutions get their power from. And so budget campaigns is a way to shift that and we can flex our organized people power to shift the institution's power that comes from their money, then we can see some real change. And so it is a very hard thing to do, let me tell you that <laugh>, but it's where the bread and butter is I think because like I said, we still need to fully fund right to council, but what we've been able to prove since, so we passed it two years ago, actually it might have been three, the covid years are so like blurred together but <laugh>.

Speaker 2 ([37:17](#)):

But we, you know, when we passed it, we were it, it was underfunded, it continues to be underfunded now, but every year when we've come back around for our budget campaign, we've been able to get more funding because now we've been able to show that the need is there, that this is something that needs to be funded. And now that we, because we passed the policy that made right to council legal, it almost has to be funded now. You know they're gonna underfund it if they wanna keep doing that next year, you know, we're gonna go and fight with some more money. Last year we were able to win six more million dollars for three years. So six every year, but we need it funded at 20 million. So <laugh> there is a long uphill battle and that 20 million might be more now because that number was projected off of what the need is.

Speaker 2 ([38:07](#)):

But all that to say where we try to make sure that the things that people are visioning in their utopia world actually gets acted on is within the budget. And so we often have to have like a policy fight that's complemented with a budget fight. And so that's the first way, but then the last way of say, you know, we use elections as a vehicle to power, we don't see them as like end all be all. And so when we think about how to bring our members vision of the world to life, we have to elect people into those seats that are willing to take that on. And so sometimes they might be the lone wolf within the house of representatives or the city council or you know, the county commissioner seat shouting at their peers, the values that we care about. But we need you to do that.

Speaker 2 ([38:57](#)):

We need people to be in certain places strategically to be able to take that on. And so going into election season, we have an endorsement process led by our members that they're asking all the questions, this is what we wanna see done, will you commit to it? Housing, water infrastructure, police, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And then if you don't make that commitment, we're not gonna reelect you. So it's like, you know, we keep a running record, we won't re endorse you, we won't support you. Whatever the case is is that we know that the public relationship that we wanna build with electeds is very specific so we're not getting lost in the sauce. You know, we're setting that foundation from the very beginning. Yeah. So it's like we definitely use different strategies but I think budget campaigns and elections are two very clear areas where we try to make intentional decisions that will help bring those visions to reality.

Speaker 4 ([39:50](#)):

Yeah. I do have a follow up question. So I have a question related to conflict and the visioning as well as organizing. So we talk a lot about shared values are so important for organizing, bringing, you know, community members together, neighbors together for political actions. But like what we saw, you know, during the sections, there's like a lot of different conflicts happening even in that speculation space, right? And I was really inspired by you like when you step in and intervene with those kind of conflicts and help everybody to kind of identify a common ground, can you share a little bit more about like your experiences and different kind of strategies of how you bring folks together?

Speaker 2 ([40:32](#)):

And that is so hard to do <laugh> transparently. I mean because again, like it's not my job to invalidate someone's reality, right? But it is my role to keep us aligned on what our shared analysis is and like sharpen it. And so sometimes we use the language and organizing as like it's agitation, but it's not agitation in the point of getting on someone's nerves and irritating them. You know, I have to be able to

be in deep relationship with that person to be able to kind of push them a little bit beyond what their thought process might be and really be able to ask those questions of like, where did you get that information? Like where'd you get that from? You know, where did you read it? Who told you that? And the thing is, is that with bad information, that is easy to disprove <laugh> and it is easy to find a way to like if that person is willing, again, that's where the deep relationship has to happen to receive that and kind of like take it in like hmm, maybe I am just regurgitating something that actually is out of my values.

Speaker 2 ([41:38](#)):

And so for example, you know, I have a member leader who, he falls a little bit more the way I think about class is your poor or your working class, but pretty much in the same bucket, right? And so he finds himself in the retired end of being a working class person his whole life and blames the reason why so often gets himself caught up blaming the reason why he can't get into certain social programs. Like because he's not disabled yet. He's not at his official retiree age of 65 and because of poor people <laugh> and he'll say this, he'll say this because that is what the media says and he believes it. You know, that these social programs are only for poverty and that if only they would get a job, right? He regurgitates these things because that is the reality in which he believes why his needs aren't being met.

Speaker 2 ([42:32](#)):

And so then the first couple of times I met him when he said these things, no I was not gonna challenge him right off the bat, but after a few times and kind of you know, doing some political education where he's been in our space, we see that we're all oppressed by the same entities and stuff. I asked him, you know, he had shared some things about what his life was like getting back into civil society and I just asked him like, were those things easy? Did you have access to what you needed? You know, X, Y, z? And a lot of times he said, no, no, no, no, no. And so I just probed to him like, if you believe in this value, if you believe everyone should have their needs met, then why do you blame the people that don't have power as to why you're not having your needs met?

Speaker 2 ([43:14](#)):

And just being able to ask those direct questions I think is the best place to do that one-to-one conversations really being able to agitate that person as to like who told you that though, <laugh>. But I think in group settings, in group settings it's a little bit different, right? Like we have to hold firm to what our values are. And so like if I'm not setting the example of being able to defend that value in real time, then I'm not able to model to folks how you should live into that value and also defended themselves too. And so it's really just about, honestly, I'll tell you the truth, I get a frog in my throat every time we're in a public meeting space <laugh> and one of my members says something that you know, directly contradicts someone else's lived experience in the space. It's because I know that is my moment to step in.

Speaker 2 ([44:03](#)):

I have to do that. And it could cause tension, it could cause conflict, it could maybe not as go as well as it did when we were in that meeting space, but that's a risk I have to take because if they're in deep enough relationship with me, we'll be able to follow up offline out of that meeting, right? You know, things are not gonna be the end. But at the same time, if I don't do that, then it communicates to folks that we don't actually have to live the values we're talking about and that's not what we can do either. So I don't know if that got directly to your question, but where I like to agitate people most is in one-to-

one conversations. But in group settings, a lot of times <laugh>, you know, I have to figure out how to do that with some grace and it works most times, sometimes it hasn't. So <laugh>,

Speaker 3 ([44:49](#)):

I love that, you know, as you say that I think about how do we begin to develop the muscle of getting frogs in our throats, right? Like how do we begin to ask ourselves the question, you know, might there be others in the room who agree of what what I'm saying? Right? You know, I mean of course there always are and just opening up space for people to have those discussions, right? To working through the agitation. I love that term agitation.

Speaker 2 ([45:18](#)):

I think also just like one thing to be true, especially about the system that we're in is that not everyone can access it. So, you know, a lot of times, especially when I'm working with folks that are off about being denied for like the third application they put in for the roof that they need and they start saying all the reasons why they think this is happening. You know, some of those reasons might be spot on and the other reasons are just coming from emotion, right? And so it's like honoring that but then also regrounding them. It's like, well you remember that not everyone can access that, right? So we can't blame people that it can't have access. And I just think reminding people that it's really important because a lot of us are just surviving like that. I don't think there's many people that I come in contact with that get to live a life that they're thriving in. That's just the reality. So until we get there, yeah, again, it's just like being able to give people grace but then also like not let them get away with it at the same time. <laugh>,

Speaker 3 ([46:16](#)):

What role does technology play in the envisioning process or or reaching the imagine future, if any at all?

Speaker 2 ([46:25](#)):

Oh, that is a good one. Um, you know, I, I don't, I don't think I, I think this is more of a, like a me perspective, but um, you know, I, I don't think that there's a, maybe this is a cap on my imagination, but <laugh>, uh, I, I don't think there's a, a world where, you know, we're gonna step away from technology. I think it's pretty integrated in the way that we operate, even just from like a basic cellular point of view or laptops, tablets, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So like the role that I think it plays, I, I think it's just simply to help facilitate like the conversation. Like bring the vision to life visually help us see it, note it down like, like act as essentially like our drawing board in a way where, you know, if we're bringing in surveys, we can see the survey stuff.

Speaker 2 ([47:20](#)):

If we're in person we can digitize the conversation. And again, like at our last summit actually we had a graphic artist who she was drawing the whole time. And so everything that she was seeing from the breakouts to the panels to some of the artists that sang and did some of their performative stuff, you know, she captured that all into one image and that was the image that she made to like reflect our meeting for that day, our five hour summit. So I think of technology that way, it's like to act as like a note taking kind of moment capturing service to us that we can reflect on that we can see over time how we started at point A and came to point B. But I think my imagination in a way kind of stops there

because I think when we make too much room for technology to have more of an active role, we are losing the like the communal approach to it.

Speaker 2 ([48:15](#)):

And so yeah, I dunno necessarily know if that got exactly to what you were asking, but I think also, especially in the session, like technology shows up that way in Detroit because we haven't had a good experience with it, you know, whether or not it's from the policing perspective or it comes from the lack of access. Like when you talk about technology, it does kind of create some grunts in the conversation in a way where people have like ugh, whether it's because they feel shame because they can't get their kids the next tablet coming up and that's like a daunting thing on them. Or they're hyper aware of the fact that if we go into another shutdown, they don't have a laptop at home to be able to do school or they don't even have internet at the house because we have dead zones throughout the city and the bandwidth is just not updated, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Speaker 2 ([49:07](#)):

Or the fact that we're about to unfortunately pass license plates readers. And so if you get caught cutting a red light, which I have here and there not gonna lie plate. So it's like think there also is just a different relationship we have in the city with technology than you might ask someone in the suburbs or even in Ann Arbor, right? Where you know, with your student refund, everyone's thinking about getting the next like Mac to the stay up to date and things like that and you have the access to it. You could go to the office store, like I think the closest Apple store we have to Detroit might be like 45 minutes out too. So it's, I think just generally speaking, I don't know if I even could imagine past like including technology more than the ways we currently do it. So like digitally capture things and stuff. Wow, this is so

Speaker 3 ([49:53](#)):

Insightful. The question I wanna ask is why do you think that is

Speaker 2 ([50:00](#)):

Simply redlining <laugh>? I think like, you know, wait, Detroit has intentionally been, you know, divested from, kept from access to jobs, access to all the things our schools, I remember when I was going into school we were still using in Detroit schools, like their books were so dated that like they were bound together with tape and stuff like that. And so it's like we've just consistently been underfunded for so long. There's youth that I know that have only ever used like a metro PCs, Android <laugh>. And so it's like there's just genuinely a gap because of the ability to access not having enough money at home really impacts your ability to get an iPhone that like is competing with like a car note or something. So yeah, it's just, you're not gonna get it if you can't buy it.

Speaker 3 ([50:48](#)):

How do we begin to collaborate? What other collaborations might be necessary given the state of the world?

Speaker 2 ([50:56](#)):

I love this question. I think like kind of going back to what I was saying earlier, when we think about organizing, we think like everyone has a role. And I think like the relationship that like academics could have to community is recognizing that maybe the approach that you're writing your report or something

could also be out of touch in the same way that the people in institutions of power and decision making are also outta touch. And that's okay. And I think like it simply just starts by maybe acknowledging that and like asking where you could get in touch <laugh>, you know, I always appreciated our dynamic because you know, it started in that, you know, dreaming space that we were in for the new year and then organically like we, you know, just by staying in contact and figuring out how to like come together.

Speaker 2 ([51:52](#)):

We did, right? And so I think just more of that like putting yourself in, I love my undergrad experience because you know, there was always something that you could go to, there was always something happening on campus that you could go to a different talk this and that, but what would it look like if those talks were actually located somewhere else? Or there was like the attempt to bridge the gap between these larger institutions to these underfunded areas. And then it's also just wondering about like how often are these underfunded areas written about but not visited? So it's like if you're in the world of academia and you know that research is important and you know that like your material will eventually get read, I think there is a responsibility to make sure that you are figuring out ways to validate even your own perspective by being in those areas.

Speaker 2 ([52:47](#)):

It all goes down to building relationships <laugh> and being able to like foster genuine ones. So Biden gave all states American rescue plan dollars and local municipalities across the country, not everywhere unfortunately created system digital systems where they showed where and how the money was being flowed, how those decisions were made. It was kind of just like however they set it up, but it was visually pretty pleasing. There wasn't that much legalese in the language and you could just really keep track of how money was being spent, where, how many community sessions happen to make that decision. And I think of stuff like that when we think about like making work more transparent. It's just like inviting people into the process and then showing the process and not having additional steps in the process that aren't shown. But literally just showing the whole process, letting folks know where they can plug in, how people have been plugged into the work, I think are all important ways to build trust and showing transparent processes. And I think it also just normalizes inviting people into the work. I think another way to disrupt the status quo is by promoting collaboration. Like right now that just isn't the style. A lot of people have a different understanding of what collaborative work is. <laugh>. Yeah, I think finding ways to make collaboration a cultural norm I think would be cool.

Speaker 3 ([54:24](#)):

I agree. I find so many examples of agitation and collaborations and the agitation kills the collaboration <laugh>, you are able to work through the agitation. I mean, I think that's so key.

Speaker 4 ([54:36](#)):

Yeah, I do have a question, you know, bring people to the process and make the process transparent to everybody. You know, like as we have seen in City of Detroit, maybe generally know a lot like, because we were both in, you know, anti surveillance coalition, you know, like there are a lot of policies ordinances over there that are mandated. Like for example, we need to get community members involved and when we're making any decisions on surveillance of the technologies in the city, but even though those policies are there, even though there are like ordinances over there, but it doesn't really mean like community members are involved in the process even though like we say like, okay, we have



this notice out there for days. So they're not doing that in the first phase. But even if they do <laugh>, you know, like community members may not have the tools or knowledge to kind of understand what this process mean, right? Like or how should you even engage with this process? So I guess this is something that we're working towards too, but I guess like do you have any insights or kind of any thoughts around that?

Speaker 2 ([55:36](#)):

Yeah, I mean I think people are resistant to change <laugh>. So to your point, some of these structures might be in place, but there's not a culture around it. And so it's about like putting it into practice and like when it's not put into practice, being able to call it out. And that doesn't mean that we're gonna see the shift that we wanna see right away, but if that's the case, are we willing to take action around that? Are we willing to hold someone accountable for, hey, the three years that we were trying to get you to be more collaborative, you wouldn't, and now you're asking us for your endorsement, right? It's just like working at Detroit action. That's always how I'm gonna think about things in other spaces too. It's like the behavior that we've asked to change doesn't change, and it consistently states a pattern, but we just, I think it is the responsibility of those who are on the receiving end of that to just ask ourselves like, are we willing to get mad about that?

Speaker 2 ([56:37](#)):

Like, are we willing to take action a call it out and disrupt that? And this is why I've said like, you know, going back to wanting to build a co-governance relationship with electeds respectfully, you know, in that space we've had to call Santiago Romero out on some things, but it's all in the name of like strengthening our public relationship. And so then imagine if we were able to do that with all nine city council people and that they didn't get defensive, rather they leaned into it a little bit more and got creative with us on how to better actualize that ordinance. And so that's why it's like, it really goes about creating a culture around it because to your point, could exist. But if we're not on it, then it's never, so yeah, like there has to be an actual shift on wanting to see that type of.