

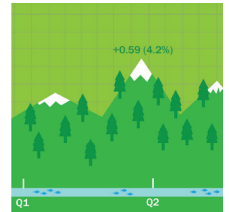
What Then Can I Do?

Ten ways to democratize the economy

Gar Alperovitz and Keane Bhatt



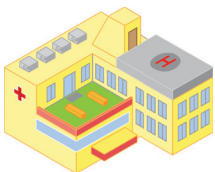
The richest 400 Americans now own more wealth than the bottom 180 million taken together. The political system is in deadlock. Social and economic pain continue to grow. Environmental devastation and global warming present growing challenges. Is there any path toward a more democratic, equal and ecologically sustainable society? What can one person do?



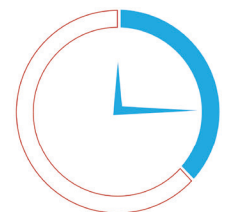
In fact, there is a great deal one person working with others can do. Experiments across the country already focus on concrete actions that point toward a larger vision of long-term systemic change—especially the development of alternative economic institutions. Practical problem-solving activities on Main Streets across the country have begun to lay down the elements and principles of what might one day become the direction of a new system—one centered around building egalitarian wealth, nurturing democracy and community life, avoiding climate catastrophe and fostering liberty through greater economic security and free time.



Margaret Mead famously observed: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Some of the ten steps described below may be too big for one person to take on in isolation, but many are exactly the right size for a small and thoughtful group committed to building a new economy, restoring democracy and displacing corporate power.



As the history of the civil rights movement, women’s movement, and gay-liberation movement ought to remind us, it’s precisely actions of this sort at the local level that have triggered the seismic shifts of progressive change in American history.



1. Democratize Your Money!

Put your money in a credit union—then participate in its governance.

Credit unions are commonplace financial institutions that typically facilitate loans for everyday purchases like homes and cars. But behind their unexciting veneer lie transformative possibilities. Unlike the large commercial and investment banks responsible

for the 2008 financial crisis, credit unions are nonprofit cooperatives that are member-owned and controlled. These democratized, one-person-one-vote banks already involve more than 95 million Americans as participant-owners. They lend to minorities and low- and moderate-income families to a far greater extent than do commercial banks. Taken together, they hold roughly \$1 trillion of assets—the equivalent of one of the largest US banks, knocking Goldman Sachs out of the top five.

Credit unions' direction of capital to community-benefiting endeavors has a long lineage. The Bronx's Bethex Federal Credit Union, founded in 1970 by Joy Cousminer and the "welfare mothers" in her adult education class, is a good example: it now serves more than 9,000 members, has \$16 million of deposits and continues to empower local residents with a wide range of services and loans for students and businesses.

Hope Credit Union of Jackson, Mississippi, has generated more than \$1.7 billion of financing for more than 130,000 individuals in the Delta region. Half of its loans go to minorities and women. More than a third of its members were unbanked before joining. Hope's CEO explicitly states that one of the credit union's purposes is to ensure that "no one is victimized by the predatory lenders that prey on vul-

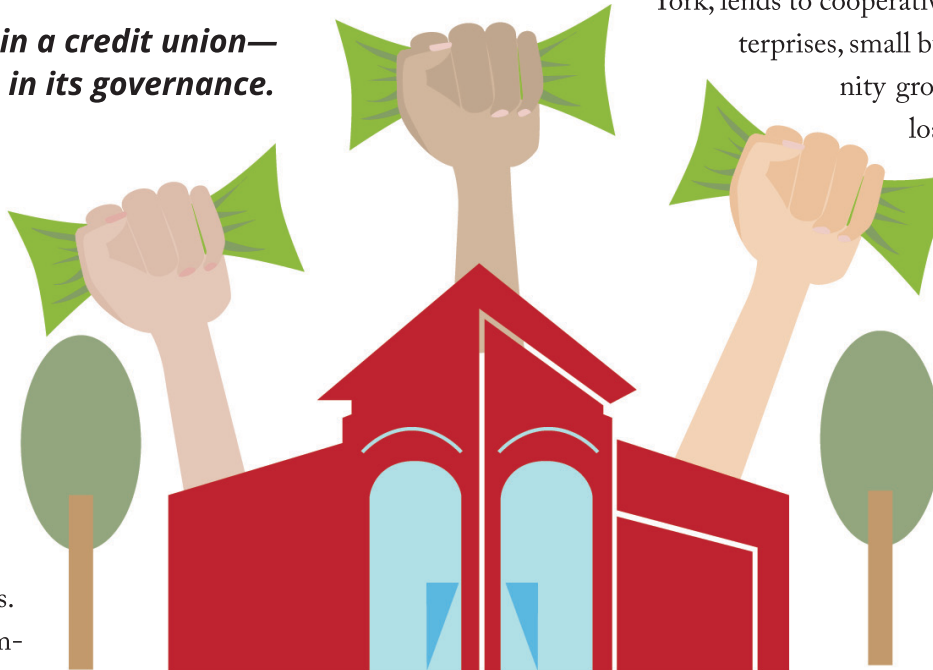
nerable, minority, low-income and elderly residents." Alternatives Federal Credit Union, in Ithaca, New York, lends to cooperatives, worker-owned enterprises, small businesses and community groups and offers micro-loans to self-employed residents.

While many older credit unions have become quite cautious, it is also clear that collective efforts to direct capital in their communities can work. In Washington, for example, activists from the small town of Vashon formed an organizing

committee that was able to get three seats on the board of the Puget Sound Cooperative Credit Union (PSCCU) then worked to open a branch for Vashon. PSCCU was "willing to cede substantial control in exchange for new members and deposits," wrote the LA Times. And, according to the activists, the credit union was "already doing the most aggressive energy conservation lending in the state," including home weatherizations—a good fit for their vision for a coal-free Vashon. PSCCU supported the idea of nonprofit groups using their own savings to guarantee microlending on community projects. And in its first year, the Vashon branch enrolled 16 percent of the population, with local deposits totaling almost \$20 million.

These examples point to an opportunity for activists to build a nationwide, democratic, localized, nonprofit alternative to corporate finance—and, where possible, begin to deprive it of the wealth that has become a stranglehold over our political system.

If you don't already have your money in a credit union, move it! And if your local credit union isn't living up to its potential as a democratically owned, community-based financial institution, get involved and organize members to take it in a new direction!



2. Seize the Moment: Time For Worker Ownership!

Help build a worker co-op or encourage interested businesses to transition to employee ownership and adopt social and environmental standards as part of their missions.

Worker-owned co-ops bring democracy and democratic ownership into the economy and into community life. Several older and newer co-ops show what can be done. Equal Exchange's 100-plus worker-owners, for instance, generate \$50 million of annual sales while pursuing an innovative agenda to make international trade in coffee and other food products more ethical. The WAGES-incubated green housecleaning worker cooperatives in the Bay Area provide critical job security for the immigrant women who work in and own them. In Chicago, the New Era Windows Cooperative is saving the jobs of workers who famously occupied their factory on Goose Island. And the United Steelworkers, working with the Mondragón Corporation, has proposed a nationwide effort to create unionized worker-owned co-ops that is beginning to bear fruit in Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and elsewhere.

The most common form of worker ownership is the Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP). Although there have been difficulties with some ESOPs, research has shown that workers in ESOPs are much less likely to be laid off than those who are not. Furthermore, ESOPs tend to be more profitable, more productive and more efficient—especially with training in self-management—than comparable firms.

An ESOP works like this: a company sets up a trust on behalf of the employees, into which it directs a portion of its profits. The trust uses that money to buy the owners' shares

for the workers, either all at once or over time. Currently, there are 10,000 ESOP firms successfully operating in virtually every sector—3 million more individuals are now worker-owners of their own businesses than are members of unions in the private sector.

In the next decade, millions of business owners born during the baby boom will retire. And if they sell more than 30 percent of the company to the employees, the owner may defer capital gains taxes (provided that the proceeds are invested in US companies). This incentive could have an enormous impact on America's business landscape. Advocacy for such conversions could be a powerful strategy for building more stable, vibrant worker-owned businesses and economies.



Consider the case of Fort Collins, Colorado-based New Belgium Brewing Co., America's eighth-largest brewery. When chief executive and co-founder Kim Jordan sold the enterprise to its more than 400 employees in 2012, she considered the conversion to 100 percent worker ownership a rare opportunity to "have multigenerational impact." Soon afterward, the worker-owners met to discuss cutting into the company's near-term profits to power their entire facility with wind energy. "Within a minute or so, we had decided as a group to become the world's largest single user of wind power," said Jeff Lebesch, a co-founder.

New Belgium is committed to open-book management, whereby all employee-owners can review finances and provide feedback. It also became certified as a B Corp, which enshrines in the firm's bylaws both social and environmental goals as well as profits.

Conversions to worker cooperatives also confer tax benefits to business owners who decide to sell to their employees. Among employee-owned institutions, co-ops allow for the most democracy. Namasté Solar in Boulder, Colorado—a \$15 million-plus-a-year solar energy services firm—converted to an employee-owned cooperative at the beginning of 2011. Its workers own the firm equally and manage

its operations on a one-vote-per-person basis. Having also certified itself as a B Corp, Namaste's mission consists of creating "holistic wealth for ourselves and our community." Its worker-owners in their mission statement declare, "We choose co-ownership over hierarchy, democratic decision-making over centralized leadership, sustainable growth over aggressive expansion, and collaboration over competition." They benefit from transparency of all company information, a 4-to-1 cap on the ratio of highest-to-lowest pay, and six weeks of paid vacation.

If you are in a union, you can encourage your union to promote worker ownership, as some already have done. Within the world of ESOPs and co-ops, the potential for organized labor should not be underestimated.

The Massachusetts-based architectural lighting manufacturer Litecontrol is a 100-percent worker-owned ESOP, and 60 percent of its workforce is unionized through the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Industrial brush manufacturer and supplier Maryland Brush Company, also totally employee-owned, allows United Steelworkers union representatives three seats on its board of directors—the same number of seats as management. Recology of San Francisco, a fully worker-owned business, is the largest ESOP in the solid waste industry and is 80 percent unionized through the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA) of the Bronx, New York, is the country's largest worker co-op (and certified B Corp), consisting of more than 2,000 mainly Latina and black home health care providers. CHCA collaborated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to unionize its workforce, with the broader aim of raising the wages of home-care workers throughout the industry (thereby raising the payroll costs of its competitors to measure up to CHCA's higher wages). The United Steelworkers proposal for "union co-ops," which combine principles of worker ownership and labor solidarity, also represents a major step forward in assembling the building blocks of a new economy.

Worker-owned companies deserve your support; the more commonplace they become, the easier they become to launch. Help stimulate the development of worker-owned co-ops and work to encourage retiring owners to sell their companies to their employees.

3. Take Back Local Government: Demand Participatory Budgeting!

Organize your community so that local government spending is determined by inclusive neighborhood deliberations on key priorities.



Participatory budgeting, pioneered in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 1989, is a bottom-up process through which community members collectively decide how their local tax money is spent. While Porto Alegre's initiative involved up to 50,000 people and 20 percent of the city's annual budget, participatory budgeting (PB) has been adapted to the differing contexts of 1,500 other municipalities worldwide, from small towns in Europe and Africa to bustling metropolises like Buenos Aires and São Paulo.

And PB has now arrived in the United States. In 2009, committed organizers partnered with Chicago Alderman Joe Moore to institute the country's first PB initiative. Following the example of other cities around the world, Chicago residents brainstormed ideas, developed them into proposals with the help of volunteer delegates, voted on the various proposals, and were then able to direct more than \$1 million of the ward's discretionary funds toward their top projects. In New York City, communities and local government officials have followed suit, committing \$10 million in taxpayer money to the process. In 2012, the City Council of Vallejo, California, instituted the first citywide process of this kind in the country.

You too can help propel this empowering approach and reconnect politics to concrete human needs like housing, schools, infrastructure and jobs. As the Participatory Bud-

getting Project argues, the process contributes to more robust self-governance, greater transparency, better-informed citizens, more equitable access to decision making and spending, and real community building in the neighborhood—a central organizing unit of democratic life. And as such efforts grow, the idea of democratic, larger-scale planning undoubtedly will become less peculiar and remote and could evolve over time to manage mass transit, high-speed rail and regional economic development—and beyond.

Lawmakers who have embraced participatory budgeting have found it to be enormously popular with their constituents across the U.S. and the world, so educate and encourage your city council member to take the plunge into direct democracy!

4. Push Local Anchors to do Their Part!

Make nonprofit institutions like universities and hospitals use their resources to fight poverty, unemployment, and global warming.

Hospitals and universities are increasingly recognized as important “anchor institutions” in their local communities. Unlike other large economic actors, they are geographically tethered to their localities. Their missions, invested capital, nonprofit status or public ownership, and other relationships contribute to their permanence. By encouraging anchors to play a responsible role in their local communities, activists often can influence and partner with them to solve social, economic, environmental and health issues.

Higher education as a sector employs a workforce of nearly 4 million, enrolls 21 million students, retains more

than \$400 billion of assets, and contributes \$460 billion of annual activity to the US economy. Universities, spurred by student involvement, can leverage that economic power to go far beyond narrow academic missions. Over the years, university students have won remarkable victories from their institutions—divestment from apartheid South Africa and the cancellation of contracts with retailers engaged in sweatshop production, for example—but there is much more work to be done to push for proactive and positive investment of assets, as organizations like the Responsible Endowments Coalition have argued. There are also opportunities to work with groups like 350.org in the effort to push for fossil fuel divestment on campuses across the country. In such campaigns it’s essential to have a clear idea of where university endowments and other resources should be directed; namely, to investments that support not only green energy but healthy local economies.

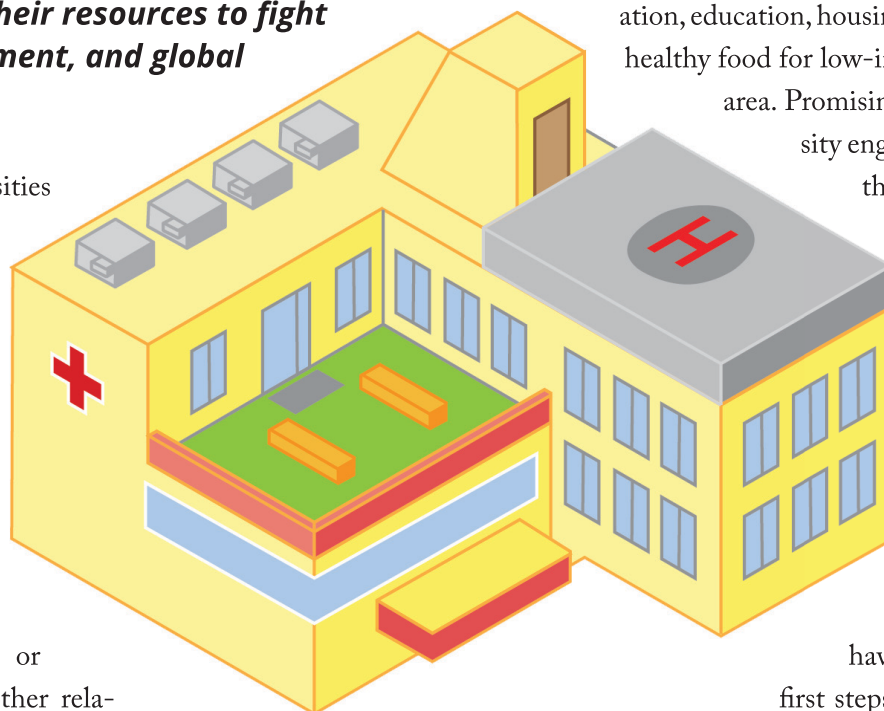
If you are a student or a member of the surrounding community, you can help organize campaigns to deploy university assets toward local job and wealth creation, education, housing and the provision of healthy food for low-income residents in the area. Promising examples of university engagement are emerging throughout the country.

Community investment of university endowments is a crucial field for activist involvement. Schools like Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, for instance,

have taken important first steps. By supporting Dur-

ham’s Latino Community Credit Union and Self-Help Credit Union with a total investment of \$12 million, Duke is aiding the credit unions in their efforts around affordable housing and neighborhood revitalization.

Nationally, nonprofit hospitals report annual revenues of more than \$650 billion and assets of \$875 billion and can be powerful allies in addressing the social, economic and



environmental factors that lead to poor health outcomes in the first place. Bon Secours Baltimore Health System is one of the largest employers in West Baltimore, in a neighborhood where life expectancy hovers in the low- to mid-60s. In 1995, George Kleb, executive director of housing and community development, made a commitment to residents that “there were no longer going to be unilateral decisions: Everything else moving forward will be done in partnership with the community.” A process that involved the input of hundreds of neighborhood residents now guides Bon Secours’ efforts—which have run the gamut from developing more than 650 units of affordable housing and repurposing more than 640 vacant lots into green spaces to getting rid of rats and trash.

You can work in your community to seize on an important provision of the Affordable Care Act (often referred to as Obamacare)—Section 9007—which requires every nonprofit hospital to complete a Community Health Needs Assessment every three years, to engage the local community regarding its general health problems and to explain how the hospital intends to address them. Health is connected intimately to economic conditions. Given that hospitals must now reach out to the community, especially underserved populations, residents can push for community-based economic strategies that fight unemployment, improve educational achievement, foster community safety and build stronger social service networks.

The integration of hospitals, universities and other anchors into a long-term vision for a community-sustaining economy is a significant development. In the University Circle area of Cleveland, for example, such institutions spend \$3 billion on goods and services a year. None, until recently, purchased from the immediately surrounding neighborhoods facing high unemployment and exclusion. An integrated group of worker-owned companies has been developed, supported in part by that purchasing power. The Cleveland co-ops offer laundry and solar services and run the largest urban green-

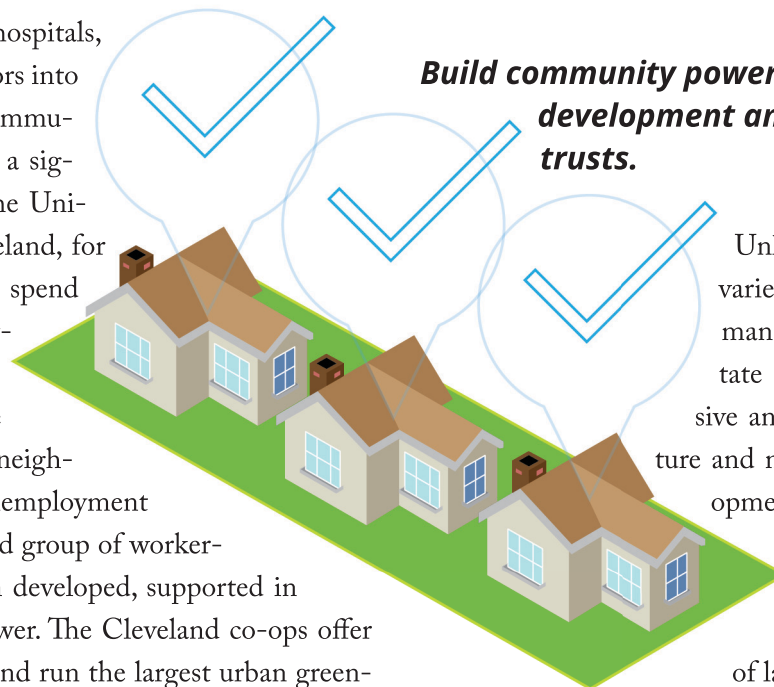
house in the United States. The aim is to create new businesses, year by year, as time goes on.

The goal is not simply worker ownership but the democratization of wealth and community building in general. Linked by a community-serving nonprofit corporation and a revolving fund, the companies cannot be sold outside the network; they also return 10 percent of profits to help develop additional worker-owned firms. Organized community members can interact with anchors, municipal government and conveners like community foundations, to adapt aspects of the Cleveland model and an economic development strategy that uses the power of the anchors and builds from the bottom up. Numerous other cities are exploring efforts of this kind, including Atlanta; Pittsburgh; Amarillo, Texas; and Washington, DC.

If your community is suffering while big nonprofit institutions enjoy generous tax breaks or are recipients of public funding, get organized to push these institutions to use their economic power to benefit the community, following models now emerging in many parts of the country. If your university is investing in fossil fuel companies, organize to bring about a major change in investment priorities.

5. Reclaim Your Neighborhood With Democratic Development!

Build community power through economic development and community land trusts.



Unlike corporate developers, a variety of nonprofit organizations manage the ownership of real estate in ways that promote inclusive and sustainable use. The structure and mission of community development corporations, community land trusts and housing co-ops allow them to democratize the stewardship of land.

Community Development Corporations (CDCs) are community-based organizations that anchor capital locally, usually in low-income areas, through the development of residential and commercial property, ranging from affordable housing to shopping centers and even businesses. Roughly 4,600 CDCs operate in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and they have created tens of thousands of units of affordable housing and millions of square feet of commercial and industrial space a year. Although many are smaller in scale, there are efforts like New Community Corporation in Newark, New Jersey, which employs 600 local residents, manages 2,000 housing units, has roughly \$500 million of assets and owns businesses whose proceeds go toward underwriting such social programs as day care and medical support for seniors. Also important: as a neighborhood-based, 501(c)(3) nonprofit, at least one-third of the CDC board is composed of community residents, allowing for the possibility of direct, grass-roots participation in decision-making.

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) are nonprofit entities that operate in more than 200 communities and have helped produce close to nearly 10,000 housing units of low-cost housing nationwide by taking land off the market and placing it in a trust. Most CLTs lease homes to residents. And by retaining the majority of the home equity gained over time, the trust is able to continue to make homes available to new members at affordable, below-market prices. Like CDCs, land trust boards are typically composed of at least one-third land-trust residents.

Organized communities can incorporate CLTs into their broader vision for economic justice. Take the Dudley Street area of Roxbury—one of the poorest neighborhoods in Boston. Residents of the predominantly black and Latino neighborhood convinced Boston city officials to grant the community the power of eminent domain over 1,300 parcels of abandoned land—an unprecedented step—then promptly established a land trust. Today, the highly democratic CLT Dudley Neighbors Inc. (DNI) ensures “community land ownership, permanence and affordability,” having rehabilitated many of those parcels into hundreds of high-quality affordable homes, along with community centers, new schools, a community greenhouse, parks, playgrounds and other public spaces. John Barros, executive director of DNI (and, at this moment, a candidate running for mayor in Boston), says the

initiative counters the narrative of “economic development from the standpoint of a singular individual.” In communities of color, he said, “We need advocacy for collective wealth building,” not simply “individual wealth building.”

You might also build on some of the lessons learned from another low-income, largely minority community that formed a housing cooperative. The Alliance to Develop Power (ADP) in Springfield, Massachusetts, began as a small nonprofit fighting local displacement—until its members decided: “We want to own stuff too, not just fight people who own stuff.” The organization mobilized renters in a large-scale campaign and bought 1,200 units of housing from private owners, making it the largest block of tenant-controlled housing in the United States. The democratically governed, multimillion-dollar organization subsequently embarked on an effort to build a “community economy,” leveraging its ownership over property to anchor and incubate businesses whose surpluses go back into ADP’s programming—including advocacy on behalf of the whole community.

As communities attempt to carve out holistic economic development, they are incorporating the interests of tenants, homeowners, businesses, workers and families. As ADP Executive Director Tim Fisk writes, “We are attempting to not just push back and improve individual and community standing within an unequal world, we are attempting to build the world as it should be. A world framed by our own definition of community values and shared prosperity.”

Get involved in your local CDC, CLT or housing co-op, and encourage them to leverage their assets to support inclusive economic development. Connect activist struggles for economic and housing justice to institution-building strategies to build up long-term power for such work.

6. Public Money for the Public Good!

Organize to use public finances for community development.

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, some cities in Oregon responded to organized constituents and set in motion an effort to keep municipal money circulating locally in ways that help build the local economy. Until this point, cities

could make federally insured deposits only up to \$250,000 in credit unions. A state-led program now provides regular oversight and insurance, allowing local governments to deposit more than \$250,000 safely. Cities such as Portland and Beaverton already have started shifting their money.

In total, ten area credit unions have accepted deposits of more than \$27 million since the program began in April 2013—all of which can be reinvested in the local economy under the purview of community-based democratic participation. Oregon's treasury holds credit-union securities as collateral, monitors them monthly, and can sell them to recover any funds in case of financial-institution failure. "It makes sense for local governments to move some of their money from Wall Street to Main Street," observes John Trull of the Northwest Credit Union Association, who helped facilitate the program.

Over the longer term, grass-roots momentum is beginning to build around the ideas of shifting state finances away from for-profit banks through the development of public state banks. Activists have been pushing for legislation in many states that would replicate key features of the Bank of North Dakota, a successful public bank founded in 1919. The bank leverages \$5 billion of deposits from taxes and public funds, and partners with and backs local banks, which then offer loans to small businesses, farmers and college students. In times of economic hardship, the Bank of North Dakota injects credit into the state economy, providing a countercyclical cushion; it also returns millions of dollars of profit annually to North Dakota's general fund.

Vermont State Sen. Anthony Pollina is championing the effort to create such a bank for his home state. Pollina, quoted in *The American Prospect*, expressed frustration regarding the for-profit financial institution that currently receives the state of Vermont's deposits, TD Bank: "They charge us fees; they lend our money wherever they want to lend it," but "they don't do that much lending in Vermont anymore."

In California, organizations like the Public Banking Institute (PBI) have begun to advocate North Dakota-style public banking options as well, given that the state's tax-

payors pay millions in interest on bonds and loans for their infrastructure needs. PBI's Marc Armstrong observes that if "California had had a state bank, we could have used the state bank credit to fund virtually all of that debt at very low cost."

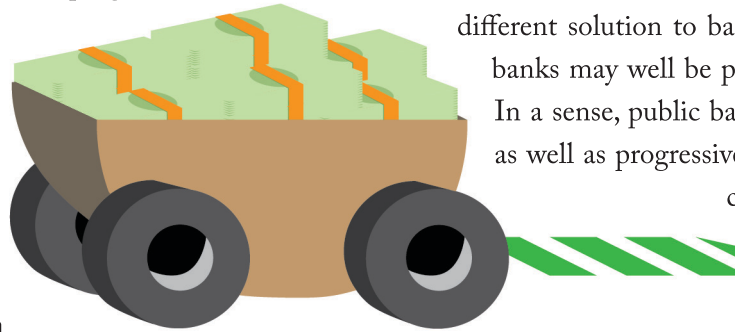
Many experts believe that it's only a matter of time before the next financial crisis hits—and when it does, a different solution to bailouts for reckless for-profit banks may well be possible at the national level. In a sense, public banking is a very conservative as well as progressive concept: Public banks and credit unions weathered the last crisis much better than private banks, benefiting the communities they served as well. There is a role for action at every level, and especially through institution building at the local level and organized advocacy for state-level democratization of finance.

To build a financial sector that works for the public good, start organizing at the city, county and state level to make sure public money flows through community or publicly owned banks—get involved with one of the many groups dedicated to these efforts around the country.

7. Stop Letting Your Savings Fuel Corporate Rule!

Get your workplace to offer more retirement-plan opportunities for responsible investment.

If you have retirement savings, chances are that they are currently being invested in Wall Street and are thus being invested in ways that work against workers and communities. As British historian and sociologist Robin Blackburn has observed, the "boring world of pension provision now fuels the glamorous world of high finance, property speculation, rogue traders, media and technology mergers, and stock exchange bubbles." However, socially responsible investing (SRI) is now an important and expanding realm and can increasingly be applied to pension plans. Pushing your em-



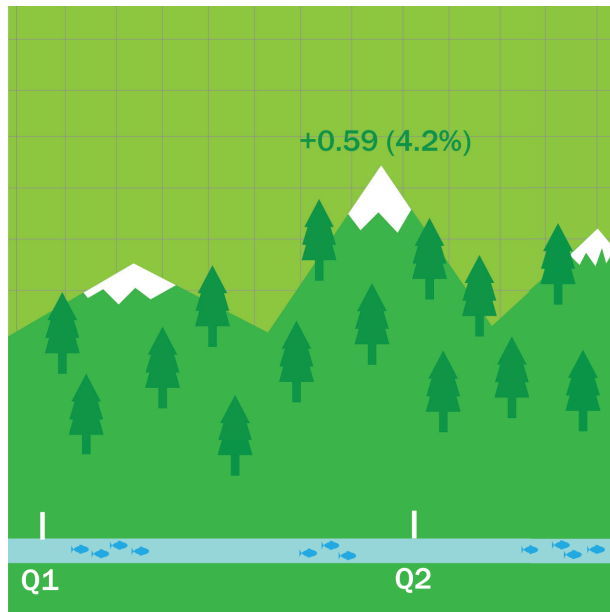
ployer for more SRI options, and in particular supporting the community-investing sphere of SRI can lead to important impacts on the national and local economy.

Firms and employees in the private and public sectors can learn from the positive experiences with community investing of some state pension funds. Since 1990, for example, Alabama's somewhat unusual public pension system has invested 10 percent of its resources within the state (including in worker-owned businesses) to en-

hance economic development, and a 2012 study found that returns on that investment were greater than if they had been put into traditional investment vehicles. California's state pension fund, CalPERS, has similarly directed almost 10 percent of its investments, or \$23.5 billion, to community-building efforts in the state rather than handing them over to Wall Street. Private pension programs also can follow the lead of Illinois-based General Board of Pension and Health Benefits of The United Methodist Church, which in 2012 invested more than \$750 million of its assets in affordable housing and other community-development facilities.

The potential for impact through directing worker pension funds in support of workers' priorities is enormous, and some have even called for a 21st-century New Deal financed by working people themselves. A Green New Deal leveraging the \$4.5 trillion in public pensions and private-sector-union pensions could help maintain public ownership of critical infrastructure and protect workers' rights while creating well-paid jobs. Such a realignment of workers' capital would transform power relationships in local communities by creating alliances between state and local governments, public workers and labor unions. The effort could help lay the groundwork for a different pattern of political economy that could address deeper systemic chal-

lenges, as union pension funds also could be used to help develop worker-owned, unionized co-ops.



If you have an SRI option at work, use it! If you don't, have a conversation with your co-workers about demanding investment options that support an economy that you'd prefer to live in. Push public officials to use public pension funds to help change ownership in general.

8. Democratize Energy Production to Create a Green Economy!

Get involved in public and cooperative utilities to fight climate change.

Public utilities always have been important in providing energy to US homes. In fact, more than 2,000 public utilities supply power to tens of millions of Americans. On average, their customers pay 14 percent less than customers of private utilities. One obvious reason: they get pretty much the same work done for far less. CEOs at investor-owned utilities earn on average almost 25 times more than their counterparts at public power companies. State and local governments benefit more too. Although public utilities do not pay taxes like traditional private utilities, they transfer to state and local governments a greater percentage of their median revenues than the median taxes paid by private energy firms.

Public utilities are subject to citizen pressure and involvement and can be recruited to play a powerful role in building a greener economy. In California, the Sacramento Municipal Utility District—one of the ten largest public utilities in the United States—now supplies more than 24 percent of its retail energy sales from renewable sources and expects to reach its goal of 37 percent by 2020. In Texas, Austin Energy provides about 15 percent to 17 percent of its power from renewable sources—primarily wind—and expects to reach 30 percent to 35 percent renewable energy by 2020.

Electricity cooperatives also serve tens of millions of customers. They are one-person-one-vote institutions owned collectively by their consumer-members. Employing more than 120,000 and generating \$45 billion a year in revenues, co-ops are also able to demonstrate the innovative possibilities of green energy. Co-ops in Kentucky and South Carolina are retrofitting homes at no up-front cost to customers, reducing electric bills while conserving energy use dramatically. Others are involved in upgrading their distribution systems to “smart grids.” In Tennessee, one co-op makes direct stakes in a new solar farm available to its members, and a Montana co-op helped rebuild a municipal hydroelectric plant. “Investor-owned utilities are legally required to prioritize shareholder profits,” observes journalist Brooke Jarvis, but electricity co-ops “are required to maximize value for their members. That makes a cooperative potentially more willing to try out a program with an as-yet-unproven effect on the utility’s bottom line, but with the immediate potential to help member-owners and wean the region off fossil fuels.”

Active member participation in co-ops can redirect their priorities dramatically. Philadelphia residents created The Energy Co-op as a simple cost-saving measure to buy heating oil in bulk. Through the vision of its members channeled into the co-op’s democratic processes, the company added sustainability to its institutional mission in the 1990s. Today, The Energy Co-op offers its members 100-percent renewable electricity and has developed Southeastern Pennsylvania’s largest biodiesel distribution business. Using a closed-loop process, the biodiesel is produced, sourced, distributed and used within the state. Regular electronic polls answered by member-owners also guide the company’s long-term policies and everyday practices.

Community engagement in municipal energy can have a tremendous impact on the fight against climate change as well. In Boulder, Colorado, grass-roots activists and the local nonprofit New Era Colorado Foundation have been

campaigning to create a new public utility for the city so as to pursue renewable options more aggressively and reduce carbon emissions. In November 2011, two ballot measures narrowly passed that would allow for “municipalization”—the legal process whereby the city can form its own public utility company and purchase the infrastructure of the existing private provider, Xcel Energy—all in spite of Xcel’s massive efforts to stymie that process. This year, Xcel

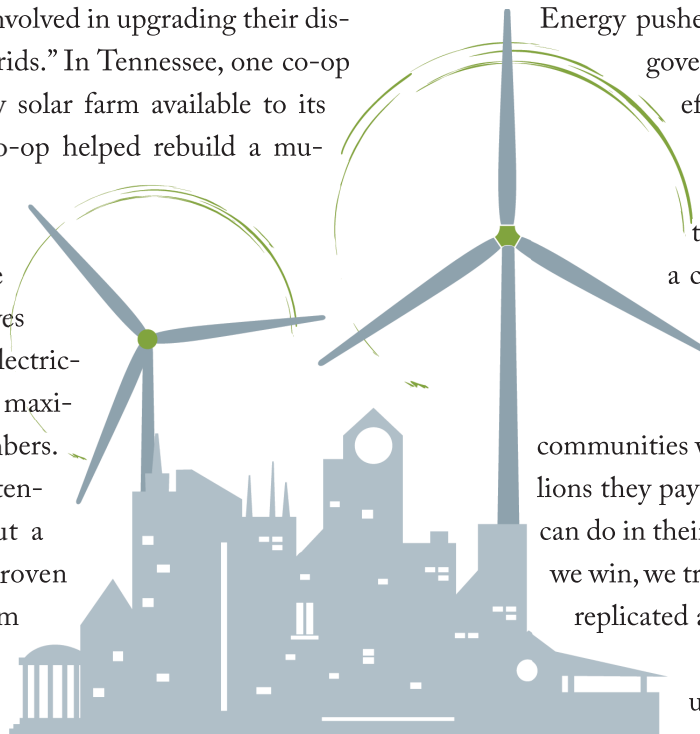
Energy pushed new ballot measures to reduce government debt, limiting Boulder’s effort to move forward with the process. In response, residents have turned to supporters across the country and the world through a crowd-funding campaign that has generated massive solidarity for their precedent-setting effort.

“If we can do it, maybe other communities will start wondering what the millions they pay in profits to their power provider can do in their city,” concludes the nonprofit. “If we win, we trigger a national model that can be replicated across the country.”

Cooperatives and municipal utilities already account for more than 25 percent of the nation’s total electricity, representing an

enormous arena for democratic involvement and growth. In addition to politically helping achieve greater environmental sustainability, local control can allow these firms to serve as anchor institutions that can support local economies through their procurement, employment and banking decisions. An expanding, democratized energy sector that provides citizens with ever-greater renewable energy can serve as a driving force for the national policies needed to address climate change and keep fossil fuels in the ground.

Participate in your utility co-op’s elections to push for innovative green strategies like those taking place across the country. Organize in your area to press your local government to municipalize private energy. Campaign to make your local public utility provide more renewable energy and use its economic power to benefit the local economy.



9. Mobilize the Faith Community!

Get your religious organization to move its money to a local financial institution involved in community development.

Religious groups and faith-based organizations, often strongly tied to local communities, have been pioneers in the field of community development. Black churches have long been involved in equitable neighborhood development, and much community investing as it is understood today is a consequence of earlier efforts by Catholic women's religious orders that tied the stable retirement of nuns to investment in nonprofit food banks, affordable housing and community land trusts. Today, congregations of the Sisters of Mercy, through their Mercy Partnership Fund, invest directly in nonprofits like women's and day care centers, as well as cooperative business.

The potential to leverage the capital of faith-based institutions committed to economic justice is immense. The Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility's 300 faith-based investor members boast more than \$100 billion of combined assets. More and more religious institutions are beginning to dedicate "1% or More in Community Investing," as encouraged by the Social Investment Forum, a membership organization advocating responsible finance.

Moving a portion of your religious organization's investments to a community financial institution involved in improving low-income neighborhoods is a straightforward alternative to patronizing profit-chasing banks. Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ), for example, invests \$7.5 million in Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs)—banks with an explicitly nonprofit, community-development mission, often involved in affordable housing, small-business creation and financial services for underserved areas. JFSJ also links its investment to educational efforts, such as field trips for students to participate in and learn from exemplary community-finance initiatives around the country. The effort also offers the nation's Jewish

community "a way to participate in community investment with only a \$1,000 minimum." Additionally, JFSJ, Dignity Health and the Unitarian Universalist Association all invest in Hope Credit Union's valuable work in the Mississippi Delta region.

The long history of American religious institutions serving as economic and financial bedrocks for their neighborhoods, especially in minority communities, suggests broader possibilities. Consider the Mondragón cooperatives in Spain. Founded in 1956 in the wake of the devastation of Spanish Civil War by Catholic priest Jose Maria Arizmendiarieta, one cooperative in the oppressed Basque region with five employee-owners making paraffin stoves laid the foundations for a modern multibillion-euro network of firms employing more than 80,000 community members involved in everything from construction to supermarkets to financial services to high-tech equipment and advanced research. Partly the result of the community-anchored economic engine of Mondragón, the Basque Country's unemployment is much lower than in the rest of Spain.



Resources abound for getting a conversation started with your congregation about building a new economy. These conversations can then help you build support for putting your religious institution's money where it can do more good—and less harm.

10. Make Time for Democracy!

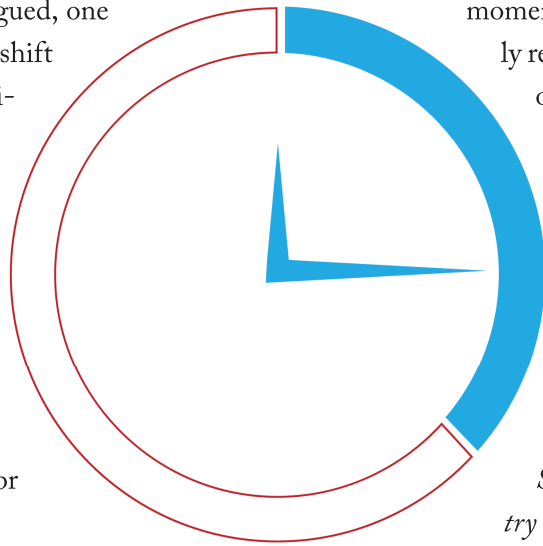
Fight unemployment by joining the fight against work.

Even in economic hard times, the United States already has an economy that produces the equivalent of over \$190,000 for every family of four. At some point we must ask when enough is enough. Although the economy has steadily been producing more goods and services in less time with less effort, most workers' wages have largely stagnated and work hours have increased for the past four decades. The long-term solution is not a dash for growth, imposing a

greater ecological toll on the planet. Rather, it is redirecting an already-productive economy toward redistribution and community needs. Also, as sociologist Juliet Schor has argued, one key step toward such a shift is to encourage more leisure time. This can also include taking advantage of opportunities to share work, and—where possible—to work less, discouraging excessive overtime, and pushing employers and legislators for a reduced workweek.

One practical way to get started is by exploring the possibility of work-sharing. The program works as follows: rather than fire one employee, a business can opt to reduce the workweek of five employees by one day each, thereby retaining their skills and the ability to quickly ramp up production in the future. But the employees working four days instead of five will retain 90 percent—not the expected 80 percent—of their wages, because unemployment insurance steps in to cover that gap. In fact, there are already 24 states, including the District of Columbia, that have work-sharing programs of this kind.

In Rhode Island, state officials have promoted their program aggressively to employers and credit it with preventing 16,000 layoffs from 2007-11. As of 2012, according to economist Dean Baker of the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), fewer than 40,000 workers nationwide were participating in shorter work programs, mainly because of lack of awareness. “To increase this number,” he writes, “states will first have to publicize the system. Many employees don’t even know that the program exists.” And even states that don’t currently offer such measures “could also receive federal money to establish short work programs,” he added. Companies facing slower demand throughout the country should consider the policy. It can reduce local unemployment and offer more free time to families.



The long-term importance could be tremendous: if we Americans grow increasingly accustomed to working less for only modestly less pay, there could be greater political momentum for guaranteed time off and, over time, for slowly relegating work to a receding portion of life. Questions of leisure, community building, and political engagement may one day emerge as feasible for an increasingly larger portion of society. Furthermore, work sharing can be a potent tool in the fight against climate change. “The calculation is simple,” says CEPR economist David Rosnick. “Fewer work hours means less carbon emissions, which means less global warming.”

Seek out feasible opportunities for work sharing. As you try to make space in your own life for the critical practice of democracy and community building, continue to challenge the unhealthy dilemma of overwork or unemployment imposed by the current economic system.

And There’s More...

There are many additional practical precedents to build on, refine and adapt. The examples outlined above aim to encourage thinking about how we move beyond partial experiments toward greater publicly benefiting democratization over time. For many others, see *Community-Wealth.org* and *What Then Must We Do? Straight Talk About the Next American Revolution*, by Gar Alperovitz. But all of this hinges on the strategic and self-conscious decision to adopt a sustained course of institution-changing action—one linked to movement-building politics and explicitly understood as a way to begin laying the necessary groundwork for something more.

For more information:

garalperovitz.com
 whatthenmustwedo.org
 community-wealth.org
 democracy-collaborative.org

A version of this essay with hyperlinks to sources can be found at <http://garalperovitz.com/what-then-can-i-do>