

*Chattanooga Organized for Action*



# Principles of Unity

Our Analysis, Vision, and Strategies  
for Change

*Written and Ratified by the membership of Chattanooga  
Organized for Action in the summer of 2012*

Chattanooga Organized for Action is a grassroots social justice organization. We work to build the power of everyday people from marginalized and oppressed communities to take control of the circumstances of their lives. We know another world is possible, and we organize together to work collectively with hearts, minds and hands to make that world a reality, and we will not rest until the work is done.

Chattanooga Organized for Action is grassroots. That means we're not funded by large corporations, we will never have the backing of the government, and we are definitely not in this for the money (ask our staff). This is not your typical non-profit organization. You won't find our staff in a nice office downtown, you won't find our board members jet-setting to three-piece suit fundraising galas, and our membership don't just show up, they *run* the show. Our staff work in public housing developments building tenants associations with the residents, our board members lead marches on City Hall, and our membership live and breathe a singular, relentless passion: to make Chattanooga a more just place for all.

As a grassroots organization, we know that our greatest resource is our people. The greatest single thing COA has to offer is not a program or a campaign; it's the people who *make* our programs and campaigns. In order for our organization to be strong, that means our relationships with each other must be honest and deep, loving and full of care. To truly change the world, we must understand in our hearts what it means to be a community, to be a family. That's what it means to build people-power.

Making the world a more just place isn't easy. Building people-power is hard work, but we know it can be done. Not only does the work of social justice deserve and require our passion, but we all deserve and need to experience each other as our full selves. In order for our work to be successful and to fully grow and develop as human beings, we must hold each other accountable to acting and treating one another in ways that reflect our

principles, values, and commitments. Together, we will educate one another about the world-as-it-is and collectively develop our vision for the world-as-it-should-be.

Chattanooga Organized for Action is a living and breathing organization. This document is no different. We have grown and changed as a result of collective analysis, deep and honest reflection, critique, and struggle. This is a process that continues today. We sincerely hope that you will join our organization, commit to the work of social justice, and offer your insights into how we can continue to work in ways that better reflect the values of the world that is struggling to break free inside of all of us.

*As members of Chattanooga Organized for Action, we commit to the following Principles of Unity:*

# OUR ANALYSIS AND VISION

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## ANALYSIS: THE WORLD AS IT IS

From plantations to the convict lease system, from the chain-gang to the private prison complex, from Jim and Jane Crow to the criminalization of migrants, from the Trail of Tears to Urban Renewal, from literacy tests to mandated government identification, from slave and convict labor to the super-exploitation of women and migrants in menial low-paying jobs, from the lynching tree to lethal injection, the South has a uniquely violent history of the powerful and privileged consolidating their power and control over others.

We live in world of conflict and unequal power. No one is

neutral and everyone is affected. We live under institutions and patterns of behavior where:

- White people have power and privilege at the expense of people of color and peoples of the Global South.
- The rich have the power to profit through the exploitation and oppression of poor and working class people.
- Men have power and privilege at the expense of women.
- Able-bodied people have power and privilege at the expense of people who are differently abled.
- Heterosexuals have power and privilege at the expense of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, and questioning people.

We recognize that people of color, peoples of the Global South, those who are differently abled, poor and working class folks, women, and those across the spectrum of gender, sex and attraction are born into the world-as-it-is and under these systems of domination. That is why the historical struggle for freedom, equality and democracy has been a struggle fought by marginalized and dominated peoples to obtain the capacity to control the circumstances of their lives, communities, workplaces, and identities.

## VISION: THE WORLD AS IT SHOULD BE

All power belongs to the people. All people have the right to actively work with others to determine the conditions of their own lives, communities, workplaces and identities. We commit to a just and egalitarian society based on solidarity and mutual aid, valuing cooperation over competition. We believe in grassroots democracy--where all people have a right to take part in, and have power over, decisions that affect them to the degree they are affected. We work to ensure that poor people and people of color gain the power of self-determination over themselves and their communities. We organize our communities to reflect the new values of the future society we are building together. We

commit to acting together; not in sympathy but in solidarity; not in charity, but in mutual aid; out of co-operation and not in competition. We organize together to take action and move the world-as-it-is closer and closer to the world-as-it-should-be.

# OUR METHODS/ STRATEGY FOR CHANGE

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## OUR COMMITMENT TO EACH OTHER

As members of Chattanooga Organized for Action, we understand that the power of our organization rests in the strength of our relationships. Our relationships and friendships with each other must be prioritized and tended to with care, love, and mutual respect. Unless we prioritize and value our relationships, then the work of organizing cannot succeed.

*In order to truly value and prioritize our relationships, we, as members of COA, commit to the following:*

### **To achieve unity through struggle and discussion.**

We recognize that, while we may not always agree with each other on everything, we all deserve a chance to struggle together towards unity. Unity does not mean that we are in one-hundred percent agreement, but it does mean that we agree to move forward together in solidarity. One of the greatest gifts we can give is the opportunity to listen and learn from one another, and we owe it to each other to create the environment where all of us grow and learn together.

### **To the creation of a liberated and judgment-free space to**

## **give support for all persons.**

Chattanooga Organized for Action seeks to create a unique space in our city; one where marginalized and oppressed people are encouraged to express their thoughts and opinions. Liberated space means that we develop the trust in each other necessary for open and honest discussion and participation, and that we commit to celebrating our differences and struggling through our disagreements towards unity.

## **To acting directly and collectively as a group, as well as in alliance with other groups according to our principles.**

We recognize that our power lies not only in numbers, but in the strength of our unity with each other. While there is power in individual action, the great injustices of our society cannot be solved through individual will alone. Societal change requires group action, and it requires us to learn how to build coalitions with other groups who share our values.

## **To accepting and respecting the leadership and self-determination of communities of color and other marginalized communities.**

The heart of COA's work rests in organizing with marginalized and oppressed communities to develop the leadership necessary to practice self-determination. That means that we must respect their leadership and honor their own independence from COA. The communities that are organized and the leaders that develop are autonomous, but they are also our brothers and sisters in the struggle.

## **To creating a community of self-care, collective-care, and mutual aid and to treating each other with loyalty and respect.**

We recognize that the struggle for social justice can be mentally and physically demanding, but in order to build a movement to

last we have to prioritize our own self-care. The struggle for justice must be a joyous one, and if we are to win, then we must consistently seek to refresh and renew our spirits in the love and care of our relationships with each other. We must remember that in COA, we are always among loving and loyal friends.

### **To educate present and future generations.**

The victory we seek will take more than one generation to achieve, and we recognize that we stand in a long legacy of freedom fighters who took on the long struggle. Those of us in the movement today enjoy the fruits of labor that people in the past fought and died for. As we have benefited from the struggles of the past, we owe it to the present and future generations to educate them in the great tradition of struggle towards social justice.

## OUR COMMITMENT TO THE WORLD AROUND US

Chattanooga Organized for Action seeks to make the “world-as-it-is” into the “world-as-it-should-be”. We will work to build a world where the values of truth, justice, and love are first and foremost, but the way in which we work is just as important as the outcome of our work. In order for COA to be successful, we must not only hold each other accountable in our commitments to each other, but we must work in a deeply principled way so that we can fundamentally change the material conditions of our lives, communities, and planet for the better.

*We commit to the following guiding principles in all levels of our social justice work:*

### **To oppose and act directly against oppression in all forms.**

We believe that in order to achieve a just world, people must take up the responsibility to act directly to undo oppression.

Direct action means that people are working to fix a problem themselves, not relying on the State or other powerful institutions to fix it for them. Indirect actions like voting or lobbying, although useful, will never allow all people to have a meaningful role in decision-making and control in their community. The time is long past for us having trust that politicians and civic leaders will have the solutions, the will, and the power to win the fight for social justice. The people should take the lead, and let the representatives follow.

**To challenge power at all levels, demanding accountability.**

Acting directly does not mean that we concern ourselves only with our own private or personal matters. Our fight is a public fight. We are not content with a system of power in which unaccountable authorities--whether they are government, business, or even nonprofits—make the majority of decisions that affect our lives, and we are left with the scraps. We stand together to make all power in our community more open and accountable by consciously aiding marginalized people in their struggle for justice.

**To emphasize the dual power of resistance and replacement through workable solutions.**

At the same time that we fight against oppressive institutions, we also work to build their replacements. Does the city's budget process involve the participation of the citizens affected? Is the behavior of our police department answerable to the communities they regulate? Are there better ways of addressing these problems that allow everyone affected to be more involved? Through a dual power strategy we look to find ways for people to meet their own needs by creating and supporting organizations that embody the values of a just society. Organizations of the people are built up by the participation of the people. Until these organizations can take over or replace the failing and unaccountable institutions we have today, there will



be conflicting powers in our city: one of the people, the other of the powerful.

**To bring an anti-racist, feminist approach to all aspects of our work.**

We will never achieve a just society by ignoring the different histories and experiences of people in our city. Instead, Chattanooga Organized for Action works to highlight those differences in order to challenge privilege and power, and to help everyone understand their own circumstances within the context of a diverse community. We acknowledge that white supremacy and patriarchy, systems that give benefits and privileges to one group while oppressing others, play a major role in the balance of power in Chattanooga, and we commit to actively challenging these legacies in all we do.

**To emphasize diversity and leadership from directly-affected communities.**

Social justice is not one-dimensional. There is no one issue, no single fight, which achieves a fulfilled, empowering place in society for everyone. Our success is dependent on the diversity of our tactics as well as the diversity of our people. Active engagement with all manner of oppressed groups is the key to developing the ties of solidarity that allow us to fight alongside each other instead of against each other. COA looks to develop the leadership of people in oppressed communities to play the major roles in setting the direction for campaigns. By making sure that the grassroots communities are the leaders of our organization, we are taking care to work with the people and not for them.

**To develop specific roles for allies.**

We believe that solutions to community problems should come through the leadership and participation of those who are directly-affected, but there are numerous ways for people within

the larger community to support and aid their struggles while respecting their leadership. COA provides a space for dialogue in order to develop meaningful roles for ally support that respect the self-determination of communities while rejecting paternalism. All people have a role to play and a responsibility in the fight for a better world.

**To maintain consistency and a visible presence in our community.**

We understand that the relationships we build and the actions we support have the potential to radically change conditions in our city; but oppressed people are risking a lot when they stand up against injustice. Targeting and retaliation are real dangers, and so we must make sure that our support for local freedom fighters is consistent and meaningful. Campaigns for social justice create both relationships and responsibilities that will remain long after the campaign ends. Part of this responsibility will always be to recognize and serve the community's immediate needs.

**To develop and promote our own analysis of contemporary issues, providing the context for current campaigns within the history of struggle for social justice in the South and around the world.**

Acting directly to create a better society is hard when individuals feel isolated, or when their problems are not understood within a larger context of struggle for justice. Part of COA's work lies in uncovering the hidden stories of activism that let people know they are stepping into a movement for social change that reaches deep into the history of the South and counts hundreds of thousands of people in its ranks. We carry a torch that has been kept burning by those who came before us. Today's injustices cannot be properly understood without understanding the context of power and resistance of which we are a part.



chattanooga | **organized for action**

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