

Is the Economic Crisis a Crisis for Social Justice Activism?

Insights from the 2010 United States Social Forum

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Abstract

Using quantitative and qualitative data collected at the 2010 United States Social Forum (USSF), we explore how social justice activists perceive the effects of the economic crisis on their political organizations and what types of social change strategies they are advocating to address it. Nearly half of activists reported that funding has become tighter in the context of the economic crisis, while slightly more than one quarter (28 percent) of activists reported that the goals and priorities of their organization and its alliances shifted in light of the economic crisis. Findings from an analysis of the USSF program and ethnographic observations suggest that the economic crisis has inspired or revived campaigns for economic justice among consumers, homeowners, and unemployed workers, as well as among a variety of public sector workers and their clients.

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Seeking Social Justice during the Economic Crisis

The recent economic crisis, which began in 2007, has had devastating impacts for people throughout the United States, putting eight million workers out of their jobs and as many as three million families out of their homes. By March, 2009, about 5.4 million mortgages were delinquent as middle and working class households faced the brunt of financial deregulation and speculation: rising interest rates atop of overpriced mortgages. Mass layoffs further exacerbated the foreclosure crisis, which continued to deepen the following year; in October, 2010, one in every 389 houses in the nation received a foreclosure filing (Realty Trac 2010). That same month, the official unemployment rate reached 9.6 percent of the labor force and nearly 42 percent of the unemployed—approximately 6.2 million Americans—experienced long-term unemployment, or 27 or more weeks without work (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). While the unemployment rate improved somewhat in early 2011, the official rate remained as high as 9.0 percent as of April, 2011 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

As state revenues from income, property, sales, and other taxes declined in the context of the economic crisis, many states and local governments have been under pressure to cut back their services. Already, state revenues had been reduced through several decades of tax reductions for large corporations and wealthy families. While federal economic recovery funds helped to stave off further budget cuts, those funds only covered about 30 to 40 percent of states' deficits. Meanwhile, tax increases (enacted in over 30 states since 2007) were insufficient to make up the difference. At least 40 states cut back spending on state services in their 2009-10 budgets and 46 states did so in their 2010-11 budgets. Altogether, in the 2010-11 state budgets, 31 states reduced spending in

healthcare, 29 states cutback services to the elderly and disabled, 33 states spent less on K-12 public education, and 43 states cutback spending in higher education (Center for Budget and Policy Priorities 2009, 2010).

Social justice activism, which works to promote equality and solidarity, could have a significant impact on public and policy responses to the economic crisis at multiple levels. However, the economic crisis may influence social justice in ways that make it more difficult for activists and organizations to serve as advocates for resource redistribution and social solidarity. The economic crisis has created shifting terrain for the social justice movement in the United States, creating both challenges and opportunities that activists must navigate.

Social movements like the social justice movement do not develop simply because people are unhappy and aggrieved; rather, certain social, economic, and political conditions stimulate people and groups to come together to form and maintain social movements. Periods of strain, including economic recessions, present both opportunities and challenges for social movement organizing. Grievances may increase during recessions, thereby creating a larger pool of potential participants (Piven and Cloward 1977). During a period of economic or other strain, movements may also have opportunities to identify new institutional and/or symbolic opponents to help galvanize support. For example, in the current recession, “big banks” have become a widespread target of discontent. Similarly, any type of crisis may generate new discursive opportunities and possibilities for using innovative social movement frames, or beliefs and meanings that social movements use to inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns (Benford and Snow 2000). Finally, economic crises can increase

strain on political and economic structures in ways that render them more vulnerable to challenges by social movements.

Simultaneously, however, economic recessions can increase the sense of threat that movement participants experience (Goldstone and Tilly 2001). People may become more reluctant to participate in collective action if they see such action as potentially jeopardizing their livelihoods. Furthermore, financial resources are often more limited during times of economic struggle, which may mean that social movement groups must cut back on expenditures. Indeed, 52 percent of non-profits in a recent national survey of 800 nonprofits reported cuts in funding. Nearly half (49 percent) reported a 10-20 percent reduction in their organizational funding, while another 25 percent reported a decrease of 21 percent or more. At the same time, many nonprofits reported increasing demand for their services as a result of the economic crisis (Bridgeland et al. 2009).

Has the economic crisis created a crisis for social justice activism in the United States? This paper examines how social justice activists perceive the effects of the economic crisis on their political organizations and how new organizing campaigns are seeking to address the problems associated with the recession. We analyze quantitative and qualitative data collected at the 2010 United States Social Forum (USSF) in Detroit, Michigan, where some 20,000 activists affiliated with a variety of organizations and social movements gathered to discuss current issues, plan actions, and broaden their alliances.

The USSF is the largest meeting of progressive social justice activists in the US, making it a strategic research site for examining patterns and shifts in US social justice activism. While mobilization by right-wing activists such as the Tea Party and the

Truthers has drawn extensive media and public attention, those advocating for leftist and progressive causes have received less attention. Examining the perceptions of USSF participants helps us to understand better the experiences and perspectives of various grassroots constituencies, including women, people of color, immigrants, low-income communities, LGBT people, people with disabilities, and those who serve them and advocate on their behalf.

Our analysis of how the economic crisis is influencing social justice activism is based on a combination of data and methods. First, survey data collected from 564 USSF participants reveals the perceived impacts of the economic crisis on political organizations in terms of their access to resources, membership, agendas, framing of issues, and alliances. Second, we analyze descriptions of 1,039 workshops listed in the USSF's on-line program, examining what portion of them addressed problems associated with the recent economic downturn and how they did so. Finally, we examine field notes from 20 workshops that members of our research team attended, considering how and to what extent they sought to address the problems associated with this historic crisis.

We begin by providing background on the USSF, which grew out of the World Social Forum. We follow this introductory discussion with a summary presentation of our findings, starting with an analysis of our survey results. Next we present our analysis of the USSF program and our field notes from workshops. Our findings indicate that the economic crisis has created or increased financial hardships for many organizations even as it has inspired or revived popular demands for jobs, housing, and social services. However, many organizations focusing on non-economic issues appear to be going about 'business as usual,' without much shift in their political agendas or coalitions. In our

conclusion, we discuss the implications of our findings for understanding emergent policy agendas from the left, and the challenges that activists must overcome in order to gain wider political support for their demands.

The USSF and the Social Forum Process

The USSF is the outgrowth of the global justice movement and the World Social Forum process. The global justice movement seeks to create solidarity across a diversity of movements in order to achieve a more just world. The global justice movement is “a ‘movement of movements’ that draws together all those who are engaged in sustained and contentious challenges to the current global political economy and all those who seek to democratize it” (Reese et al. 2011: 1). Since its origins in 2001, the World Social Forum has provided the largest international meeting for participants of the global justice movement to network, share their ideas and experiences, and coordinate actions.

The first World Social Forum (WSF) took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001 as an alternative to the annual World Economic Forum, which brings business, political, academic and other leaders of society together to coordinate and shape global, regional and industry agendas. The WSF has drawn growing numbers of global justice movement participants across the globe. Participants must agree to adhere to the WSF “Charter of Principles,” to not attend as official representatives of any government or political party and to refrain from advocating for the use of violence. While the logistics of the WSF are addressed by the International Council and a local Organizing Committee, most of the workshops are independently organized by participants. Regional and local forums have

increasingly been organized around the globe, although they remain more concentrated in Western Europe and Latin America (Reese et al. 2011).

The WSF inspired US global justice activists to organize a national social forum in order to strengthen the capacity of US social movements. After years of preparation, the first USSF meeting took place in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2007. The organizers were mainly leftist social activists, many of whom were affiliated with mass-based community organizations. Seeking to overcome the tendency of more privileged social groups to dominate activist gatherings, organizers purposefully targeted their outreach towards grassroots organizations of low-income people of color as well as queer (or LGBT) and feminist groups within the U.S. (e.g., Smith et al 2008). This had the effect of attracting participants who were far to the left of the political mainstream in the United States, and who were racially diverse (Reese et al. 2008).

USSF organizers selected Detroit as the site for the second USSF in 2010 in part because the problems of unemployment, poverty, and social dislocation are so severe there. According to USSF organizers, Detroit at that time had the highest unemployment rate of any major city in the country with nearly one in four (23.2%) of residents of Detroit unable to find work. Detroit used to be known as Motor City because of the importance of automotive manufacturing to its local economy. Thousands of living wage jobs have been lost in the automotive industry and related sectors as a result of the rise in offshore production and the economic recession. By locating the USSF in Detroit, organizers hoped to highlight the economic problems that were plaguing millions of Americans around the country, and how activists were responding to those problems.

The 2010 USSF drew nearly 20,000 participants from across the United States. Most attendees are left-of-center activists who are affiliated with community-based organizations, independent workers organizations, unions, student groups, or academic institutions. Participants focused on a variety of causes and included grassroots activists from a number of oppressed groups, including indigenous nations, workers, poor and underemployed people, women, queers, people of color, immigrants, youth and children, the elderly, and differently-abled people.

Data & Methods

Our analysis employs a mixed methodological approach. First, this research analyzes survey data gathered from 564 participants at the 2010 meeting of the USSF. Due to the unavailability of a complete list of Forum participants, we selected a purposive sample at a variety of event venues, including registration, the lobby area, workshops, evening plenary sessions, organizations' tables, and cultural performances over the several days of the forum. This sampling method is consistent with other survey research projects fielded at previous Social Forums (Kavada 2005). The survey itself was available in both English and Spanish and consisted of 50 questions covering respondents' demographic and socio-economic characteristics, political views, affiliations with different types of organizations and social movements, and political activities. However, despite our best efforts to obtain a representative sample, it is likely that certain sampling biases resulted. We may have undersampled attendees who were under time constraints, who could not read or were not literate in Spanish or English, or those who were simply uncomfortable completing written surveys.

Second, we completed a content analysis of the program, which lists more than 1,039 workshops held during the USSF. Here, we were interested in what proportion of all of these workshops addressed issues related to the economic downturn and how they did so. We first used an initial key word search, using “economic crisis,” as our key word, to identify workshops that might have addressed the economic downturn. We identified an initial sample of 590 workshops in this way. We then used the following set of key words to identify other potential workshops (excluding any duplicate workshops): fiscal crisis, budget crisis, recession, economic depression, financial crisis, banking crisis, housing crisis, foreclosure, and unemployment. Next, we inspected the descriptions of all of the workshops we identified with these key words to determine whether they actually did mention the economic downturn or were focused on more long-standing and systemic problems with capitalism. We found that the vast majority of the workshops focused on systemic problems such as the “crisis in global capitalism,” one of the main themes of the 2010 USSF meeting. We coded the remaining 124 workshops addressing the economic downturn in terms of the particular problems that they addressed. Identifying the specific issues these workshops address clarifies how workshop leaders integrate the economic downturn, and the various problems associated with it, into their agendas.

Finally, we draw on observations conducted at workshops during the USSF to provide additional detail on the exact ways in which social justice activists have been affected by the economic crisis and how they are responding to it. Seven members of our research team who participated in the USSF in Detroit attended twenty different workshops, during which they took detailed notes about the themes of those sessions. Workshops were selected according to observers’ interests and represented a wide range

of movements and issues. Of these workshops, eight addressed the economic downturn in some way. The field notes from those eight workshops were subject to more detailed analysis. While not representative of the 1,039 workshops at the USSF, these observations, along with our program analysis, help flesh out how the economic downturn and associated problems are incorporated into the debates, discourses, and discussions at the USSF.

Survey Findings

Our survey provides us with information both on the kinds of activists attending the 2010 USSF meeting and how attendees perceived the impacts of the economic crisis on their political work. Our survey sample suggests that attendees at the 2010 USSF were mainly leftists, with about 83 percent of our sample identifying as left-of-center. Our sample of USSF attendees was also more racially diverse than the U.S. population, with whites making up only a slight majority, or 55 percent, of all respondents. Women made up about 55 percent of our sample, while nearly half, or 47 percent, were 30 years old or younger. The vast majority of respondents had at least some college education, with only 13 percent of respondents having a high school education or less. A comparison with a similar survey carried out during this meeting by University of Michigan researchers (with a total sample size of 691) found similar results in terms of the distribution of gender, age, and educational attainment (see Table 1).

(TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

Survey respondents were given a list of possible ways that the economic crisis impacted the political organizations they worked with and were asked to check the ones

that applied to their organization (see Table 2). Table 2 reports our findings for respondents who reported an affiliation with some sort of political organization (85% of all respondents). We call this sub-group “organizational affiliates” for the purposes of this paper.

As we expected, the most common response among organizational affiliates was that the economic crisis had reduced their organizations’ access to resources, with 48% reporting this and only 7 percent reporting that their organization had gained material resources as a result of the economic crisis. About one third (or 36%) of organizational affiliates reported that their organization had shifted how issues were framed in order to link them to the economic crisis. More than one-quarter (or 28%) of organizational affiliates reported that their organizations shifted their goals and priorities in response to the economic crisis, while the same proportion reported that they shifted their alliances. Slightly more than one-fifth of organizational affiliates claimed that their organization was spending more time trying to meet the needs of its members. About 16 percent reported that membership participation increased in the context of the economic crisis, while the same percentage reported a decline in membership participation.

(TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE)

To compare responses across organizational affiliation, we ran cross-tabulations and examined the chi-square values generated from these tables. Compared to respondents not affiliated with unions, a significantly higher percentage of union members reported that their organizations lost material resources (54% vs. 43%; p-value .056; n=510), spent more time and resources on providing for the material needs of their members (31% vs. 17%; p-value .001; n=510), shifted their goals or priorities towards

issues related to the crisis (36% vs. 23%; p-value .009; n=510), have had changes in their membership participation (increased: 25% vs. 12%; p-value .001; n=510; decreased: 25% vs. 12%; p-value .009; n=510), and cooperated more closely with other organizations or shifted their organizational alliances (38% vs. 22%; p-value .001; n=510) ((see Figure 1). Given that working class people have been disproportionately affected by layoffs and foreclosures and unions are mainly funded through membership dues, this finding is not surprising.

As Figure 1 shows, individuals affiliated with non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, were significantly more likely than those not affiliated with NGOs to report that their organizations have been impacted by changes in their material resources (either gaining or losing them) (gain: 54% vs. 40%; p-value .042; n=510; lost: 54% vs. 40%; p-value .001; n=510), spent more time and resources on providing for the material needs of their members (24% vs. 17%; p-value .058; n=510), shifted how they talk about the issues they work on to link them to the economic crisis (39% vs. 30%; p-value=.042; n=510), and cooperated more closely with other organizations or shifted the kinds of organizations with which they work (31% vs. 22%; p-value .018; n=510). Individuals affiliated with social movement organizations were significantly more likely than other respondents to report all types of impacts except for decreasing membership participation (lost resources: 53% vs. 38%; p-value .000; n=510; more time: 23% vs. 17%; p-value .083; n=510; cooperate more closely: 31% vs. 21%; p-value .008; n=510; members increased: 19% vs. 10%; p-value .004; n=510; shifted they way they talked: 43% vs. 24%; p-value .000; n=510; shifted goals: 34% vs. 18%; p-value .000; n=510; gained resources: 9% vs. 5%; p-value .055; n=510).

(FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE)

Perceived impacts of the economic crisis also varied depending on respondents' affiliation with different kinds of social movements. About 60 percent of respondents identified themselves as "actively involved" in at least one of 27 movements specified on our survey. Comparing the responses of activists involved with economic justice oriented movements to the responses of activists involved only in movements without a primary focus on economic justice reveals that a larger percentage of economic justice activists reported that their organization lost resources.² This relationship was marginally significant (41% vs. 52%; p-value .061; n=310). Similarly, when compared to other respondents, a significantly larger percentage of economic justice activists reported that their organization shifted their goals or priorities towards issues related to the crisis (21% vs. 36%; p-value .004; n=310), shifted how they talked about issues to link them to the economic crisis (34% vs. 47%; p-value .016; n=310), and saw their membership participation increase through membership gains and/or increased participation by existing members (9% vs. 21%; p-value .007; n=310).

Similarly, we found that respondents' political ideologies informed their experiences of the recession (see Figure 3). A marginally significant larger percentage of those identifying as 'leftist' in their political views than those identifying as center/right reported that their organizations lost resources (49% vs. 38%; p-value .084; n=506). In contrast, individuals with center/right political views were more likely than those with

² Of the twenty seven social movement types listed in the survey, those categorized as oriented towards "economic justice" were: Communist, Development aid/Economic development, Fair Trade/Trade Justice, Housing rights/anti-eviction/squatters, Jobless workers/welfare rights, Labor, Peasant/Farmers/Landless/Land-reform, and Socialist. Such categorization is certainly debatable, but these choices were considered to be conservatively within an economic justice orientation.

left-of-center views to report that their organizations saw declines in membership participation (23% vs. 11%; p-value .003; n=506) (see Figure 3).

(FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE)

(FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE)

Disaggregating our sample by social class showed only marginally significant differences in respondents' class position and the perceived effects of the economic crisis on their organization. Compared to upper middle class respondents, a larger percentage of individuals who self-reported as lower middle class, working class, and lower class reported that their organizations spent more time and resources on providing for the material needs of their members in the context of the economic crisis (22% vs. 11%) and this relationship was marginally significant (p-value .067; n=481). Similarly, a significantly higher percentage of respondents without a college degree than respondents with an educational degree reported this as well (25% vs. 17%; p-value .027; n=504). Respondents with less household income and educational attainment may have been more personally impacted by the economic crisis than upper class individuals, offering more motivation to work toward these goals or a greater awareness of these kinds of organizational efforts.

We found no significant differences among respondents' responses to these questions across race or gender. However, we did find that a significantly higher percentage of older individuals (31 years or more) than younger respondents (30 years or less) reported that their organizations shifted their goals (31% vs. 19%; p-value .013; n=484). This finding is unremarkable given that older individuals are more likely than younger respondents to have longer histories in well-established organizations and so

may be more aware of how their organizations have shifted in response to the economic crisis.

In summary, the USSF survey data suggest that the most common effects of the economic crisis on respondents' political organizations were perceptions of declining resources and shifting frames. Respondents affiliated with labor unions, NGOs, and social movement organizations were more likely than those affiliated with other kinds of organizations to report various impacts of the economic crisis on their organizations.

Compared to other respondents, higher percentages of political leftists, middle to lower class individuals, and those affiliated with economically oriented or leftist social movements reported impacts on their organizations. However, whether these trends reflect real differences among activists' experiences or simply differences in their perceptions is difficult to gauge from this data.

Program Analysis

Our content analysis of the 2010 USSF meeting program provides a detailed understanding of how and to what extent workshops addressed issues surrounding the economic crisis. Of the 1,039 workshops listed in the on-line program, we found that 124 workshops (slightly less than 12% of all workshops) mentioned the economic downturn in some way in their on-line description. Among those that refer to the economic crisis, 30 workshops (about 24%) included the general idea of crisis in capitalism in their program descriptions, one of the major themes highlighted in the USSF program. In addition, 37 workshop descriptions talked about the economic crisis in general terms,

examining it at the global level or considering alternative ways of organizing the economy.

The workshops that invoked the economic crisis in their descriptions addressed a range of specific topics. The greatest share focused on workers' rights and job creation. Specifically, 39 workshops incorporated discussions of workers' rights and labor organizing and 36 workshops covered issues of unemployment and job creation. For example, a workshop entitled "Roots of the Economic Crisis and the Case for a Solidarity Economy," involved an interactive activity during which organizers and attendees analyzed the origin and consequences of the economic crisis in terms of "unemployment, lower wages, and foreclosures" (US Social Forum Program 2010). Similarly, 17 workshops addressed the topics of anti-poverty and welfare rights in relation to the economic crisis. One such workshop was the "Voices from the Front and a Vision of a New Society," which was described in the program as promoting solutions to economic problems through social movement mobilization and demands for "a new society free of poverty and oppression" (Ibid). Eight workshops discussed homelessness, 14 addressed cutbacks in social services, and twelve workshop descriptions invoked spending cuts in public education.

Workshops also focused on issues surrounding banks, credit issues, and home foreclosures. Bank and credit justice was a topic covered by 20 workshops, including 17 that addressed foreclosures and evictions. Recognizing the failure of mainstream economic and financial institutions to meet people's needs, some activists promoted alternative economic systems. One such workshop, for example, promoted TimeBanking initiatives through which people swap skills and labor directly with each other, banking

the time they spent helping another rather than paying each other with cash or financial credit.

Social justice activists link the economic crisis to a wide range of social issues and problems. That is, many of the workshops connected the issue of focus within that workshop to other problems stemming from or tied to the economic crisis. A workshop centered on homelessness, for example, also included reference to housing foreclosures, poverty, inadequate and underfunded schools, unaffordable healthcare, and unequal income distribution in its description (Ibid). Other workshops linked the struggle to meet human needs in the age of budget cuts with the struggle against US militarism. The widespread inclusion of the economic crisis in workshop descriptions points to the diffusion of the crisis-oriented rhetoric into social justice organizing and suggests that the crisis is influencing activism around, and providing an organizing framework for thinking about, a broad range of issues.

Observations from USSF Workshops

Our program analysis evidences that workshop leaders used the economic crisis to revive long-standing demands for workers' rights, welfare rights, and against homelessness. Activists are linking the economic crisis to campaigns opposing public sector cutbacks and privatization and supporting workers' (including unemployed workers') rights and consumer-friendly policies and practices among financial institutions. The workshops we observed focused on three types of campaigns.

Defending the Public Sector

Protecting the public sector, including social services, public education, and other types of public services, was a core area of discussion within many of the sessions we observed. For example, the session entitled “They Say Cutback... We Say Fight Back: Responding to Economic Crisis through Movement Building” focused on public sector cutbacks and the challenges in creating alliances between labor and communities to forestall the further decline of the public sector. Like many sessions at the USSF, this session began with a panel discussion and then involved smaller break-out groups in which attendees could discuss the issues at hand. During their presentations, panelists described their experiences with public sector cutbacks, emphasizing how the cutbacks affect a range of people, including clients, workers, vulnerable populations like children and the elderly, and community members at large. They also discussed how policymakers used the fiscal crisis and Hurricane Katrina to justify continued shrinkage in the public sector and growth in privatization. To counter these trends, both the invited panelists and speakers in the audience advocated for building coalitions between labor organizations and community organizations for larger and more effective mobilization. Other ideas for restoring funding to the public sector included taxing the rich and businesses, lowering policing and incarceration rates through the decriminalization of poverty, and ending American military incursions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Participants also reported local successes in stopping service cutbacks through popular mobilization.

Several workshops focused specifically on opposition to cuts in public education, particularly at the post-secondary level. The workshop titled “Another Education is Possible” offered potential solutions to problems in public education, including defunding, the reproduction of social inequalities through the public education system,

and low educational achievement. The speakers described proposed and actual budget cuts to public education as an “attack” on public education. Presenters and audience members linked this attack to neoliberalism and the economic crisis. The speakers addressed issues of school oversight, the corporatization of schools and student services, budget cuts, and racial differences in resources dedicated to students. The attendees then split into small groups that focused on these topics and discussed how these social processes have affected them and their communities.

Participants devoted extensive attention to the cuts to educational spending they perceived as precipitated by the recent recession. While this was widely seen as a major cause for the deterioration of public education funding and quality, participants also asserted that the crisis is attracting attention to the ongoing deterioration of quality of education that may help make changes in the short term. One of the presenters mentioned that she had lost her job as a teacher as a result of budget cuts and that this gave her more time to organize. Thus, while apparently worsening the social problems to which these activists respond, the economic crisis creates both possibilities for new strategic frames and the galvanization of new participants.

Discussion of public sector cutbacks was not limited to sessions specifically on this topic. For example, a workshop focusing on the need to improve working conditions and environmental conditions within the global goods movement industry emphasized building regional coalitions against public sector cutbacks and privatization. Likewise, during the workshop “Using University Money for Economic Transformation,” workshop leaders mentioned the shrinkage of university endowments as an outcome of the recession and there was some discussions about the implications of this for students,

including higher fees for students. Thus, the specter of the economic recession hangs over a wide range of issues.

Organizing the Unemployed for Jobs and Income Support

Another important area of emphasis within the sessions was on the rights of unemployed workers. A workshop on organizing unemployed workers recognized high rates of unemployment as creating ideal conditions for promoting the rights of the unemployed. This workshop focused on sharing experiences and strategies for organizing unemployed workers. The sixty-three participants came from many different kinds of organizations, including faith-based, community, and union-affiliated organizations. Prevailing themes at this session included the consequences of the economic crisis, as well as the introduction of tools and skills for organizing the unemployed. Participants discussed the impacts on workers and their families and how unemployment leads to significant hardships. Various audience members mentioned that the need for food and companionship among the unemployed helps in organizing them because their search for food and company pushes them towards social service agencies where they can meet others who are unemployed and discuss opportunities for mobilization. Furthermore, lack of unemployment makes them more available for participating in organizing protests and other activities. High unemployment clearly has negative consequences for the unemployed and their communities, but also offers the upshot of a willing and able population of potential activists.

Financial Justice: Organizing Consumers and Homeowners

Sessions focusing on consumer protection addressed a range of consumer issues with an emphasis on promoting corporate accountability and government regulation to protect consumers better. The workshop titled “The New Redlining: How Consumer Debt Harms Communities of Color and Perpetuates Inequality and Poverty” was both educational and organizational, providing information about the negative effects of consumer debt in communities of color and creating a forum for sharing ideas on how to address this problem. Participants referred to predatory lending and the monopolizing of the banking industry by “big banks” such as Chase Manhattan, Bank of America, Citicorp, and Wells Fargo. Furthermore, participants argued that actions made possible by the lack of regulation within the financial industry created a cycle of debt for people of color. In addition to the negative implications of this debt cycle for individual people of color, the speakers also identified numerous ramifications for communities of color including a lower property tax base, gentrification, family strain and disintegration, and inadequate access to credit. Pay-day lenders were subject to pointed criticism for placing people into never-ending debt. Cooperative ownership was suggested as an alternative model for homeownership in particular.

Even a session on a very different consumer issue, namely food safety, quickly dovetailed back to problems facing homeowners and other borrowers. The workshop titled “The Untold Truth about Our Food System—Screening of *Food, Inc.*” addressed issues surrounding food production in the United States. In addition to discussing food safety, panelists addressed the complex connections between the banking and agricultural corporations. Participants noted that major American banks routinely support agricultural corporations that offer unsafe working conditions. These same banks foreclose on the

homes of low income farm workers and other low income workers. A representative from the Farm Workers Organizing Committee of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) discussed a divestment campaign to stop JP Morgan Chase investments in Reynolds Tobacco, which labor organizers contend engages in human and workers' rights abuses. Divestment protests at JP Morgan Chase facilities, one of which took place during the USSF, also involved protesting foreclosures and predatory lending. Activists thus see—and challenge—a complex web of corporate involvement in the economic crisis and in social inequalities more broadly.

The Economic Crisis as Opportunity

While the economic crisis has affected the daily operations of USSF organizations in diverse ways, the economic crisis does not appear to be radically redefining social justice activism. Indeed, about 88 percent of USSF workshop descriptions made no mention of the current economic crisis, and, reflecting that proportion, most of the workshops we attended made no mention of it. Likewise, most activists who we surveyed, particularly those with more mainstream political beliefs, reported that their organizations had made no change in their political priorities or alliances in response to the economic crisis. Thus, while many activists are feeling the effects of the economic crisis, the effects of the crisis do not yet appear to be significantly diffusing across arenas of social justice activism.

Simultaneously, the devastating impacts of the ongoing economic crisis on individuals and families have unquestionably affected the agendas and mobilization

efforts of many social justice activists in the United States. The 2010 USSF provided an ideal opportunity for examining how grassroots activists and organizations pursuing a wide range of social justice activities have responded to the crisis. Our analysis suggests that although the economic crisis has generated intense pressures on social justice activists and their organizations to respond to growing material hardships, they may be more tightly constrained financially than ever before. Rather than indicating a tendency to “throw in the towel,” most participants acknowledged the constraints social justice advocates currently face, and struggled together to craft ways to improve difficult conditions.

Policy ideas generated at the USSF contradict many of the dominant neoliberal and conservative discourses about how to resolve the economic crisis. Those discourses claim that the government needs to reduce regulation of banks and other businesses and reduce taxes among the wealthy and businesses in order to stimulate economic growth, while simultaneously reducing government expenditures to curb rising deficits. In contrast, discussions at the USSF instead highlighted the importance of increasing governmental funding for public schools, social services, housing, and job creation by redirecting public expenditures on prisons and foreign wars towards social needs. Reflecting the perspectives of grassroots constituents and left-leaning activists, the discourse at the USSF also supports increasing taxation of corporations and the wealthy. Likewise, many groups at the USSF were targeting Wall Street bankers with various demands for economic justice and highlighted the need for greater governmental regulation of the credit card and home loan industries. As such, the USSF’s framework for understanding the economic recession represents an important counterbalance to

neoliberal and conservative understandings of how to resolve the recession. Notably, the core values of the USSF as a whole emphasize long-term policy changes that will significantly redistribute opportunities, income, and rights in the US.

The Great Depression of the 1930s paved the way for the New Deal and the introduction of Keynesian economic policies in the United States and Europe, and ultimately lent important credence to social democratic policies in Europe. The current recession could serve as a similar catalyst for a major rethinking of economic and social policies. Activists such as those involved with the USSF will likely be currently at the forefront of advocating for such changes, and the recession could, in fact, lend them the necessary traction to influence political trends and policy processes.

Of course, significant political conflict marks the current American landscape, and a major challenge facing progressive social justice activists is that the economic crisis has mobilized the right as well as the left, as the rise of the Tea Party movement and resurgence of nativist organizations attests. Republicans also gained Congressional seats in the last election, overturning the Democratic control of Congress present at the time of the USSF. Nevertheless, protest movements are underway among students, unemployed workers, evicted homeowners, and social service clients. The recent protests against proposed budget cuts in public services and efforts to strip public employees of their collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin and Ohio, which drew together tens of thousands of demonstrators, show the willingness of students, workers, and community activists to unite when confronted by Republican opposition and common threats to their interests. Whether or not such popular mobilization will continue to rise and lead to

major progressive policy shifts as they did during the Great Depression, or simply stave off further efforts to dismantle the public sector and workers' rights, remains to be seen.

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Table 1 – Demographic Descriptive Statistics & Frequencies for UCR and Michigan

	UCR		Michigan		
Sample size	564		691		
<u>Year of Birth</u>					
	N	μ	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
UCR	509	1973.530	16.565	1917	1992
Michigan	638	1972.646	16.485	1924	1992
<u>Sex/Gender</u>					
	UCR		Michigan		
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
Female	299	55.99	317	54.10	
Male	218	40.82	267	45.56	
Other	17	3.18	2	0.34	
N	534		586		
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>					
White	281	55.31	398*	66.33	
Black	54	10.63	93	15.53	
Latino	73	14.37	68	11.33	
Asian	26	5.12	55	9.18	
Other	74	14.57	61	10.17	
N	508		600**		
<u>Highest Level of Education</u>					
< High school diploma	17	3.21	18	2.92	
High school diploma	38	7.18	41	6.65	
Some college	92	17.39	98	15.88	
A.A./technical degree	21	3.97	28	4.54	
B.A	168	31.76	184	29.82	
Some graduate	35	6.62	57	9.24	
Graduate/prof. degree	158	29.87	191	30.96	
N	529		617		
<u>Personal Income</u>					
\$0-\$14,999	166	46.50	\$0-\$15,000	235	39.36
\$15,000-\$20,000	46	12.89	\$15,001-\$30,000	127	21.27
\$21,000-\$39,000	78	21.85	\$30,001-\$45,000	101	16.92
\$40,000-\$51,000	31	8.68	\$45,001-\$60,000	60	10.05
\$52,000-\$63,000	16	4.48	\$60,001-\$75,000	25	4.19
\$64,000-\$100,000	13	3.64	Above \$75,000	49	8.21
Above \$100,000	7	1.96			
N	357			597	

* Calculated from mean and given N; **Given N from descriptive statistics (doesn't match sum); unlike the UCR survey, the UM survey's race/ethnicity categories were not mutually exclusive categories.

**Table 2: Impact of US Recession on Political Organizations Reported by 2010 US
Social Forum Participants Affiliated with an Organization**

	Percent of Organizational Affiliates
Lost Material Resources	48%
Shifted the Issue Framing towards Crisis	36%
Shifted Goals and Priorities	28%
Shifted Allies	28%
Spend More Time Responding the Members Needs	21%
Membership Participation Decreased	16%
Membership Participation Increased	16%
Gained Material Resources	7%
Other	6%
Don't Know	17%

Note: Respondents were allowed to select more than open option, so actual responses do not sum to 100%.

Figure 1 – Economic Crisis Impacts by Organization Type

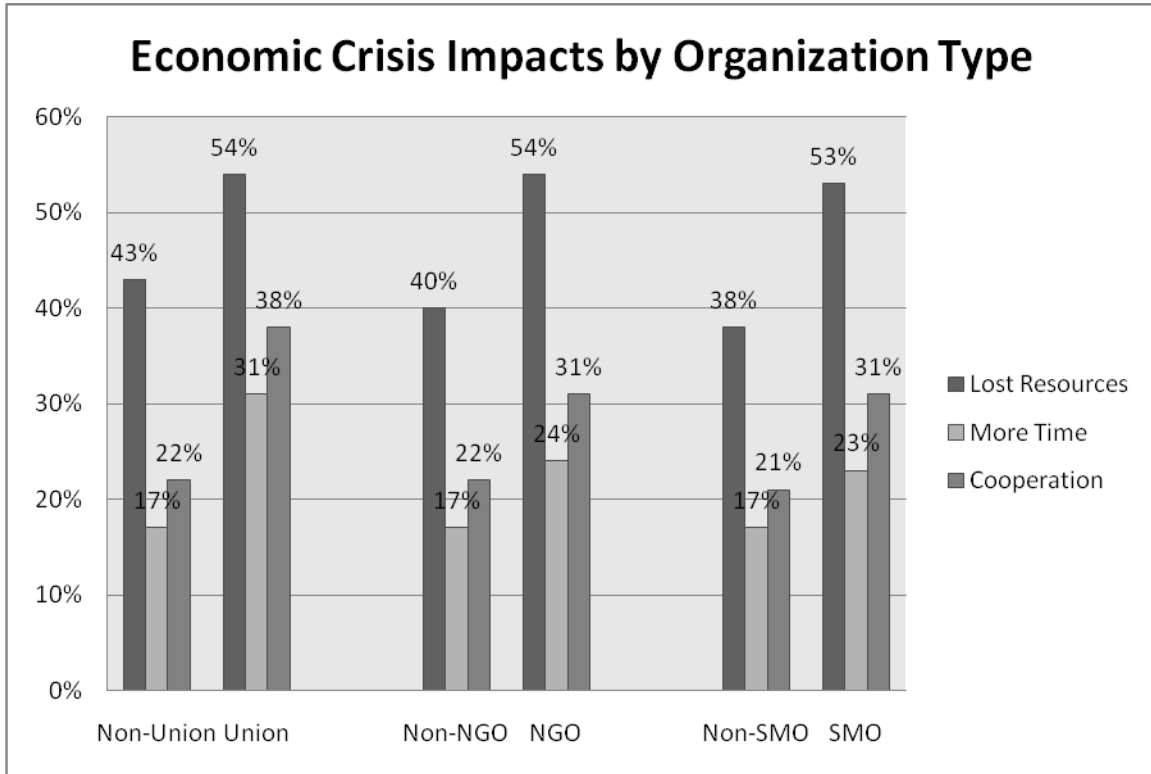


Figure 2 – Economic Crisis Impacts by Economic Justice Movement Affiliation

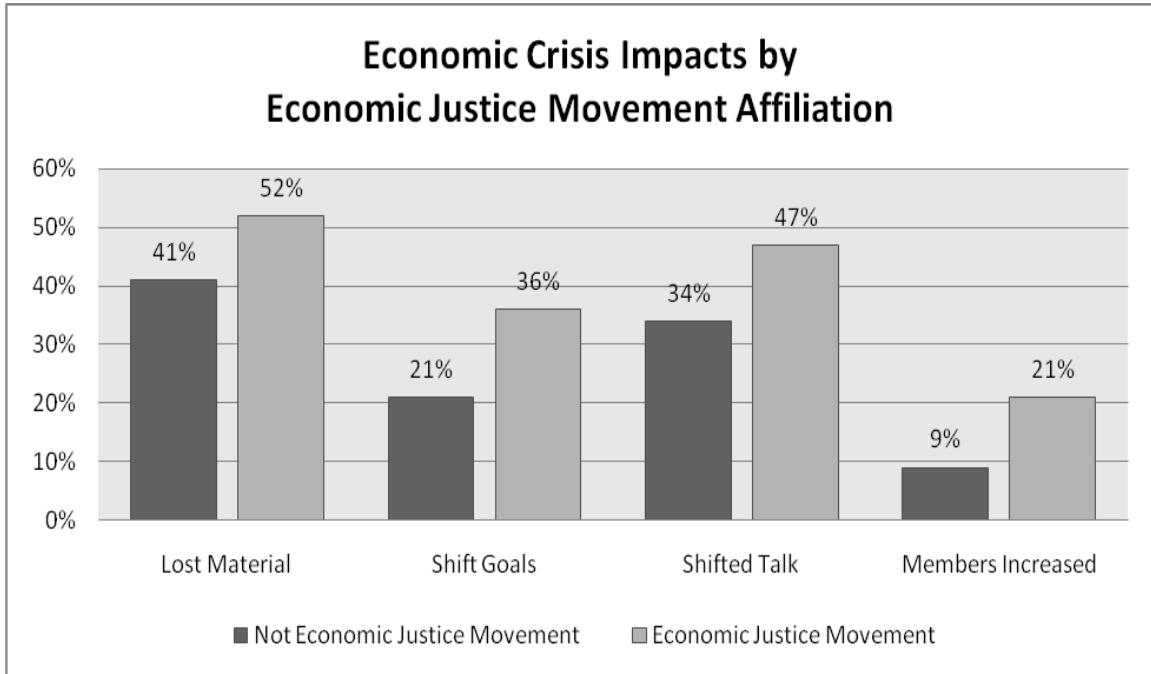


Figure 3 – Economic Crisis Impacts by Political Ideology

