

# ORGANIZING ON THE TITANIC



part of a series on social justice organizing by  
**Ricardo Levins Morales**  
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# The course

that organizing in the U.S. has taken over the last half century or so is a lot like trying to organize for better conditions on the deck of the Titanic.

We get to struggle for what our people need, as long as we don't ask who owns the ship, how fast it's going, what direction it's going, and what that big white thing coming up ahead might imply for us.

There are three kinds of organizations that were established in order to contain popular aspirations and keep them from getting out of hand. Each is the product of a wave of mass struggle. These are tribal governments, modern labor unions, and the nonprofits.

The Wagner Act in the 1930s, the Indian Reorganization Act, and the emergence of the nonprofits at the end of the 1960s were all attempts to contain these peoples' struggles and prevent them from challenging the real sources of power.



**One of** the things that happened as a result is that their relationships became vertical instead of horizontal.

Tribal governments' primary relationship is with the federal government, labor unions' with management, and the nonprofits' with their funders. That cutting off of horizontality is what prevents real solidarity from happening.

The movements that are potentially destabilizing, potentially liberatory, always emerge from the margins, from outside of those fences—from the wild country, not from the cultivated fields of the liberal system. Struggles like Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, and the DREAMers, all have come out of the organic aspirations of people.



# The nonprofits

have the capacity to respond to that but they cannot generate those kinds of challenges. Even in South Africa they were able to detach themselves from the regime and unite with the anti-apartheid movement, but only after it had generated an alternative center of power with a large enough gravitational force to represent a viable challenge to the system.

What we need to do, I would say, is restore our peripheral vision, our ability to see each other.

We each think, "It's my struggle versus the man," and other oppressed peoples are just bit players on the margin.

**We need to be able to reweave that fabric of connection so that in all of these different movements we really have each others' backs.**



**Ricardo Levins Morales** is an artist and organizer based in Minneapolis. He uses his art as a form of political medicine to support individual and collective healing from the injuries and ongoing reality of oppression.



Ricardo was born into the anti-colonial movement in his native Puerto Rico and was drawn into activism in Chicago when his family moved there in 1967, including support work for the Black Panthers and Young Lords and later participating in or acting in solidarity with farmers, environmental, labor, racial justice, antiwar and other struggles for peoples empowerment. In addition to his art, he also leads workshops on creative organizing, social justice strategy and sustainable activism, and mentors and supports organizers.



**RLM Art Studio** is a union shop that produces and sells artwork Ricardo has made over the years as posters, cards, buttons, shirts and more. We also produce custom button pins at bulk prices for campaigns and causes. Browse and order online at [RLMArtStudio.com](http://RLMArtStudio.com).