STATE OF THE SOUTH REPORT

Produced by members and anchors of the Southern Movement Assembly
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The Southern Movement Assembly (SMA) is a formation of frontline leaders and organizations working for justice across many frontlines throughout the thirteen states of the US South. The SMA visions a future of expanded democracy through people power. The plan and work of the SMA is rooted in the history and legacy of Southern resistance and progressive social change. The political commitment of this regional formation is rooted in the words of Southern Freedom Fighter Fannie Lou Hamer: “Nobody is Free until Everybody is Free.”

The State of the South Report 2020 is the SMA’s assessment on the state of justice struggles across various frontlines of the U.S. South. Offered from the perspective of leaders and organizations leading both the sustained resistance and creative solutions to injustices, this report is shaped by the work, experiences, thinking, analysis, strategies, relationships and vision of the hundreds of people who have been part of the Southern Movement Assembly over the last decade. In particular, it brings forward the voices and work of the 700+ frontline organizers from across the region making offerings in any of three People’s Movement Assemblies during the summer of 2020. It captures the struggles that communities on the Southern frontlines experience daily and the conditions that shape those struggles. This report highlights the experiences from the frontlines with a goal of informing the shifts needed to achieve real and lasting change.
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Pat Hussain, one of the founders of SONG closes out the first Southern Movement Assembly in Lowndes County, Alabama in 2012
INTRODUCTION

This report is a love letter from Southern people to Southern people. We mean “love” as described by The STAY Project, “the act of celebrating and honoring our culture and traditions while dismantling the parts that harm us.” Love [i]s action that stems from the belief in the inherent dignity and value of all of humanity and our shared vision to create systems that nurture our collective well-being and self-determination.

This report is an acknowledgment of Southern communities and organizers. We see you and too many Southern families struggling to put food on the table each week, to keep the lights on month to month. We see the anxiety and worry that you and so many others have each and every day about the health and safety of your loved ones. We see how exhausted you are from the physical, mental, and emotional labor it takes to simply survive. Despite the hope of an American Dream, for too many of us, this American life is brutal. And, as bad as it is, we know that we do not all feel the impacts in the same way or to the same degree. We resist and build towards our collective liberation by understanding the differences between our various lived experiences. We acknowledge the work needed to successfully challenge the powerful systems that seek to divide us. And we know that in our commitment to love one another and struggle together, we will win the transformations we need.

“We already have everything we need to keep our communities safe... We are the children of the ones who did not die... We are the children of the people who could fly. We are the children of the ones who persevere. We are fearless. We are strong. And we’re ready to carry on.” - Nia Wilson, SpiritHouse (NC)

Experts of the Southern Experiences. Those experiencing injustice are in the best position to talk about its impact and solutions that advance a collective liberation. To avoid the continued invisibilization of southern struggles and successes, links to stories, research, and reports are provided to support assertions of this report. To round out the data and research often found on the south, this report adds the lived experiences of frontline communities into the record.
Defining South. To define the south, we first acknowledge, traditional, sacred and often unceded land of many Indigenous Peoples of this region. We ask permission to use the colonized terms in this report until we learn the correct ways to speak and call this place and her Original Peoples. It is with respect and a shared love of place that members of the Southern Movement Assembly struggle for positive change. The SMA’s membership and work extends across Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia, Virginia and Puerto Rico. For the SMA these thirteen territories make up “the South.”

Southern Geography & Demographics. In terms of both physical landscape and social demographics, the South is the most diverse region in the United States. Geographically, the South includes the Appalachian and Ozark Mountain, the Gulf Coast and Atlantic shorelines, Black Belt farmland, the nation’s most forested land, and scattered cities and suburbs. Despite its richness in diverse landscapes and natural resources, the South is financially ranked as the region with the most poverty in the country and with pockets of persistent poverty throughout, particularly in parts of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia (also known as the Black Belt). Fifty-three percent of all Black people in the United States live in the south. Nearly 30% of Latinx people in the country live in Texas and Florida alone and the second largest number of Indigenous Tribes lives in the South. The diversity of the South also includes the nation’s largest percentage of LGBTQ folks (3.6 million) and the nation’s second largest percentage of immigrants. Texas alone is home to 11% of the 44 million immigrants. The south is home to nearly 50 percent of the rural population of the U.S. (approximately 28 million people). In addition to poverty, rural places in the US are challenged by lack of transportation infrastructure, geographic isolation, lack of broadband access, underfunded schools and hospitals, and fewer economic opportunities.
The Southern Frontlines. The term “frontline” refers to those closest to the negative impact of the various injustices systemically embedded in the US social, economic and political systems. The Southern justice frontlines are Black, Brown, Indigenous, queer, immigrant and differently-abled anchored in a history of resistance that continues to fuel the struggles for dignity, justice and liberation. The SMA frontlines create space for everyone to be seen, valued, heard, and connected to the fabric of our community power. Through the People’s Movement Assembly process, SMA members reimagine what is possible and work together to transform the conditions of daily life, reclaim collective power, and begin the process of healing through reconciliation. Frontline leaders move and work in communities that are targeted, abandoned, and poisoned for profit and political gain. Just caring often results in becoming a target for extraction or violation by state, corporate or vigilante violence. These frontlines survive because they move in rhythm with culture bearers, artists and healers to create or find beauty in the struggle. The SMA reminds us that none of us struggle alone.

The Southern frontlines include educators, agitators, and freedom fighters who refuse to cooperate in their own destruction. Leaders of the Southern frontlines are in the streets demanding change and sitting at a southern kitchen table making strategy for a better world. Experience and the commitment to the long-haul fight for liberation is the power of the Southern frontline. Driven by the love of community and a sense of responsibility to make things better, frontline communities stand on the shoulders of those that came before as they join a continued movement of resistance against the systems that strips people of dignity and legitimize state and vigilante violence against the frontlines. The Southern frontlines are often overworked, significantly undervalued and underfunded. For too many frontline communities, the work gets done as a result of people literally fighting for their lives and for their future.
The COVID-19 crisis reveals that as a nation, we are far from achieving a dream of democracy and liberation. We have known for a long time what the pandemic has recently revealed about our social, political and economic systems. White nationalism, extractive and exploitive economies, dehumanizing and undemocratic institutions and oppression are not anything new in the United States and especially not new in the South. The system we critique is not broken, but rather works as intended. It was never designed to benefit the communities that make up the Southern frontlines. Reform of this unjust system is not sufficient. We must uproot the systems of harm that can be traced back to the historical roots of our nation. We must heal our people. We must heal our land.

Understanding the current public health and economic crises today requires knowledge of U.S. history. Dr. Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, co-founder of SMA member group, the National Council of Elders, asserts that the “threads of fascism” can be found throughout US modern history. During the Cold War, the United States positioned itself as the leader of the “free world,” as opposed to the communist dictatorships of the East. Meanwhile images of Black Americans being killed, beaten, and terrorized for trying to register to vote, to visit a library, or to get served a cup of coffee in a diner in the U.S travelled around the world. These images showed the hypocrisy of the U.S. and undermined its efforts to win the Cold War conflict with the Soviets. It is under this backdrop that the Black Freedom Movement gained leverage in soliciting the help of the federal government to challenge the fascist rule of racist segregationists leaders and decision-makers in the U.S. South.
Understanding the Jim Crow South as a form of fascism is not how US history is taught. But the US government could not call itself a democracy until it put an end to the violent and undemocratic rule taking place in the South. The implementation of Jim Crow segregation was a response to the times of Reconstruction (1865-1877). Power in the South has too often relied on violence, social control, and inequality as their means to maintain power. Colonialism, slavery, and segregation continue to shape systemic oppression today.

Most Americans are taught to disregard the role this history has played in our current realities even though the ideas, structures, and practices that legitimized the theft of land, genocide of Indigenous peoples, and the kidnapping and enslavement of Black people. The very concept of private land ownership has been with us since colonization and shapes our current unjust and undemocratic systems. The dehumanization of Indigenous peoples and Black people was normalized, codified by law, and served as a foundation for which our political and economic systems were built, something white Americans need to keep in mind when they question whether or not structural racism exists today.

Though the messaging, explanations, and tactics have changed, the strategy of normalizing and embedding dehumanization and dispossession practices into our systems for the consolidation of wealth and power for the few continues today. We see this strategy taking shape as Tribal Nations, such as the Carrizo Comecrudo Tribe in Texas, defend their own land from corporate control, surveillance and pollution. We see this strategy over the course of decades as 97% of Black farmers lost ownership of their land. We see it in the criminalization of refugees and immigrants and the separation of families as they cross the border. And we see it as our nation expands policing, surveillance, and militarization in our communities and across the globe.
COVID-19 Global Pandemic. This report comes in the midst of a global pandemic, something the world has not seen for over one hundred years. As of mid-November 2020, there have been over 12.8 million cases and over 261,000 people who have died from COVID-19 in the United States alone. Numbers of new cases are on the rise as the country braces for a second wave of infections creating more uncertainty as to when the pandemic will be over. While there is no doubt that COVID-19 is impacting all Americans, it is not having the same impact across race and class differences. Race, age, work-sector and likelihood of being in the custody of law enforcement play a role in determining exposure and morbidity to the virus.

Systemic racism in our society, economy, and healthcare is what makes COVID-19 more deadly to Black, Indigenous, and Brown people. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Indigenous and Black folks are five times more likely to be hospitalized for and more than three times more likely to die from COVID-19 infection than their white counterparts. For Latinx communities, the rates are four times and nearly three times, respectively. While elders are a vulnerable group across all populations, the virus is also more likely to affect younger ages in all communities of color.

Low wage workers are also at greater risk as the pandemic forced many businesses to close and/or shift the way they operated. Essential sectors of our economy, where women, immigrants, and people of color disproportionately hold jobs, became sites of increased risks for workers, particularly as the government and businesses failed to provide workers with protective gear and enact other safety measures. Low wage workers and healthcare professionals continue to be among the most vulnerable. SMA members, National Nurses United, Southern Workers Assembly, and Black Workers for Justice organizing across these sectors all report companies failing to provide proper PPE and ensure safe working conditions during COVID. People detained in prison and ICE detention centers are also particularly vulnerable because of the close quarters and the lack of testing, proper sanitation and medical care. The rates of infection are up to five times greater for people living in detention centers and prisons. This fact disproportionately impacts Black and Latinx populations that make up the majority of people imprisoned and detained.

Actions taken in response to the COVID crisis reveal that the US Public Health system is sick. Twenty seven percent of people without a high school degree lack health coverage. The majority of Americans who lack health insurance coverage live in the South.
Black, Indigenous, and Brown people make up nearly 60% of the uninsured people even though they make up only 39% of the population. Rural communities are also disproportionately impacted during a pandemic, given that local health systems are severely underfunded or do not exist. Rural hospitals already struggling to stay open are finding it difficult to remain so during the pandemic. One study found that when a rural hospital closes the death toll increases to 6%. The Trump administration's response to the health crisis in the United States has been detrimental to these communities. Denial about the severity of the problem has politicized the issue.

Failure of the federal government to respond in a timely and appropriate manner to the COVID threat has led to the unnecessary suffering and trauma of the American people, particularly communities of color. In the midst of the pandemic, however, national leadership condoned the over-policing of Black bodies and bailing out corporations with stimulus dollars and rolling back of environmental regulations in place to protect human health. This willful effort, on the part of the Trump administration to create divisiveness among the American people and push a white supremacist fascist agenda, requires an intentional disregard for science, a rise in dogmatic, individualistic white nationalism, and the advancement of false media campaigns.

Injustice & Federal Crisis Creation. The government response to this public health crisis is, in many ways, predictable, given the crises we have experienced over the last two decades. The 21st century has been a time of revelation and alarm—from the government’s response to the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 to the devastating aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, the Great Recession of 2008, and the BP Extractive Drilling Explosion in 2010 to today’s COVID-19 pandemic. What is repeatedly visible during these events is that the crisis response advances a vision of our nation that is undemocratic, imposes more violent forms of social control, and expands corporate power.

The COVID crisis is happening in the midst of a number of ongoing and worsening crises that disproportionately impact Southern frontlines. These include the economic divestment and gentrification of communities that exacerbate poverty, displacement, and racial inequality, police killing of 5,600 people, expansion of inhumane immigration policies, alarmingly high number of people imprisoned and detained at unsafe facilities and under inhumane conditions, deterioration of public infrastructure, environmental degradation, and a worsening climate crisis that is on track to usher in the collapse of human civilizations. Understanding all these ongoing crises is critically important for understanding the current one and the kinds of solutions we need in this moment to achieve a more just, sustainable, and equitable future.
Southerners are dying from COVID, and they are being poisoned by extractive industries pumping toxic pollutants into the air, land, and water. Southerners are targets of police and military violence and cannot access affordable healthcare; Southern people are dying because of a lack of access to living-wage jobs that do not comprise human health or ecological systems. Southern communities are dying because of a racialized economic system designed to extract and exploit more than it gives and a political system that protects corporate profits over people. Our people are dying at the hands of a state that seeks to interlock its power with corporate interests that move through violence in all its forms, including incarceration, social control and surveillance, medical violence, and military violence that displace people globally and locally. These threats to the south are interconnected, entangled, and compounded. To address a particular issue facing our communities requires deep assessment of the ways each of these threats interact to shape the conditions that cause the current reality.

Public Health in the South. Many of the Southern states have consistently ranked among the highest per population COVID-19 cases. As of September 21, 2020, nine out of the top ten states were Southern states. Many Southern states are led by Republican leaders at multiple levels, many of whom are following the Trump administration’s playbook in their approach to the pandemic. Another reason is discriminatory policies and programs in the healthcare system that have led to the disparities we are now seeing in health outcomes. There are many factors that explain the racism in healthcare today, including differential and poor treatment of care by physicians, lack of access to quality healthcare in both the number of doctors and facilities that exist and ability to pay due to lack of health insurance, and other social determinants of health related to economic opportunity, safe housing, clean environment and healthy foods. And this is not the only reason people avoid doctors and hospitals. The history of abuse that the medical sector has had with communities of color, particularly Black people and LGBTQ folks is important to note as another obstacle for accessing healthcare.

On August 5th, National Nurses United organized 200 actions across the U.S. demanding PPE and Medicare for ALL!

Image: NNU Union (FL)
**Access to healthcare.** The south remains the region with the highest rates of uninsured, due in part to persistent poverty, low wage economies, and Republican-controlled state governments that chose not to expand Medicaid after the passage of the Affordable Care Act. Out of the 14 states that did not expand Medicaid, eight are Southern (ranging from the low end in Arkansas with 8.1% of the population being uninsured to 17.5% of the people in Texas). People without access to insurance are at higher risks for serious medical conditions that also put them at a higher risk of dying from COVID if contracted. Not having health insurance leads people to put off going to the doctor for as long as possible due to the unaffordability of preventative care. People without insurance in the south are also more likely to work in essential sectors of the economy where everyday on the job is taking risk of getting COVID-19.

**Public health in prisons & detention facilities.** The alarmingly high rates of COVID deaths in detention centers and prisons are a result of medical neglect as a common and illegal activity occurring in many prisons across the country. The U.S. Department of Justice is investigating the state of Mississippi, for allegations of inhumane treatment of those incarcerated. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Inspector General is investigating inhumane and unsafe conditions at the Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC) in Ocilla, Georgia, a private detention facility detains immigrants under Immigration and Citizenship Enforcement (ICE). Conditions like these make prisons and detention centers hotbeds for the spread of the virus and COVID-19 related deaths. These are just two of many examples.

The work of grassroots Southern organizers has fueled a victory for folks detained in ICE prisons. On Friday, Oct. 2, the House of Representatives passed Resolution 1153 condemning the medical abuse happening at the Irwin County Detention Center.
Immigration in the South. Nearly 20,000 people living in the South have traveled here from other countries for work and opportunity or safe refuge, escaping poverty and/or violence. U.S. foreign policy and multinational corporations play critical roles in creating instability in various countries, and then manipulate laws to criminalize migration from those countries. We have seen the number of people denied safe refuge, detained, and deported increase under the Trump Administration as our nation's approach to immigration has become increasingly more inhumane. The Trump Administration has used the pandemic as one more reason to expand immigration bans and illegally deny asylum to refugees, leading to more people being detained where they are more vulnerable to getting and dying from COVID.

Incarceration Rates in the South. The US has the highest incarceration in the world and seven of the 10 states with the highest incarceration in the country are in the US South. The number of people in jails, prisons, and detention centers has been increasing to unbelievable rates since the 1980s. The number of people imprisoned has at least doubled every decade, climbing from over 20,000 people to over 1.4 million people.

The aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement saw the creation of a series of federal and state policies and programs that led to increased policing and surveillance and economic divestment in Black and Brown communities. An opportunity to channel white fear into political power emerged as politicians declared war on drugs and poverty. The rhetoric of law and order and dehumanization of people as “thugs, delinquents, criminals, and/or illegals” were exactly what many people needed to hear to make it easier for them to look away as the dehumanizing criminal justice system expanded. With the support of the majority of white America, leaders from both political parties took part in building what we now recognize as the US Prison Industrial Complex.

Over the last forty years, the U.S. has created a prison market that allows companies to profit from the imprisonment and surveillance of its citizens and residents. And at nearly every level of government, elected and appointed officials are making decisions to expand and maintain this system. As early as grade school, many individuals, in Black and Brown communities in particular, are being funneled through this profit-making and inhumane carceral system. For example, in 2018, SMA member, Project South and Women Watch Afrika organized to stop legislation introduced in Georgia would have enabled racial profiling, disciplinary targeting, unjust punishment of students of color, and federal surveillance and data collection on children. This systematic targeting of Black and Brown children fuels the school-to-prison and school-to-deportation pipeline.
A lot has been written about the prison industrial complex (government funded markets for detaining and imprisoning people) and its ineffective approach to public safety. This system of confinement houses 2.4 million people. It is filled with people we know and love who are often sitting there because they cannot afford the bail. Many are also in prison for a drug offense that have been decriminalized across nearly a third of the country. The criminal justice system is tearing apart Southern families and communities, creating long-lasting trauma and reinforcing a cycle of poverty through imprisonment and punitive measures imposed upon formerly incarcerated people, even after serving their time. The likelihood of imprisonment is not one equally shared across groups categorized by race, gender, sexuality, ability, or class. In recent years, the rate of incarceration for women, particularly Black women, has grown at a rate two times more than that of men. The majority are single moms who are survivors of sexual and domestic violence serving sentences for non-violent crimes or awaiting trial because they cannot afford bail. Black men are incarcerated five times more and Hispanics are nearly twice as likely to be incarcerated as white men. People with disabilities are significantly overrepresented in prisons, with one out five people behind bars having a serious mental illness.

The criminal justice system does not make Southern communities safer but rather labels members of Southern communities as threats to public safety. They, in turn, become targets for racial profiling in policing, race discrimination in punishment and vulnerable to the most horrific, inhumane, and unsafe living conditions and violence while detained and imprisoned. These conditions have only worsened during COVID-19. People are being released and readmitted at high rates and are being denied their right to a speedy trial. Access to courts is becoming more limited, leading to postponing of court dates and longer time in jails for the many who cannot afford bail. SMA members People’s Advocacy Institute, DecARcerate and Racial Justice Coalition report that these facilities fail to provide enough Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and use COVID to justify intense segregation, lockdowns, solitary confinement, and elimination of family visitation to name a few.
Reproductive Rights in the South. Many Southern politicians have also used the pandemic as reason to advance their harmful political agendas. We are seeing Republican state legislators and governors across the south leverage this moment to advance their anti-abortion agendas and fail to protect people’s rights and access to reproductive healthcare. Mississippi, Texas, Tennessee, West Virginia, Arkansas and Alabama all took measures to limit access to abortion, defining it as non-essential medical care. SMA members, Sister Song, URGE (Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity) and SexySexEd report that there is also a lot of concern about access to contraceptives and reproductive care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many southern states already impose unnecessary legal restrictions and barriers to care, and during a time where people are not able to see their doctors, access to reproductive services are even more limited. As states and medical facilities make determinations about what is and is not considered essential care, the trans community is particularly vulnerable to being denied care. All of this is happening in the midst of more federal rollbacks for Transgender healthcare by the Trump Administration.

A Southern Economic Crisis. The COVID public health crisis is worsening the Southern economic crisis. Across the region, people are losing their jobs. And while Congress and state governments provided relief to many workers and families through direct payments, expansion of unemployment benefits, and moratoriums on evictions, these supports expire soon, if present at all. Many Southern folks were left out of relief efforts, particularly those working in the informal and care economies, undocumented folx, immigrants, refugees, and those incarcerated. COVID has created the conditions to accelerate corporate trends toward outsourcing American jobs to cheaper labor overseas and/or using technology in place of workers. Major retailers are declaring bankruptcy at a rapid pace leaving millions of retail workers without a job. Small and minority-owned businesses have been disproportionately impacted. Black-owned businesses, in particular, are struggling for many reasons related to the history and ongoing structural racism in this country. The loss of so many Black-owned businesses is unacceptable, especially as large corporations receive over $500 billion of relief without the requirement to preserve jobs that smaller businesses had to comply with in order to get funds.

The worsening economic crisis is also particularly troublesome in the south where, despite federal protections, fair housing and employer discrimination are rampant, in part because of the state's role in enforcing these protections. This “Southern strategy” weakens federal intervention into state governance and economies while at the same time preventing local government control within their own states. Phrases like “states rights” and “individual choice and freedom” are code language used to protect the status quo, racism and corporate control of government. The effects of Jim Crow segregation continue to be so pervasive and embedded within the current economic and political systems at all levels of government.
The worsening economic crisis will further exacerbate racial and economic inequalities as state and local governments remedy budget shortfalls by making deep cuts in public infrastructure and social safety net programs. State and local governments are already shrinking budgets for social services, affordable housing, education, healthcare, and public spaces such as libraries and parks and using economic recessions and downturns as just cause. Resources to support economic development projects that often lure public support with the promise of jobs and then repeatedly fail to live up to those promises. Taxpayer money and even publicly owned properties that could be used for affordable housing, for example, are often used to build casinos, condos, and ballparks and to subsidize the expansion of polluting industries.

**Southern Workers Rights.** The downsizing of the American economy will have a devastating impact on everyday working folks already struggling to make ends meet. Before the global pandemic, over 40 million Americans were one missed paycheck away from poverty. This was particularly true in the South, where many people are employed in low wage work and where the highest concentration of Black people reside; they are particularly vulnerable because of conditions that created (and continue to create) the racial wealth gap. Many people simply do not have the cash assets to bounce back from an economic crisis such as a job loss. We can expect that one of the outcomes of a prolonged economic downturn will be an increase in the number of families living in poverty, an increase in homelessness, and an increase in the wealth gap and racial inequality, all of which exacerbate the pre-COVID public health and housing crises.

There is also an increase in corporate profit generation through union-busting efforts to undermine the ability of workers to collectively bargain for better, healthier working conditions and just compensation.
Many southern states have passed “right to work” and “at will” legislation leaving many Southern workers vulnerable to low wages, discrimination and unsafe working environments. This continues an economy of domination where owners extract their profits from a “disposable” labor force. SMA member, National Nurses United reports an increase in union busting during the pandemic.

**Housing & the South.** Most workers are also tenants, either paying rent to a landlord or a mortgage payment to a corporate bank. Millions of Americans have been unable to pay their rent and mortgage payments because of the pandemic-related economic crisis. Many of the so-called relief programs for tenants during this crisis are functioning as direct aid to wealthy landlords and corporate banks, not the tenants. When the current federal eviction moratorium expires January 1, 2021, 6 million American households face eviction.

This acute crisis compounds the longer-standing crisis of housing affordability, an affordable housing shortage, and unchecked gentrification of lower-income neighborhoods, especially in urban downtowns. Foreclosures have been used as a tool of dispossession by corporations and elite property owners of lower-income folx. Evictions are part of a broader scheme of criminalizing poverty, are experienced as a major traumatic event, and can send folks on a path to incarceration. As we saw with the 2008 financial crisis, the bailouts provided are for the elites and powers that be, instead of the people impacted the most. Grassroots efforts, such as SMA member South Carolina Housing Justice Network, to organize to protect tenant rights and against foreclosures and evictions at the local and municipal level have been met by a backlash of State preemption laws.
Racialized residential segregation explains in part the disproportionately high rate of COVID cases and deaths in the South and among communities of color, particularly Black and Indigenous communities. The 2020 Regional Leadership Justice Summit hosted by SMA member, South Alabama Center for Fair Housing, explained how racialized residential segregation is at the center of current social inequities. Studies continue to show that a person’s zip code is a better indicator of health outcomes than their genetic code. Many neighborhoods across the South are racially segregated as a result of the racially motivated and government backed patterns of economic and community development of the past (think racial redlining and white flight to suburbs) and on-going revitalization of inner cities that have faced decades of divestment and are now pushing out the very same people that were forced into the area.

Discriminatory policies and practices, economic divestment and gentrification have led to Black families to be significantly more likely to live in areas with high rates of poverty, low economic opportunity, underfunded schools, poor transportation, lack of access to quality healthcare, and lack of access to healthy foods. Black communities are also two times more likely to live near polluting facilities and sites than their white counterparts, even when accounting for income differences. During a health pandemic, underlying conditions, such as decades of exposure to pollution, can put individuals at a higher risk of death.

The South & The Global Climate Crisis. Since long before the pandemic, the justice struggles of the South have been happening in the midst of a global climate emergency. Both science and Southern observation confirms that the planet is warming. Global warming is causing dangerous and catastrophic changes to the climate and Southern communities are among the first to experience its impacts. Southern communities are flooding, even during sunny days. Southern land is disappearing as utility bills are rising. 2020 is now the most active hurricane season on record. 2020 also brought an active wildfire season that devastated the West Coast and rapid temperature changes in the Midwest brought extreme heat one weekend and freezing temperatures the next. Climate events are only expected to worsen and include more global health pandemics.

Without an economic transformation, the US and other industrialized nations are leading the global charge toward the sixth extinction. Temperatures will continue to warm and rise to life-threatening levels. The world’s leading climate scientists have reported that we have less than ten years to make preventive global shifts before we cause irreversible damage. There is no doubt that this reality is being grossly accelerated by human activity. The social dependence and economic investment in fossil fuels and corporatized agriculture are at the roots of the climate crisis. The Gulf Coast communities impacted by these deadly storms are the same places where oil and gas companies responsible for climate events are extracting the wealth from communities in exchange for jobs.
Decades of pollution and environmental degradation have led to a public health crisis in such places as Cancer Alley. The false choice between jobs and the environment has been thrust upon Southerners as extractive and polluting industries have expanded throughout the region, particularly in Appalachia and along the Gulf Coast. It is in these areas that we find remnants of this country’s economic philosophy of extraction that developed first with the slave economy. SMA member, Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy asserts that the philosophy of extraction takes from the land, without repair or restoration to the point of dispossession of land for the benefit of a few who become a very wealthy power class.

Climate change is real and this frontline fight is bigger than just one issue. Its causes and impacts are connected to all of the social and racial injustices of this nation. During this most active hurricane season, protests for Black Lives erupted in Lafayette, Louisiana over the police killing of Trayford Pellerin just before the parish prepared for a life-threatening Category 3 hurricane. In the end, Lafayette was spared the impact of Hurricane Laura, but local officials, claiming to be concerned about the “security threat” protestors posed, refused to open their shelters to others displaced by the storm. This is just one example of how anti-Black racism is used to legitimize the inhumane response and increase state violence.

This extractive economy continues, aided by the protection of the police and national security forces, as well as the support of corporate controlled governments. During the COVID pandemic, fossil fuel companies have been able to capitalize on national relief funds, turning them into bailouts. Before the pandemic, many of them had been facing bankruptcy, but now the tide has turned in their favor with billions of dollars in direct aid on top of the annual government subsidies these companies receive. Unlike the majority of companies receiving relief, the fossil fuel industry received its aid with no requirements for how the money would be spent. The CARES Act relief has extended the viability and life of these companies at a time when the country needs, more than ever, to be transitioning away from its dependence on fossil fuels.
Southern Struggles for Democracy. The Supreme Court continued to advance the erosion of civil rights and liberties and the expansion of rights and privileges to corporations. The South has been the historic testing ground for national attack. Once a key defense, the Courts are now in the hands of the Conservative Right. Fewer legal avenues to stop white supremacist corporate control of government makes this moment look a lot like the 1880s.

2020 marks the first US Census Count since the Voting Rights Act (VRA) protections changes from the in 2013 ruling. After the VRA passed in 1965, the former Confederate states had to have their political redistricting plans pre-cleared by the federal government. The 2013 Supreme Court ruling makes that federal oversight no longer necessary. Recent lawsuits brought against Republican-controlled states accuse racist gerrymandering targeting the political power of frontline communities. The US Census Count plays a key role in the redistricting process in which political districts at every level of government are redrawn according to the Census data completed every ten years. The first Census took place during Reconstruction in 1870. This was the first time minorities were counted by the government and established majority-minority political districts. This led to the election Black and minority political leaders for the first time.

SMA member, SpiritHouse Inc. launched “Protect Our Legacy” campaign in 2020 to educate communities about the Census and Voting Rights.

The US Census Count is also directly tied to the amount of federal dollars that are allocated to a community. These dollars are used to fund public hospitals, schools, roads, and other critical infrastructure. As SMA members, Crescent City Media Group/Center for Civic Action, Women Watch Afrika, Southern Echo, and Southern Rural Black Women’s Initiative report the south already has a disproportionate number of what the Census Bureau calls “hard to count” populations.
One of the most undercounted populations are refugee and immigrant families. In addition to the language barriers that make completing the Census difficult, they also live in an increasingly hostile political environment that creates legitimate fear and distrust of engaging with government officials. This includes the Trump administration’s inhumane immigration policies (family separation, prolonged detention in unsafe conditions, deportation, increased ICE raids, denial of refugee status, to name a few), the passage of state anti-immigration laws, cooperation with ICE in local communities (police, schools, and workplaces), and the recent attempt by Trump to add a question about citizenship to the U.S. Census Count.

"Since the 2010 Census the southern region of the US has grown by 35% outpacing the midwest and northeast. According to a report by Election Data Services, as many as sixteen states will see a shift in congressional reapportionment in 2020. This significant shift lends credence to the idea that ‘Southern’ politics can potentially dictate this nation's future, " Trap Bonner, Crescent City Media Group/Center for Civic Action

Voter suppression in the south looks like the hurdles communities face to vote on decisions that impact their lives. For decades now, Republican-controlled southern states have passed laws and implemented policies and practices that make it harder for people to register and vote. This trend has spread throughout the nation as Republicans have gained control of other state legislators. Calls of voter fraud are used to justify the restrictive voting laws. The voter suppression strategies include: requiring registration forms to be mailed or dropped off at the voter registrar’s office, requiring specific kinds of identification, limiting who can vote through felony disenfranchisement, and limits on when and how a person can vote. Many southern states also participate in programs to “clean or purge” their voter lists. These programs have led to inaccurate removal of hundreds of thousands of voters in each state. Voting locations in neighborhoods are often closed for low-income and predominantly people of color to create confusion around where to vote and cause long lines. According to a report commissioned by Crescent City Media Group/Civic Action Center, modernizing voting could save money, and yet many voting stations are still outdated machines that create problems for counting votes. Voter intimidation by racist individuals and local police is still a thing, particularly in communities with predominantly Black populations. While vigilante terrorism is not so common as it once was, we expect white supremacist armed militias organizers to “watch” the polls in the 2020 Presidential Elections. The FBI is preparing for possible violence.
**Militarization & Vigilante Violence.** Since the beginning of this nation, the majority of people have been fighting for their right to participate in the governing of their lives. Many of us achieved some recognition of our rights, but, in order to maintain them, we must fight against the policies and practices that suppress our vote and our community voice. For much of the past few decades, we have been losing so much ground that our government is starting to look a lot like the one in the 1880s that instituted Jim Crow laws. We have a person in the White House who refuses to denounce white supremacy or agree to a peaceful transfer of power. Trump has publicly signaled to a known white terrorist militia group, the Proud Boys, to stand by, presumably until needed, to help put down our people’s movement that is expected to rise up after the election. Right wing militias are not the only means at the President’s disposal. We have already seen how he has yielded the power of the US military and paramilitary forces to enact violence on protesters, Black people, refugees, and immigrants.

While the cruelest and most undemocratic laws and practices during the Jim Crow decades happened in the south, all branches of the US government allowed them to exist until a massive movement of people made the federal government enforce at least some of the rights that had been denied to Southern Black people since the end of Reconstruction in the late 1870s. We also know that the reactionary forces of a defeated South did not just go away. They have also been systematically regaining power but, this time, at all levels of government. As of October 2020, ten of the thirteen southern governors (except for Louisiana, North Carolina, and Virginia) and the leadership of all the legislatures (except for Virginia) are Republican. The election of Donald J. Trump to the Presidency has been their most visible and crowning achievement.

In the 1880s, the US was home to unfettered visible racism across the South upheld by the legal structures, as well as by social practices. It was “legal” to prevent Black people from registering to vote, to restrict our access to public facilities like libraries, museums, zoos, parks and playgrounds and the like. Schools and other publicly funded institutions were “segregated by law.” While earlier forms of racism perpetuated by the government have been eradicated, new forms have taken shape in the form of sustained violence and discrimination toward people of color. The conditions that gave rise to the Jim Crow South are taking shape right before our eyes. As we look at the history of the US, a cyclical pattern of democracy emerges beginning with Reconstruction through the Jim Crow era, Civil Rights, and today. This political moment is a resurgence of the Confederate and Jim Crow power of earlier eras. We have an opportunity to weaken the conservative stronghold with a Biden/Harris win and the prospects of a Democrat controlled Congress. The lesson of our cyclical history is that we must defend our wins or risk losing the democratic gains that are more often than not made possible as a result of grassroots social movements led by Black people and other oppressed groups.
Despite the uncertainty surrounding this political moment, we look for answers in the history of the Black Radical traditions. We honor the creative ways of surviving and thriving that emerged in practice alongside sustained resistance. We remember that landownership is a strategy toward educational and economic advancement, as it was for Black folks coming out of slavery. By 1910, Blacks held over 15 million acres of farmland, which provided life, food, water, and spiritual resources. We acknowledge that even as Jim Crow segregation took hold in the South, new forms of legalized discrimination and violence made a mix of mutual aid and resistance even more critical to survival. Land trusts and cooperatives were created based on the ideas and philosophy of mutual aid, cooperation, and collective responsibility and governance.

These tactics of resistance challenge the belief of white Americans individualism and private ownership as measures of success. The wisdom was understanding that these American principles shaped the very undemocratic and oppressive institutions that required transformation. Just as many decades ago, we are called upon again to build mutual aid to defend our communities in the midst of ongoing crisis and harm and shift the conditions of our lives toward our wildest utopian visions of freedom and liberation. The Southern Movement Assembly is birthed from this history of Southern resistance. Guided by eight years of People’s Movement Assemblies that share community knowledge, skills, strategies, and tactics, hundreds of communities have participated in the design and change of the conditions on multiple frontlines.
The Southern Movement Assembly officially formed in Lowndes County, Alabama, central birthplace of the historic struggle for Southern freedom, voting rights, and Black political power. The decision to hold this first people’s assembly was rooted in the organizers’ experiences of collective assembly through participation in the World Social Forum and two US Social Forums, and the realization of our lack of movement power to respond and intervene when our people were abandoned by government and exploited by the private sector in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. With a commitment to regenerating the Southern Freedom Movement in alignment with the Black Radical Tradition, we organized the first of many people’s movement assemblies in 2012. We gathered our people from 13 Southern states to build interconnection, unity, and power.

Social Movements throughout history and around the world have used people's assemblies to make decisions. Movements, particularly in the Global South, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, have used assemblies to advance the practice of people power, self-determination, and governance. The assembly process is a process by which we gather our people, lift every voice, connect through stories, identify our issues, and create politically aligned strategies to change conditions and build our common good.
Over the last eight years, we have been growing our power, growing in size, strengthening our political analysis, building our skills, and deepening our relationships with one another. Over 200 organizations across the South have come together with a shared commitment to follow our Principles of Unity, share our work and political education, create analysis, synthesize our ideas, and make an action plan for the coming year.

**Southern People’s Initiative (SPI).** During the ten years since the last economic crisis and the fifteen years since Hurricane Katrina it is clear that inside disasters are openings that allow transformation. Disasters force a collective gaze in the mirror in a broken mirror allowing humanity to see itself. The COVID-19 recovery is a disaster that creates such a gaze. We must have the courage to open our eyes and acknowledge that “going back to normal” is not an option. We must call forth vision and imagination and commit to engage in a world where the frontlines see the first benefits of change.

In 2015, the SMA launched the Southern People’s Initiative (SPI), a visionary framework that names what we strive to achieve through collective action. Together we **Protect & Defend** our communities from violence and extraction. We build a **New Social Economy** that is safe for workers and safe for the planet. And we advance a **People’s Democracy** rooted in a deeper sense of civic engagement and self governance.

The SPI is accompanied by a **Southern Movement Blueprint** that represents the components and action steps for a multi-year strategy to resist and build in a time of crisis. In this time of transformation, disunity, corrupt governance, and heightened violence, the SMA’s vision and process designed to meet this moment and those to come. As a movement formation, the SMA has paved the way to stronger movement coordination, frontline convergence, and people’s power to contend with the many faces of state violence.
WE MUST RESIST AND BUILD

**SPI in Action. Protecting & Defending** our communities means resisting state and vigilante violence in all its forms, including incarceration, social control, medical violence, and military violence, all that displaces people globally and locally. Building a **New Social Economies** involves coordinating just transition strategies that interrupt and confront extractive and exploitative economies and build new democratic institutions like cooperatives and practices of community-based agriculture, land trusts, and participatory budgeting. **Advancing & Practicing a People's Democracy** requires organizing, using People's Movement Assemblies to build coordinated local community governance for movement power, challenging legal barriers to political participation, expanding civic engagement beyond the vote, and providing organizing political education.

**SPI #1: Protect & Defend Our Communities.** 2020 saw a resurgence of uprising and protests after the murders of George Floyd (Minnesota), Breonna Taylor (Kentucky), Tony McDade (Florida), Yassin Mohomad (Georgia) and Tre’mall McGee, a 14-year-old unarmed Black boy in Louisiana who was shot in the head by an off-duty police officer. National uprisings were in response to the persistent brutal and systemic violence towards Black people that continues in the U.S. Despite COVID-based school and business closures, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets across the country protesting the impunity of police officers murdering Black people. Black people are three times more likely than their white counterparts to be murdered by police. As of November 2020, there have been 598 killings in 2020.

Images: Upper left and far right Concerned Citizens for Justice, Lower left Mississippi Rising Coalition, and middle SpiritHouse, Inc.
The resurgence of Black resistance has captured the attention of the nation and ignited a fire among a generation of young people. This moment in the Black liberation movement has opened up new opportunities for realizing long fought demands for police accountability, criminal justice reform, local police budget accountability, police divestment campaigns, and the fall of Confederate statues and symbols. Hundreds of local actions were organized across the south in coordination with calls from the Movement for Black Lives to defund the police. Local communities in Tennessee, Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, and Georgia launched campaigns for public divestment from police. Twenty-two cities across the country (including Alabama, Virginia, Louisiana, Kentucky, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arkansas, Texas, Mississippi) removed Confederate statues and Mississippi finally removed the Confederate battle flag from their state flag as a result of local organizing.

**Backlash.** The combination of growing activism and consciousness is creating new opportunities for social change, but resistance to state violence is being met with an increased rise of fascism and far right organizing. Protestors have also been met with hostile militarized police (national guard in large cities) and white nationalist militia groups (sometimes working in coordination with local police). Armed with riot gear, tear gas, batons, and more, police officers have been caught assaulting peaceful protesters. Intimidation through billy-clubs, batons, and firearms along with tear gas were tactics used against SMA members on May 30, 2020, Chattanooga’s Bloody Sunday. Police actions have been defended by the federal government and many elected officials, as a maintenance of law & order and the protection of property. Law-makers are taking actions to criminalize protesters and a new Georgia law makes police a “protected class” in legal challenges.

**Harm-Free Defense.** A key strategy to protect & defend our communities against state violence is building participatory defense and harm free zones and moving through a lens of abolition. Participatory defense and harm free zones are being built across the South. MIX and Concerned Citizens for Justice in Tennessee, Women Watch Afrika and Project South in Georgia, SpiritHouse, Inc. in North Carolina, People’s Advocacy Institute in Mississippi, and DecARcerate in Arkansas, are just a few of the many organizations within the SMA working on this frontline. It involves strategies that break the pipelines, close the cages, free the people, speak the truth to power, and repair harm. Across the South, frontline leaders and organizations are educating communities about their rights; organizing community defense plans and networks, such as community lawyering networks; offering bail, courtroom support, and sanctuary spaces; and demanding change in the streets and at government offices. It also includes providing emergency housing such as transitional housing provided by Ordinary People Society and housing for the Trans community, such as My Sistah House and TULIP (Trans United Leading Intersectional Progress) in Louisiana.
In 2019 **SpiritHouse, Inc. and Durham Beyond Policing** lobbied and won the establishment of a community and safety taskforce and a participatory budgeting program which lets the residents decide how to spend $2.4 million in the city. This task force would be empowered to research and propose viable, cost-effective, long term solutions to violence and harm, that does not involve the use of the police.

**Culture and Healing.** Arts, culture and the work of Cultural Organizing have been an integral part of the Southern Movement since the beginning of Black resistance to enslavement in the Americas through the Civil Rights Movement to today. Freedom songs, quilts, drumming, folktales and mass meetings carried forward our collective history, hope and healing. Our current Southern Movement continues these traditions forward. Bystander videos were often the catalyst for accountability. Photography captured the mass demonstrations of the Movement for Black Lives/ BLM across the globe. Art installations, singing, dancing and spoken word that captured the outpouring of grief and defiance of respectability politics in the face of police intimidation and violence. The global pandemic has also renewed our commitment to wellness within our own ranks. Organizations like **The Wind and the Warrior, SpiritHouse, Inc. and Alternate ROOTS** remind us to breathe, stretch, walk, rest, sit on the porch and mindfully take care of our body and spirit as we support the care of our communities. We also believe that joy is an act of resistance. This is reflected in the celebration and creation of art and culture by our creatives across the South including the work of the **Highlander Center, LOUD Queen Youth Theater, Magic City Youth Initiative, The STAY Project** and the **Appalachian Love Fest.**
Mutual Aid. Building community networks of mutual aid is an alternative for meeting the needs of our communities. Such programs already exist through much of the South and have increased during the COVID pandemic as the need has grown. Existing infrastructure includes alternative healthcare cooperatives and doulas, such as the work of Sister Song, worker-owned cooperative and solidarity economy incubation and education such as Highlander Center in Tennessee, Co-operate WNC in North Carolina, and Southeast Center for Cooperative Development; community land trusts and farmers’ networks and cooperatives, such as Cooperation New Orleans, Franklin Center in North Carolina, Cooperation Jackson and Sipp Culture in Mississippi, Dynamite Hill-Smithfield Community Land Trust and Alabama Sustainable Farmers Network in Alabama, New Communities in Georgia and Southern Rural Black Women’s Initiative in the Black Belt. Because of COVID-19, many people within our communities are struggling to put food on the table, facing evictions, and, especially as essential workers, are being subjected to unsafe conditions. Local organizations and leaders across the south are playing critical roles addressing health and economic needs in their communities. Mutual aid and education hubs are providing financial assistance, food, COVID education, PPE, and more.
Nearly every organization within the Southern People’s Movement Assembly engaged in some kind of rapid response organizing in their communities as COVID-19 spreads. Project South and the Hunger Coalition of Atlanta launched COVID testing increasing access to healthcare. The Hometown Organizing Project made over 25,000 masks. The STAY Project, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, Highlander Center, Muslims for Social Justice, The Ordinary People Society, Mississippi Rising Coalition, Northeast Arkansas Mutual Aid, Women Watch Afrika, People’s Advocacy Institute and many more have been providing much needed aid in these times when people are suffering. SMA members, SC Housing Justice Network, Lexington Housing Justice Collective, Southern Crossroads, and QC Family Tree came together in the midst of this pandemic to build tenant power and mutual aid networks, and Black Workers for Justice and Southern Workers Assembly organized a resiliency and mutual aid hub for workers in North Carolina and across the south respectively. Alternate ROOTS formed the Solidarity Fund to provide support for basic needs for artists and culture bearers who may not have qualified for other government assistance.

The STAY Project and the Kentucky Student Environmental Coalition, organizations run for youth and by youth, established mutual aid fund for young people in their networks who are being displaced and put out of work by COVID-19. This fund prioritized Black, Indigenous, PoC, LGBTQIA, disabled, chronically-ill, and immunocompromised youth.
SPI #2: Build a New Social Economy. In 2020, the nation experienced the impact of corporate greed, government incompetence, and prioritization of profits and social supremacy over people. COVID-19 has revealed the flaws of the market-based individualist approach to societal needs, particularly as it relates to healthcare, leading to increased support for Medicare for all and community-based solutions that put people over profits. The privatization of healthcare and education, the militarization of police forces, and the destruction of our environment and global climate are all rooted in the profit-driven push for more consumption and greed that weakens our society. The intersectional crises affecting our health, environment, and economy are forcing us to reimagine the way that we consume, create, and produce. To liberate ourselves, we must free the land from its capitalistic aims and repurpose it for our collective well-being.

Racialized capitalism has been presented as the best and most natural way to manage and distribute resources, so much so that it can be difficult for people and communities to imagine any other way. However, communities in the SMA envision a new economy that centers people and planet over corporate profits, an economy that works with, strengthens and regenerates local community resources and assets. Building an economy centered on the values of dignity, safety, and elimination of poverty and fear. This means creating exchanges with each other, outlining what we need and what is fair. It means transitioning out of the racialized capitalist economy rooted in debt, extraction, and private ownership toward an economy rooted in mutuality, democratic ownership, and accountability to each other.

Invest/Divest/Reinvest Campaigns. A key strategy to build a new social economy involves public divestment from an economy that harms our communities (prisons, detention centers, fossil fuels, and more) and public investments in an economy that supports and nurtures our collective well-being. Communities are demanding a greater say in how public funds are spent. They are organizing their power to demand that local governments divest from policing and the extractive economy and invest in a new social economy. Defund Campaigns are moving in the south such as Central Gulf Coast People's Assembly working in Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida coasts, Jackson People's Assembly in Mississippi, People's Budget Birmingham in Alabama, SpiritHouse, Inc. in North Carolina, Concerned Citizens for Justice in Tennessee, Project South in Georgia, and Sunrise Austin in Texas. Tallahassee Community Action Committee shut down a call to build a $60 million police department outside of Tallahassee. Divesting from the carceral, military, and security role of the state frees up resources to invest in public goods that improve well being for all, such as healthcare, expansion of the commons, jobs guarantees and guaranteed income, and broader infrastructural transformations like those called for in the Green New Deal. The failed response of the pandemic has renewed energy behind calls for Medicare for All, single payer healthcare, or universal healthcare. Our movements can continue to follow the lead of nurses and National Nurses United organizing around this.
Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaigns are also being used to address the worsening climate crisis. Communities on the frontlines of climate disasters are engaged in organizing to move us towards a just transition away from the extractive fossil fuel economy and to protect our communities through equitable disaster planning and recovery. This work is happening on several fronts, with a heavier emphasis in environmental justice communities, such as Greater Birmingham Alliance for Clean Air (GASP) and Birmingham Earth Month Coalition, NC WARN and Georgia WAND, where people are living next to and working in the extractive polluting economy that is creating the climate crisis and devastating environmental degradation. Fights advance clean energy solutions, to stop pipelines from going through communities and sacred lands; to stop the expansion of petrochemical build outs; to protect their land, air, and water; to be relocated away from dangers; and to hold these companies accountable for their pollution and the sickness and death they have caused.

Concerned Citizens for Justice collected over 6,000 signatures (nearly 2K more than they needed) for Community Control Campaign in Chattanooga, TN.

GASP and P.A.N.I.C (People against Neighborhood Industrial Contamination) organized a caravan to raise awareness and protest pollution in their community in Birmingham, AL.
Green New Deal Organizing. Communities are also organizing around climate impacts they are facing such as increased flooding, increased heat, dangerous storms, and climate gentrification. The Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy is moving with more than 200 organizations in building climate resiliency plans, pushing for equitable disaster recovery, providing rapid response and mutual aid after disasters, and pushing for a Green New Deal in the Gulf South to advance a just transition to a sustainable economy.

Rent Cancellation. Housing justice organizers and tenants are calling for canceling rent, banning evictions, and homes for all. These are powerful demands that reinforce housing as a human right instead of a market commodity. Established housing justice and tenant organizations have experience with organizing grassroots eviction defense, mobilizing tenants and broader coalitions to call for policy changes like eviction moratoria, rent control, and public support for affordable housing, and using rent strikes, protests, general strikes, and occupations to demonstrate power and win. Building on past campaigns to demand more affordable housing, communities hold absentee landowners and slumlords accountable, and battle corporate-, Wall-Street-, and AirBnb-backed gentrification. The Homes for All South Network is convening these groups on a regional level to coordinate research, strategy, and campaigns and to build regional power.
Decomodify Housing. To advance housing as a human right, some organizations are also working to build real solutions to the housing crisis that decommodify housing, take apartments and homes out of the speculative market, and foster mechanisms for community control, democratic governance, and cooperative ownership. Community Land Trusts, where land is owned collectively and the buildings atop are leased to “homeowners,” keeps housing affordable. Other solutions include housing cooperatives and real estate cooperatives, like the ones adopted by the mobile home community of Emma, NC.

Worker/Labor Organizing. Organizing workers to build our own solutions and build the political power to demand a safer, just, and democratic economy is a key strategy for building a new social economy. The failure of governments and corporations to protect the health and financial security of workers and communities has led to the largest resurgence of the labor movement the nation has seen in decades. Across the country, nearly two thousand labor strikes and protests have been held to demand proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other safety measures for frontline essential workers, as well as for increased pay, benefits, and collective bargaining rights. SMA member, the Southern Workers Assembly, recently launched the Safe Jobs Save Lives campaign to do just that. And SMA member National Nurses United (NNU) has been on the forefront, demanding that employers protect the health and safety of registered nurses and patients, fighting for Medicare for All, and organizing unions at hospitals throughout the nation because workers doing collective bargaining workers can create true workplace democracy. Mission Hospital RNs in Asheville, NC unionized with NNU this year making it the largest union election in the south since 1975 and the first ever private sector hospital to unionize in North Carolina.
SMA members have articulated key elements of a new social economy. Our current economic system is failing to meet people’s most basic needs. It is critical that we organize to ensure everyone has access to living wage jobs with worker rights and collective bargaining power, universal safe, effective, therapeutic health and mental health care, equitable non-privatized public education, free college and education debt amnesty, equitable access to internet and other utilities, universal basic income, healthy foods, and safe, affordable and climate resilient housing.

We need to protect our communities from exploitation and harm. This includes divesting from policing, ICE, prisons, and detentions and instead advancing alternative forms of public safety, ending predatory lending, transitioning away from an extractive polluting economy and cleaning up toxic sites, updating critical infrastructure, and advancing equitable disaster planning and recovery.

We need to advance solutions that democratize our economic system, shifting power to workers and communities. This includes community control of the commons, such as community control of energy (energy democracy) and other strategies such as cooperatives (worker-owned and/or member-owned) for housing, sustainable local farms, utilities, healthcare, financing, and more.

Finally, we need to repair past harm and protect the dignity and human rights of every person. This includes Indigenous sovereignty, racial reparations, and ecological reparations. We need to guarantee access to clean air, water, and land, healthy food, healthcare, education, and housing as human rights.

**SPI#3: Advance a People's Democracy.** This is a critical moment in the history of our democracy, one threatened by authoritarian rule. History has taught us that no matter who is president or what party has won the most positions in our state legislatures, our current economic and political systems fail to meet the needs of our communities. How organizations and the Southern Movement Assembly govern ourselves is part of building a more democratic future for everyone. People’s Movement Assemblies of all sizes synthesize the stories and visions of everyone involved instead of ceding to individuals the power to tell us what our communities need.

**Countering Voter Suppression.** The Crescent City Media Group/Center for Civic Action created an [Emergency Elections Toolkit](#) to prepare communities for engaging in the 2020 US presidential election during a public health pandemic. [Concerned Citizens for Justice](#) in Tennessee and [Mississippi Rising Coalition](#) organized rapid response teams and safety hubs to address increased hostility from white supremacist groups at the voting polls.
Members of the SMA understand that building and protecting a People’s Democracy requires much more than voting. **Southern Echo** launched a #Count Me In educating communities about the Census, voting rights, and redistricting process. **Crescent City Media Group/Center for Civic Action** also provides training that educate communities about the Census, voting rights, and redistricting. **Women Watch Afrika** is providing critical relief and aid to the Black refugee and immigrant communities in Atlanta, while educating their community about the importance of being counted in the US Census and shifting the narrative about their community from “hard to count” to “hard to ignore.” As Women Watch Afrika helps immigrants become new voting citizens, they organize them to spend time at the State Capitol to keep all elected officials accountable, especially to the needs of immigrants and refugees.

**Human Rights Commissions.** Civic engagement can also spread from remote rural areas to beyond the boundaries of the United States. SMA member, **Southern Rural Black Women’s Initiative (SRBWI)** formed eleven local Human Rights Commissions in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, with each including at least ten local Black women, two of them youths. Each of these groups interacts with their communities to determine their needs and organize appropriate political and social actions, they gather the information and find witnesses to testify at hearings held by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

For more than a decade, we have been building connection and collective work to meet this movement moment with the courage and endurance to resist and build toward freedom. Our history and analysis of this political moment affirms that transformation in our society will take all of us. We see you. This report is a collective prayer for you to join us.
SOUTHERN MOVEMENT ASSEMBLY 9 & THE PEOPLE’S FIRST 100 DAY CAMPAIGN

The role of the Southern Movement Assembly is to grow a social movement in the U.S. South with the power to practice a people’s democracy, build new social economies, and protect and defend our communities. We are building the world we know is possible. We draw from the brilliance of grassroots organizers working on every frontline in the 21st century, acknowledging the U.S. South is part of a centuries-old and global struggle for justice. We believe we all have something to contribute, we operate by shared principles of unity, and we created a blueprint for our resistance in 2016.

IN 2021, IT’S TIME TO BUILD.

The ninth Southern Movement Assembly, organized a few days after the most recent national election was guided by our shared vision, the Southern People’s Initiative (SPI). We synthesized the aspirations of hundreds of people who participated in three SPI Peoples Movement Assemblies throughout the summer of 2020 based on those three elements (people’s democracy, new social economy, and protect and defend). At SMA9 in November 2020, we produced a plan for 2021 to advance that vision.

“We the people must save ourselves from the federal government rather than relying on the government to do the right thing.” - Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, National Council of Elders

The very first Southern Movement Assembly in Lowndes County, Alabama in 2012 drew on the history and power of Black Radical Traditions to create our first collective action plan: The People’s First 100 Days. The first 100 days of a U.S. President’s first term are watched closely to understand the tone and priorities of the administration. We believe the people should set the tone, define the issues, and set our own priorities. In the inaugural People’s First 100 Days, we recognized the power of acting together in concert. In 2021, it’s time again to set the tone and name our priorities.
WHAT ARE OUR GOALS IN 2021?

The 2021 SMA Action plan is to protect our people, disrupt capital, and build infrastructure. Our plan activates the power of our people, our place, our voice, and our actions.

WHAT WILL WE DO DURING THE PEOPLE’S FIRST 100 DAYS?

The Peoples First 100 Days is the first step towards achieving those goals. During the People’s First 100 Days, from January 1 - April 10, 2021, Southern communities will Map the Spread of Resistance; Grow our Numbers; and Show our Force.

WE WILL MAP THE SPREAD OF SOUTHERN RESISTANCE: Southern communities are already building and organizing on every frontline. During the People’s First 100 Days, we will map and coordinate Mutual Aid Liberation Centers and sanctuary sites all over the South. We will map and coordinate local policy campaigns that are being organized to divest from harm and invest in community control of resources.

WE WILL GROW OUR NUMBERS: Our power as a movement is in our numbers, our relationships, and our knowledge. Our people are everywhere. We have what we need, and we will expand our base to include all the folks who are living on the frontlines discussed in this report. During the People’s First 100 Days, we will coordinate neighborhood actions, walks, assemblies, and weekly and monthly calls to grow capacity, share skills, and deepen our relationships.

WE WILL SHOW OUR FORCE: A fundamental element of organizing, including investigating the terrain and educating our folks, is to demonstrate our power. We will show our combined force on the last day of the People’s First 100 Days through a coordinated regional action. We will show a South, unified in our demands for a reimagined future, a future we are willing and able to build. Cultural projects developed and led by the people in our communities will show our force through creative actions, storytelling, mediamaking, and communications that demonstrate our collective vision.

HOW WILL WE DO IT?

Four Work Teams will create interlocking plans that lay the foundation to achieve our goals of protecting our people, disrupting capital, and building movement infrastructure that lasts beyond the 100 days and beyond any presidential term.
**Mutual Aid Work Team:** A coordinated network of Mutual Aid Liberation Centers is a vision the SMA initiated in 2016. It’s time to manifest that vision for our safety and protection. Our first step is to map and coordinate sanctuary hubs and Mutual Aid sites and Liberation Centers to connect local efforts to protect, defend, educate, and assemble our people.

**Local Policies Work Team:** To build a new social economy, we must disrupt existing systems of capital and profit and reclaim community control of our own resources. It’s time to connect policy campaigns calling for divestment from policing, harm and extractive industries. We will coordinate people’s investment plans to advance a Green New Deal for the South, participatory budgeting plans, and our shared visions for a new social economy.

**Regional Action Work Team:** To demonstrate our power and vision for community safety, economic well-being, health, education, and participatory democracy, we will practice community organizing in our cities, towns, and neighborhoods. We will create cultural projects that reimagine our world in order to shape it from the ground up. And we will converge to show our regional collective power at the end of the People’s First 100 Days.

**Communications Work Team:** Developing a regional communication strategy is a critical part of the People’s First 100 Days. Our strategy must reach Southern communities with messages that resonate with people and inspire them to become part of the movement. Internally, we must be able to stay connected with each other throughout the campaign and during moments of rapid response to crisis. We will build communication tools and infrastructure needed to mobilize quickly and securely.

*Southern People’s Power will transform our region. There is a role for everyone to play. Like an Appalachian organizer at the first Southern Movement Assembly declared: “We cannot do this alone, and we don’t want to.”*

Join us at [southtosouth.org](http://southtosouth.org)
RESOURCE ADDENDUM: SOUTHERN REPORTS & RECORDINGS

STATE OF THE SOUTH
- Chattanooga’s State of South Report
- Synthesis & Action Plan 2018 - produced by the Governance Council after SMA7
- Small Town CrossRoads, A Report by Southerners On New Ground

VOTING RIGHTS
- History of Voting Rights Struggle for Black Southerners Since 1865
- "What About the 59rs?"
- The Great Poll Closure
- Voter Registration Modernization (Louisiana)
- Cracking, Stovepipes and Gerrymandering: Redistricting in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina

PUBLIC HEALTH
- Creating Safe Spaces: A Community Health Worker-Academic Partnered Approach to Addressing Intimate
- State of Black Men & Boys in New Orleans
- We Dream A World

HOUSING JUSTICE
- Organizing for Housing Justice People’s Movement Assembly (Sept 2020, Highlander) Resources; Zoom Recording; Facebook Recording; Audio Transcript; Breakout Group Notes
- Fair Housing, Climate & Health Report

WORKERS & LABOR
- Southern Essential Workers People’s Movement Assembly (Sept 2020, Highlander) Resources; Zoom Recording; Facebook Recording; Notes; Breakout Group Notes
CLIMATE JUSTICE
- BP10 Report (2020)
- Climate Justice Begins with Indigenous Sovereignty: Carrizo Comecrudo Tribunal on Human Rights (2020)
- Katrina15 Report (2020)

SOLIDARITY ECONOMY
- Solidarity Economy in the South Assembly Report (Sept 2019, Highlander)
- Solidarity Economy in the South Network that folks can join (Highlander)

YOUTH WORK
- BLACK YOUTH POWER RISING

COMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE
- Out of Struggle. Strengthening & Expanding Movement Journalism in the U.S. South, 2017

IMMIGRATION JUSTICE WORK
- Inside Atlanta's Immigrant Cages, Report on the Conditions of the Atlanta City Detention Center, 2018
- A Dream Deferred, Report on the devastating consequences of restricting undocumented student access to higher education in Georgia, 2018
- Imprisoned Justice: Inside Two Georgia Immigrant Detention Centers, Report on Stewart & Irwin Detention Centers, 2017
- How Refugee Children are locked in the school-to-prison pipeline (Women Watch Afrika)

LGBTQIA JUSTICE
- Tell A New Southern Story: LGBTQ Resilience, Resistance, And Leadership
- LGBTQ Policy Spotlight: Mapping LGBTQ Equality in the US South

ARTS & CULTURE
- Freedom Maps: Activating Legacies of Culture, Art, and Activism in the U.S. South
- Creative Placemaking: The Art of Equitable Community Building
- Alternate ROOTS Digital Book

RECORDINGS
- Facing Opposition, Young Activists & Elders Take On Our Political Crisis: A National Council of Elders Virtual Teach In (Project South and the Allied Media Conference)
- SMA People's Democracy PMA
- SMA New Social Economy PMA
- SMA Protect & Defend PMA