



Southerners On New Ground

SONG's Strategy and Next Steps in 2011 AUGUST 2011

We are writing this short, off the cuff piece to our close comrades and sister organizations, as we realize it might be helpful to share a little bit more about what we are doing and why. We humbly offer first that we know so many of you are affected by deepening and worsening conditions, and we want to make no assumptions in what is written here that we are carrying this particular political moment of rawness and risk alone. Rather, we hope to share a little bit more about what we see and why we have the strategies in place we do, and we would love to learn more about what you see and what strategies you are using. We also want to say openly that, like all our work in this new moment, we are figuring it out as we go. We honor and deeply value our relationships with all of you, and learn much from you all the time, and want/need strong continued relationship with all of you. Over the past five years, we see how much we have grown together in politics and comradeship—and are grateful for all we have learned from all of you, and continue to learn. We think the need remains great, and becomes more and more crucial all the time, for Left LGBTQ groups to build our politics and strategies together, to have each others' backs, and to be (not 'the' but 'a') kernel of building movement where we are all looking in the same direction, though we may be taking different paths to get there.

In the past five years, we have been watching our region transform further into a new era. We have watched as the downtown areas and local businesses of our small Southern cities have drifted further into ghost towns: in the hot afternoon sun, old 'Mom and Pop' hardware stores and grocery stores sit empty. Rural sex workers work the railroad tracks where the grass grows long, and they face constant harassment, and occasionally just disappear all together without a trace: no community response to find them, people fallen completely thru cracks. The front stoops and porches of small towns come to resemble those of Atlanta: hot, listless folks with not much to do, barely surviving. All over the country, one in thirteen houses are empty and one in ten people have no job; and in the South we know those rates are higher. Wal-marts and Targets still teem with business: but all the faces of clerks and customers are tired under the yellow lights, and people seem worn thin. The young people who we know on the street corners, our neighborhoods, and at the gas stations tell us the same thing: even McDonalds, Wendy's and Chick-Fil-A have no jobs for them, no one will call them back. When we speak of 'workers rights', they say they are not workers, don't see themselves that way, that they are just living. Some of the youth who are looking everywhere they can for work, babysit at local churches, where they are paid \$2 per kid, per evening. They come home with \$12 paid under the table per day.

During Hurricane Katrina, a new generation of Southerners in the Deep South saw (in a new way) how deeply unprotected they were and are by the infrastructure of the US Government. In the South, we were all permanently changed by that moment in time. We saw the mask removed of unfulfilled promise, where government did not even pretend to help those in the Gulf Coast. We do not believe that 'help' is coming. We do not believe that this recession will soon turn around. We do not believe

that the industrial jobs are coming back. Instead, we have to build and remember other ways of getting by, surviving, and thriving. Currently, our communities are under increased violent attack by policing and prison systems. We watch as large bases of organizations and leaders in the South are drained by deportation. In rural Virginia, for the second time this year, a SONG member began raising one more child of an undocumented comrade who was deported. She is now raising four children total, who have lost parents from deportation systems. At a rural Virginia SONG gathering last week, she runs up to a SONG staff person and pushes a \$20 bill into her hand, saying: “This cash is all I got right now. Now that we have more kids, I can do more childcare for SONG, come meet at our farm, whatever we can do for SONG we will.”

As we do our best to respond, the Right grows greedy in their rush to solidify their iron hold on who they see as the ‘labor’ they hold here. They seek to permanently build a terrorized underclass of poor folks, people of Color, and undocumented people to work these fields and the backrooms of our towns. They are bringing violent legislation to secure this hold in multiple states. For Black folks, and many other communities—we see more of the same. Dead ends, and not catching a break no matter where folks live. LGBTQ Southerners continue to be scape-goated, and abused by power systems and the communities we live in. There is much more to say, and much more nuance here for how many different communities are affected, but this is just a snapshot of a few realities SONG is working with and under....

Out of these conditions, SONG is growing and forges new strategies, because we must. Here are a few of the main things we are doing to fight back for our region and help it evolve into a new future:

- **Picking Bigger, Riskier and More Visible Fights with Power Systems** As in our Georgia campaign, we are fighting openly and using media and visibility more aggressively to spread a message about the interconnections between targeted communities. This also means that in fights around immigration, deportation, and status we are risking more of the organization, and our membership are often risking their personal safety in these fights—part of our hope in protecting ourselves is to be as out and loud about who we are as we can be, so that as we are more targeted by the Southern Right (as we are now in our SONG Georgia campaign, with hate calls and emails, etc.) there is a wider base of support who knows what we are doing, and can support us. This also means asking for targeted support and backing from larger mainstream groups, in order to secure wider amplification for the struggle. If our numbers and voice are small, we are too vulnerable to come this directly at power—but by asking for targeted support and allyship from many groups and our coalitions on the ground in our states, we are able to fight harder and keep our heads above water. Then, if and when the Right decides to make an example out of SONG, which could easily happen, at least our members, allies, and coalitions know what is happening and why. This will change the way we think about our national impact and voice, but will not mean compromising core values and relationships we hold dear. Honestly, we have not figured out exactly all this will mean, or a plan. There is no secret plan, just work in the making. We realize this means stepping up our accountability and transparency, first to our closest national allies and partners. We see that inter-dependence as primary, even as we fight for and with the South. Again, we are heating up the risk factor in the work as a way to fight as hard as we can for our base, but also to garner numbers to building power—the time has come that the South must see how willing and how hard we will fight alongside our communities here. Our strategies must match their conditions, the conditions are raw and filled with risk, and so our strategies must be too.

- **On-going Surveying and Listening Work in Southern States** As we have done for some time, we continue to bring in new voices by conducting listening work to find the real stories of our LGBTQ communities around the South—this heightens in importance as LGBTQ folks living in deep oppression are falling thru the cracks and we will continue to honor our role as a primary voice for tracking and responding to the realities of the most vulnerable and least visible in the South, as well as learn from the resiliency, movement-building strategies and survival of our people. From the raw data that our organizers collect as they work, we forge new work specific to each state and its needs. This can sometimes emerge in previously “unlikely partnerships”.
- **Tracked and Focused Leadership Development and Community Gathering** As these economic and environmental conditions build, we see the need to have our organizing meet the moment of a dying system as that affects our people, and also build new systems and resources. As the conditions worsen, we need to build leaders in all of our states who are ready to fight for the future of the South. These leaders must be developed in 2 arenas:
 - Rightful Place: Helping build grassroots, savvy and scrappy Southern leadership across many communities (think preachers, teens, and grandmas) who bring our communities into the fights for the land, water, and public spaces of each Southern state and who enlist LGBTQ people into every organizing fight that comes to our ground.
 - Survival Projects: Helping build grassroots, multi-skilled, apprenticed leadership across many communities (think farmers, plumbers, firefighters) to build localized structures to help small Southern communities survive—food growing, safety systems, disaster preparation, etc.
- **Building Deeper with Black LGBTQ Churches** Throughout the deepening of the recession, many churches are still places of refuge for communities against the knife in the South. LGBTQ people in the South have always had complicated relationships to the church—at the same time, we see major growth in the Black LGBTQ churches of the South, and a deep interest within these spaces to build justice work. In North Carolina, in particular, we are deepening the base building in these churches as they are gathering together people in our communities who are ready to move, organize together and transform the South.
- **A Deeper Focus on Local and Regional Work** Robert Jensen said that in the times we now face we must build communities more than coalitions, because only communities can survive. Our time and economics call out to us to focus on how to build deeper in our region—there is simply so much of our work that we find must be done in person, must be done in the day to day, and building local economies takes showing up in the flesh with rural communities. As we write this, we are engaged in a Summer Organizing Drive, led by Project South (www.projectsouth.org), that includes 7 other Black and Latino-led revolutionary Southern organizations—where we are co-training each other’s leaders and bases through a summer of base-building and convenings. We are thrilled by the generation of leaders being trained up here this summer, as we see how the need for unity is overcoming horizontal hostility, and oppression. As the only LGBTQ-explicit organization in that group, we have never felt so hopeful about the unity possible between our straight Southern comrades and ourselves: this moment has been a long time coming. To be clear, we do NOT see this regional and local work as a move away from our national and beloved sister organizations and comrades, but rather a new opportunity to think about HOW we connect and relate nationally—we hope it will be to share strategies, help each other think thru moving all our work forward, and figuring out where we can support each others’ work.

**Have questions, need support or technical assistance on this tool?
Contact us at ignite@southernersonnewground.org or 404-549-8628.**