

SONG
SOUTHERNERS
ON NEW GROUND

A CONVENING OF
Out
SOUTH
LGBTQ LEADERSHIP

Report FORWARD

“THE WORK IN FERGUSON, AND AROUND THE COUNTRY, IS IN DIRECT RESPONSE TO THE RESULTS OF SUCCESSFUL RIGHT WING STRATEGY, EVERYBODY GOT THAT?”

–SUZANNE PHARR, SONG

This is the South. The most “churched” region of the US, with the largest number of military bases. A designated testing ground for right wing policy. Home to pickled Deep South plantations, Appalachia, and the largest rural population in the US. Home to the largest number of black lesbian families in the US. Home to increasing numbers of Latino immigrants. Large, deep-rooted Black communities; as well as indigenous people and many other people of color in smaller numbers. Increasing poverty rates. All of these realities deeply impact the lives and deaths of LGBTQ Southerners. If you were to chart basic protections for LGBTQ people nationally, the South appears mostly as a gray zone, a bone yard of basic protections. The ones we do have are few and far between. Statistically, one-third of LGBTQ people in the US live in the South. In 2012, the South received less than 3% of US LGBTQ funding. Of the six transgender people who have been murdered in the first quarter of 2015, three were living in the South.

LGBTQ communities in the South have responded to these (and many more) factors with a vibrant variety of approaches including community building, direct services, organizing, advocacy, and cultural work. Though under-resourced, there is significant multi-racial organization in Southern LGBTQ communities, much of it local, deploying a variety of strategies at the direction of leadership that carries a great deal of vision and skills. When we look at the political landscape of the South, and the work LGBTQ organizations and leaders are advancing in this region, the key question becomes: how do we maximize the infrastructure we have and move it to a new level of impact?

“THERE IS A LONG HISTORY OF GOOD PUBLIC POLICY BEING DISMANTLED. SO MUCH SO THAT THE YOUNGEST GENERATION DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT IT, SOMETIMES PARENTS NOT HAVING A MEMORY OF THAT.”
—STEPH GUILLOUD, PROJECT SOUTH

From December 4-7, 2014, a group of about 90 LGBTQ movement leaders from across the South came together at the Penn Center in South Carolina to deepen our shared political analysis, cross-pollinate the ideas and strategies that are currently shaping our work, and to build relationships and connections. The Out South Leadership Convening was anchored by Southerners On New Ground (SONG) with the intention of creating and holding a space where Southern LGBTQ movement leaders could become more coordinated in our work overall, as well as get into the nuts and bolts of what people are currently working on. While the intention was not to launch a new singular regional project, we did our best to structure the gathering in a way that would encourage mutual support, strategizing, and new collaborations. This report synthesizes the results of the convening and SONG's reflections on next steps in Southern LGBTQ movement building. It does not capture every conversation or idea, nor does it illustrate the anatomy of the overall work of any one group, rather it reflects overall patterns and themes.

SONG'S ROLE

SONG leaders began the gathering by articulating what we saw as SONG's role in bringing Southern LGBTQ groups together. SONG is not neutral about our agenda. We are unapologetically committed to intersectional organizing; we are uncompromisingly pro-black, pro-LGBTQ, pro-poor people, pro-feminist, and pro-immigrant; we are standing on the shoulders of centuries of liberation movements in the South. Our priority is to advance progressive movements for liberation, and our role in that is organizing and movement-building with LGBTQ people in the South. We convened respected Southern LGBTQ leaders and groups from that position, and we have a vested interest in seeing ourselves and other groups and leaders gain access to more information about what is happening in the South, who is leading here, and what we are moving forward to secure safety and equity for LGBTQ Southerners.

We understand Southern LGBTQ justice work as multifaceted; it involves organizing strategies, yes, but also cultural work, advocacy, and direct service provision. We are witnessing a moment when much is at stake. The LGBTQ sector in the South is called to strengthen our ability to decipher new information and data, incorporate lessons from the work we have done, innovate new strategies, visions, and problem solving for our work, and to move forward boldly and with care. We are willing to articulate that occurrences of infighting, bitterness, and cynicism make our movements weaker and do not make us safer or further concrete wins for our movement.

Given these struggles and in order to advance further wins in social, economic, and political arenas for LGBTQ Southerners, it is vital that we achieve more unity of vision and more information about the success and failures of our work. Shared strategy is not always necessary, but more would occur if we were less isolated and more cross-informed.

“HOW DO WE CONTINUOUSLY BUILD OUT A LONG-TERM STRATEGY THAT ENGAGES MORE PEOPLE WHO WANT TO BE CLOSE TO THE FIRE, WHO WANT TO ENGAGE IN GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING, TO CONTINUE TO LIFT UP AND DEVELOP QUEER PEOPLE OF COLOR LEADERSHIP IN THIS MOMENT?”

—MARY HOOKS, SONG

CONDITIONS OF THE LGBTQ SOUTH

Groups and leaders named 13 overarching themes in a discussion of the terrain of the South as it relates to LGBTQ movement building in this time:

1. The prevalence of state, systemic, cultural and inter-personal violence and social unrest in response to that violence
2. The resurgence of right wing policy attacks and the convergence of church, state and the private sector in carrying out these policies
3. The co-optation of black women leadership and youth leadership (and women of color leadership generally) by white-led progressive organizations; and the need to support people of color-led and multiracial organizations that elevate these leaders responsibly
4. A deepening understanding of the political logic, mechanics, and results of 21st century anti-black racism and of a new developing era of southern 21st century Black Liberation movement
5. An historical moment of issue selection crossroads for the mainstream LGBTQ movement post marriage equality
6. Divisions within the LGBTQ movement and competition between groups as a result of scarcity. Limited funding, small groups in non-urban areas being isolated from other groups, and co-optation by insincere larger national formations has created a dire need for a more united, fortified, and resourced regional infrastructure
7. Widespread cynicism and distrust of southern electoral processes and of national organizations that have resourced democratic electoral strategies in the last ten years with limited results and multiple state-wide defeats
8. Data from the Williams Institute and Funders for LGBTQ Issues that rates the South as the most challenging and difficult social and political climate for LGBTQ people of any where in the US
9. Joint interest for all our southern LGBTQ work to prioritize justice/equity over inclusion/equality; this is particularly important in the South. Inclusion in the South has meant primarily 'getting a piece of the pie' in deeply broken electoral systems, service systems, etc. We need transformation and overall of electoral work, civic engagement, services, and organizing

CONDITIONS OF THE LGBTQ SOUTH

Specific conditions:

10. Campaign organizing frameworks working to shift both policy and change culture, to lift up LGBTQ people's stories, and to generate wins that are meaningful to people are the most successful. Policy campaigns without appropriate leadership development, leadership support, base building and culture change organizing can result in tokenizing leaders, as well as leaving them publicly vulnerable to right wing attack in the communities they live in
11. Some of our leaders are working on statewide policy, but most of us are focusing on municipal/county/city wins
12. The Deep South and rural areas still need more support in campaign development, strategy building, and experimentation that is responsible in its approach and collaborations
13. Southern leaders want (and many are actively seeking) deeper political education around global movement building and internationalist demands and strategies

“THE POLITICAL MOMENT IN THE SOUTH RIGHT NOW IS VERY EXCITING. IT’S A TIME WHEN WE ARE MOVING ON MULTIPLE FRONTS. WE’VE SEEN BIG WINS IN IMMIGRATION. PEOPLE ARE READY TO PUSH, READY TO TAKE RISKS, READY TO PUT BODIES ON THE LINE IN A CAPACITY THAT WE’VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE, AT A SCALE THAT WE’VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE. WE ARE VERY HOPEFUL THAT THIS MOMENT WILL BE ONE THAT WE LOOK BACK ON A SAY ‘WOW, WE MOVED SOME THINGS AND CHANGED THE LIVES OF OUR PEOPLE FOREVER’.”

—SERENA SEBRING, SONG

THE POSITION OF THE SECTOR IN THE SOUTH

Strengths & Weaknesses

The groups at Out South also named a set of core strengths and resources that we are positioned with in this time. In the South, we have done a lot with a little (in terms of resources) for a long time, and we have employed the best of a working class ethic to hustle to do the work that must be done. Some of our biggest assets are our strong relationships that have survived conflicts and weathered time. The region itself has a strong movement history, including the often ignored history of southern black feminism, and has survived (even sometimes as an informal infrastructure) decades of attacks; LGBTQ people have been part of all of that movement history. Current leaders in the region bring a distinct set of leadership assets to the work. Those present were primarily: from the south or long-term residents; trained out of a wide set of progressive/community-based organizations in the South (not only LGBTQ); from a wide variety of race and class backgrounds; with a wide variety of skills; and a deeply inter-generational approach.

Southern LGBTQ organizations are well positioned to meet this current moment because we have active and bold leadership that is willing to take risks and innovate with hybrid strategies. Many of us share a willingness to share resources to increase and direct our capacity towards similar organizing projects and targets, because we are unwilling to watch the most marginalized in our communities be left behind. We see how the differences in the scope, scale, geography, and configurations of our work can become a harnessed set of strengths. Over the past five years our organizations have experimented with and strengthened our strategies from what we have learned in practice. More of our organizations are engaging in direct action organizing, are launching campaigns, are willing to push our allies to be our champions in new ways, and are making new creative interventions to achieve strategic goals as part of a longer-term plan.

On the other hand, we have concrete gaps and challenges. While our groups are increasingly visible (whether that is organizing, direct services, or cultural work), this does not always lead to wins that have widespread impact and often leaves us vulnerable to backlash. When we are winning we do not always claim those wins or clearly explaining their significance. As a sector, we are too broadly focused and we could win more if more of our groups focused in on the same demands.

THE APPROACH NEEDED

The groups present expressed interest in LGBTQ movement building strategies that:

- Employ a holistic approach to addressing the needs of Southern LGBTQ communities including direct services, direct action organizing, cultural work, and strategic communications. This approach should enable leadership power-sharing and authentic mutual support
- Bring the legacy and history of southern LGBTQ movement building to the forefront including an inter-generational approach, work inside and outside of non-profit structures, and the use of cultural organizing methods
- Build our collective work to a ‘sonic boom’ level (radiating out impact) by engaging and strengthening principled, innovative collaboration
- Reflect an understanding that in a cultural climate as conservative as the South we must be willing to be hated and attacked for the work we are doing in order to make progress
- Engage best thinking about how to protect our leaders and organizations from these attacks, win needed campaigns, and plan for long-term attacks and needs
- Prioritize the building of lasting political power, not just short term ‘quantitative’ outcomes

“NO ONE DOES INTERSECTIONALITY PERFECTLY, BUT THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ANALYZING INTERSECTIONALLY AND ORGANIZING INTERSECTIONALLY. THERE IS NO FORMULA, IT IS ALCHEMY, BUT WHEN WE ORGANIZE THIS WAY, WE DO BRING THE CORE ELEMENTS OF THESE VALUES TO OUR WORK.”

–PAULINA HELM-HERNANDEZ, SONG

BREAK OUT SESSIONS

Out South groups met in a variety of particular theme-based sessions and smaller tool sharing and break out sessions. They included:

- Southern Landscape and Opportunities
- Violence and Criminalization
- Youth and Education
- History of the Right wing and Mapping the Political Moment
- Bodies, Health, and Wellness
- Civic Engagement
- Ordinances

OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Generated from information gathered during the break out sessions:

Violence and Criminalization of LGBTQ communities (particular LGBTQ communities of color)

- Anti-criminalization and anti-violence work has always been necessary in southern LGBTQ work, but there are more groups focused on this than 5 years ago.
- There are timely possibilities for groups to learn from each other, share strategies and replicate strategies.
- We need frames and messaging that move beyond the narrative of 'good' LGBTQ people and 'bad' LGBTQ people, 'good' immigrants vs. 'bad' immigrants, etc. in order to achieve culture change.

OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS (CONT'D)

Youth and Education

- More safety and resources are needed for Southern LGBTQ youth. People are using a variety of strategies and methods to reach and support youth, including: relationship building, communications, collaborative projects, community building, and mentorship. These needs must be met for youth more evenly across the South (not only in a few big cities).
- Leaders are working in a variety of areas under the broad heading of “education.” These include working inside educational institutions (public and private) to summer camp programs to after school programs.
- Due to the often conservative and hostile social climate of the South, we must prioritize services, training, and resiliency work for our young leaders. They are particularly vulnerable to the isolation, hate speech, and backlash that LGBTQ organizers and leaders experience in the South. They need support if we expect them to lead without being tokenized in movement building work.

Bodies, Health and Wellness

- Across the issues associated with LGBTQ wellness and health, there is a sharp need to train health providers and hold them accountable to that training. This is very scarce in the South.
- We need a better slate of policy recommendations that are specific to Southern LGBTQ communities—across reproductive justice and LGBTQ sectors.
- Many Black LGBTQ women have been leading this work in our communities for a long time. We need to understand their histories and strategies and we need to resource them.
- ‘Drama’, internalized oppression, and inter-personal oppression are real and they are badly impacting our work. We need to stop taking pain and isolation out on each other. We must work on ourselves and our organizing in line with what we aspire to achieve.

“WE’RE IN THE BIBLE BELT. IT’S TIME TO TAKE OFF THAT BELT AND KICK SOME ASS!”

—VALENCIA ROBINSON

RESOURCING RECOMMENDATIONS

Groups and leaders named the urgency for the following, explicitly from funders and donors:

- For funders to name more explicitly that a new commitment to funding the South is about funding LGBTQ racial and economic justice—as that is what is needed in the South
- For funders to learn from the ‘helping’ funding that some LGBTQ funders have done globally and apply lessons (where applicable) of what worked and what did not as they invest in the South. Southern leaders understand that while global conditions are not the same as those in the US South, the low level of resources, infrastructure, etc that we experience sometimes have more in common with other parts of the world than they do with New York City or other urban centers
- Resources to have smaller, state-wide gatherings like Out South with strong coordination from groups like SONG
- Resources to continue to build out Southern, LGBTQ-led Black Lives Matter (BLM) work
- More feminist and people of color-led non-violent direct action training
- Resources for groups that do direct service work, legal work and organizing; because we know that often those most injured by right wing assaults, who experience the highest levels of poverty and daily violence, need service provision in order to be part of organizing
- Cross-training of leadership to develop a larger set of rigorous, principled, visible, and experienced LGBTQ leaders

SYNTHESIZED RECOMMENDATIONS

Those present agreed that there are many life and death crises that we need immediate relief from right now. Much of that relief could be obtained by waging and winning local campaigns, with the long-term benefit of bringing new leaders (who are willing to take risks) to the table through that work. It can be fortified by a more even distribution of direct services and cultural organizing across the region. We have a high (and uneven) concentration of Southern LGBTQ leadership and work in Atlanta and a few other cities. We need more groups focusing in on targets, and we need training for our leadership to do interventions on state sanctioned and inter-personal violence.

SYNTHESIZED RECOMMENDATIONS (CONT'D)

Key issues that arose repeatedly included: poverty, conversion therapy, lack of autonomous peoples' governance bodies, the possibility of cutting police department budgets, getting police out of schools, closing jails, immigration policy enforcement, violence against trans women of color, school bullying, profiling, and lack of basic local anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQ people. The leaders and organizations at Out South articulated the need to garner the power of new LGBTQ resources pouring into the region to accomplish these kinds of concrete goals, in the hands of leaders who are from the South and staying in the South. We want to use local energy to secure national impact.

All statistics from Funders for LGBTQ Issues or The Williams Institute

ORGANIZATIONS PRESENT

LaGender

SNaP Co.

Cicada Collective

Women's Health & Justice Initiative

Gay Community Center of Richmond

Arkansas Trans Equality

GetEQUAL

AFL-CIO

Project South

STAY Project

Peter Paul Development Center

Country Queers

The Office of Common Ground
at the University of Richmond

Youth Empowerment Program

Progressive Community Collaborative

BreakOUT!

Gender Benders

Gay Straight Alliance Network

Lambda Legal

Racial Justice Action Center

The Brown Boi Project

HRC

Revolutions Per Minute

Black Out Society of the South (BOSS)

Political Research Associates

QORDS

Girls Rock Charleston

Congress of Day Laborers

Virginia Anti-Violence Project

ALLGO

Southeast Immigrant Rights Network

Equality North Carolina

JASMYN

Concerned Citizens for Justice

Mississippi Safe Schools Coalition

Girls Rock Jacksonville

Campaign for Southern Equality

New Orleans Parents Guide

Virginia State University

Women With a Vision

El Cambio

Mississippi In Action

Soulforce

Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice

Interactive Resource Center

W. Haywood Burns Institute/Community Justice
Network for Youth

The Freedom Center for Social Justice

Organizations not in attendance that
intended to be present:

The Fairness Campaign

ChangeLab

The Counter Narrative Project

Wayside Center for Popular Education

Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights

Highlander Research and Education Center



SONG
SOUTHERNERS
ON NEW GROUND