

Interview with Tectonica / The Organizing Center

1. Your work, briefly.

I'm Ned Howey, CEO and cofounder of Tectonica. For over fourteen years we've worked on the strategy, creative, and technical infrastructure behind political organizing, across more than 600 campaigns in over 40 countries. What drew me in is also what keeps me critical of my own field: I believe the fight for a more just world is won or lost on whether ordinary people can build real power together, and I've watched the political industry's tools drift steadily toward the transactional and away from exactly that.

Here is the thing worth saying plainly at the start. As innovation has arrived for unions and progressive organizations, almost all of it has been built on the back of marketing. Those approaches treat people as consumers, and so they bend everything toward message reach, recruitment, and list growth. These are transactional tactics. Innovation in collective action and organizing, the actual base of union power, has barely happened. That is the gap I care about, and it is the reason I think we need new civic operators equipped with genuinely new tools.

2. What hostile actors do well.

I want to challenge the premise of this question before I answer it. Many assume we simply need to copy the tactics of hostile actors and do them better, and I fear this question could feed that assumption. It assumes we are equal players on an equal field. We are not, and we should not be. The whole work of collective action is to rebalance power injustices that exist unfairly in the world. We are not playing the same game as the far right, hostile employers, and hostile governments, nor should we want to. What they "do well" is advance pre-existing power that was taken unjustly, faster and across more platforms. Our reaction cannot be to copy their game. It has to be a different one.

Our power comes from one place: people standing together, and the coordination that only exists because they stand together. That is the only route to a power equal to or stronger than the power they already hold. The organizing equation (<https://www.tectonica.co/posts/equation>) we developed at Tectonica lays this out: collective strength compounds through relationships and coordinated action, it does not simply sum up individual actions the way mobilizing does. And here is where we have done real damage to ourselves. As we have innovated, we have poured effort into

growing lists and sharpening reach while eroding the very relationships that produce solidarity and the power to stand together. We have been optimizing the wrong variable. And as we adopt new technologies, we cannot use the same tools and expect results that reflect our values and needs as progressive unions, campaigns, and organizations.

This is not to say those things do not matter. Sign-ups, communications, all of it needs to keep up with the times. But to take a risk and make a personal sacrifice to stand together, a person needs to see that their sacrifice will likely produce a better outcome for the group. That is a question of relevance, not slickness, and it depends on the union actually being able to represent people and materially improve their conditions, so that collective action, which always involves individual risk, is worth it.

In the past, standing together looked like people linking arms before a factory. Today it looks different: confronting network monopolies, controlled supply chains, and a globalized field where the already-powerful can undercut worker power quickly and use it to widen inequality further. Harder, yes. Obsolete, no. Our work is to double down, even when it is more complex, on new ways to build relationships, take action together, and stand together. Hostile actors adopted these technologies so fast because the technologies were built in their image, on the logic of markets and existing power. The lesson to take from them is not their playbook. It is that we have to build technology for our own unique needs, and almost no one is building it.

3. The opportunity for unions.

The biggest opportunity going unused is the one that looks like the past. Unions were built on distributed organizing long before anyone called it that: workers bringing their own connections, voice, and local knowledge to a shared fight, not lists called on to mobilize. Technology could rebuild that capacity, and almost no one is building for it.

The reason organizations cannot do this today is a real tension, not a failure of will. Staff want alignment, strategic unity, quality, and control of risk. Leaders and constituents want autonomy, creativity, and meaningful participation. In a small operation an organizer manages that tension through relationships and presence. At scale the organizer cannot be everywhere, and organizations get forced into a bad choice: hand supporters the reins without strategic support and watch it turn to chaos, or hold tight central control and watch participation go shallow and scripted. Both are failures.

This is the specific problem worth solving with technology, and it is where our own work at Tectonica sits. The platform we are building, currently in MVP and beta pilot testing, holds the strategy, the messaging boundaries, the guardrails, and the collective alignment at the center, while letting constituents create and lead within them, bringing their own relationships and voice to the table and staying continuously connected to the collective agreement and overall strategy. The mechanism is designed friction (https://www.tectonica.co/posts/rethinking_ai_revolution_for_movements): tools that slow people down at the right moments, asking who this is for and what you want them to do, not to make the work harder but to keep it strategically aligned while it scales. This is the opposite of automation logic. It elevates the organizer rather than replacing them.

This is what actual organizing technology looks like: not tools that message people faster, but tools that empower people to do organizing itself. And this is where hope returns, because hope is part of what makes coordinated action compound in the organizing equation rather than simply add up. People sustain the risk of standing together when they can see a credible path to change. Give members the capacity to do real organizing, to power-map, to reach people, to make the things they need to bring others in, and you rebuild that credible path. Shift the relevance of unions by improving what organizing and collective action actually deliver, and engagement follows. People come to see the union as something they are part of, with a voice inside it, rather than a number to be called on.

4. Where it's easy, where it's hard.

Is it acceptable to answer "no" to where we get good results quickly? Because that is the honest answer, and it is worth understanding why.

The trap is structural. Because organizations cannot innovate organizing, only mobilizing, they lean harder and harder on transactional tactics, which means they lean harder and harder on staff. The staff become the primary source of the power that used to come from workers, so staff are overwhelmed. And when that overwhelm meets internal systems of control and accountability, the result is not motion, it is paralysis. Underneath that sits the harder problem: the people who hold power inside a union often want to keep it, and innovating means ceding some control and taking a risk. Those who do not personally feel that risk are frequently the least willing to take it, even when it is exactly the risk the organization needs to take.

So the hard part is that trying something new involves risk, and it is always easier to lean on the metrics that feel like progress without amounting to

change. But the easy part is what sits on the other side of that adoption curve: real people power. We are already seeing examples of success in politics and organizing, and with the new technology now being built for this work, that power becomes exponential in momentum, scale, and impact.

6. Being better partners.

Being a better partner is not mainly about briefs, staff skills, or involving the right people, though all of that matters and sits downstream. For the rebalancing of power that unions exist to do to actually work, they must practice what they preach.

People are held together in collective action by a shared higher purpose: justice and fairness. If the leadership of a union mirrors the power structures of the unjust, unwilling to hold allegiance to that greater good over their own comfort, ego and position, unwilling to take on risk and sacrifice themselves, including the risk and investment of innovating, then transformational leadership cannot drive the function of collective action. The equation that governs the individual worker governs the leadership too, one level up. We ask the worker to take a personal risk for a collective outcome. We have to ask the same of the people who lead. A partner who will do that is a partner with whom technology can actually land and last. A partner who will not has already decided the outcome, and no tool will change it.

7. Preparing for the future.

Unions are furthest behind on the thing they are least set up to see: a genuinely new kind of threat. We are entering an age of network monopolies, controlled supply chains, and a new knowledge monopoly built through AI, where the terrain of power is being redrawn. Worker organization came out of the Industrial Revolution, out of the need to innovate methods of resistance against structures that entrapped people in unjust power differentials. Liberation was found through innovation then. It has to be again now.

So genuine readiness is not a training calendar or a hiring plan, though those help. It is a decision to invest in organizing capacity and the leadership development that builds it, rather than only buying the next mobilizing tool. It means finding and backing new civic operators who can do this work with new tools, and accepting that the slower, more complex path of rebuilding relationships and coordinated action is the one that actually builds power. The organizations too slow to get ahead of these threats will find themselves

obsolete to the very people who would have been their strongest resisters. Being ready means refusing that fate on purpose.

9. Anything else.

One thing I would want unions to hear. The reason organizing has barely innovated while marketing has raced ahead is not that organizing is impossible to build for. It is that almost no one has tried, because the incentives, the funding, and the tooling all point the other way. That is a gap in the whole progressive tech ecosystem, not a failure of any one union. We need new civic operators, and we need to build the tools and the ecosystem that let them do organizing work at scale. We are building the type of infrastructure and technology needed for exactly that, and our hope is that it will be part of how we win. That is the work I care most about, and it is work we can only do together.