

Making California Work for Working People



Lessons from PowerSwitch Action's California Program

PowerSwitch Action organizes for multiracial feminist democracy in metropolitan regions and states. After 15 years of building a national network led by some of the country's most influential local organizing groups, we launched an experimental collaboration among our seven California affiliates. Our California Program set out to dramatically grow the governing power of working people to lead high-impact innovations for the economic, equity, and climate challenges of California, the world's fifth largest economy.

PowerSwitch Action's affiliates have played a key role in the arc of organizing in California since the 1990s. Through their successes with labor-community coalition-building, community benefits agreements, minimum and living wage campaigns, and more, our affiliates have grown their presence and influence both locally and statewide.

Despite these achievements and California's national image as a social justice stronghold, the interests of large corporations continue to have a tight grip on state and local governments. In the face of overwhelming community support for affordable housing, clean air in our neighborhoods, and the freedom to organize, corporate interest groups use their influence and money to block advances on these key issues.

In this landscape, PowerSwitch Action's California Program began testing and honing strategies to address three questions:

1. How can we **target our near-term strategies to achieve transformation**, beyond incremental improvements, that results in expanded community power and well-being?
2. How do we **amplify and network local victories to embolden organizing** in other regions and **shift the political dynamics of the state** beyond what one group can do alone?
3. How can we weave the interests of workers, immigrants, renters, environmental justice communities, and Black, indigenous, and people of color in a **deeply intersectional way that can challenge unchecked corporate power**?

We engaged an external evaluation team who, through three years of intensive research, reflected back to us these key lessons from the early years of this experiment.



The California Program: What We Built

In 2018, we began testing innovative models for organizing that would create lasting infrastructure for worker power across California and beyond.

We support local affiliates through mutually reinforcing campaigns intertwined with national strategies. Much of our work has been focused on strategic and intentional network development:

- We provide a trusted political home for affiliates to share organizing strategies and tools to sharpen and align analyses for collective organizing.
- We bring capacity, technical assistance, and centralized essential functions for shared campaigns like research, fundraising, and messaging — boosting affiliate leadership in their regional work while we jointly build infrastructure for statewide powerbuilding.
- We watch for and create opportunities to align with other movement groups and develop networked campaigns. At different statewide tables, program staff are the bridge to allies and link issues about immigrant rights, worker justice, housing, and climate to the different interests of the affiliates. Staff's statewide presence also allows affiliates to come prepared to these statewide tables at strategic moments without losing sight of their local fights.

OUR IMPACT

California Coalition for Worker Power

We co-lead the California Coalition for Worker Power (CCWP), an unprecedented alliance of worker centers, worker advocates, policy experts, and labor unions who are scaling worker organizing and driving at the root causes of insecure work.

We co-founded CCWP in 2020 through a merger of existing coalitions, as the pandemic spotlighted the absence of a space for this movement to come together across industry, geography, and organizational form to create and act on a shared analysis of the ever-changing landscape for workers.

CCWP's strategic early policy wins include stronger wage theft enforcement, COVID safety and health protections for workers, and \$75 million to educate and protect workers speaking out for their rights. Most importantly, we are laying the foundation to reach a categorically different level of power through a multiracial feminist approach. With PowerSwitch Action's leadership, CCWP invests deeply in:

- Relationships that facilitate honest self-assessment, inquiry, and learning.
- Equitable and transparent systems for finance, strategy development, and decision-making that allow coalition members with diverse power and interests to achieve trust and alignment.
- A structure that values the typically invisible labor of running a coalition.

This multiracial feminist approach creates the container and capacity for CCWP to craft a long term agenda and take new approaches to fights that will transform the playing field for workers. These fights have never been prioritized without this cross-cutting collaboration formed around a commitment to change what is politically possible.

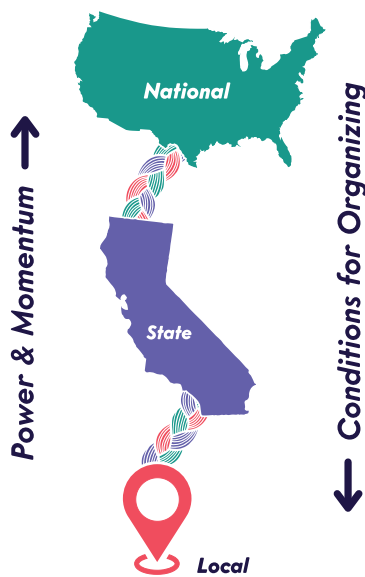
How We Built It

We developed three key approaches for building statewide power:



Working from a long term agenda

In order for immediate policy demands to create lasting change across geographies and beyond the limits of current politics, we must advance them in connection with a strategic long term agenda. We have adopted this approach as a network, and we brought it to coalition spaces for organizing, campaigning, and collaboration beyond short-term tactical relationships towards a long-term vision for our state.



Braided strategies

We developed what we call braided strategies, which emerged from our recognition of the need for stronger connections between local organizing and statewide movement-building to maximize the powerbuilding impact of both. Under braided strategies, momentum from aligned local victories opens the path for national and statewide campaigns:

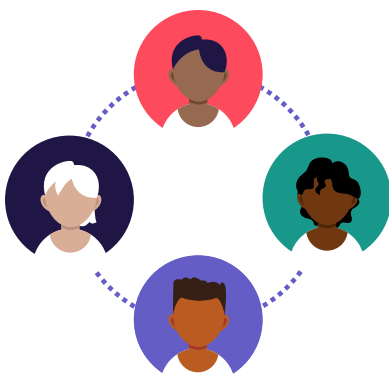
- Statewide and national campaigns develop local members' leadership.
- Victories yield new local organizing opportunities and strengthen the infrastructure for campaigns across the state.
- Local, state, and national strategies reinforce each other, with shared narratives and long-term agendas enabling alignment of local strategies across vastly different political and economic dynamics.

Multiracial feminist leadership

To weave diverse bases into the next-level alliances that counterweight corporate power, we center multiracial feminist leadership.

Starting with our base: we recognize workers as whole people who are also caregivers, renters, and immigrants — and bring capacities for leadership through all these identities and in their communities. This approach allows us to bring together diverse constituencies and build power across different issue areas, such as housing, climate justice, and immigrant rights.

These intersectional spaces and work require a model of leadership different from a hierarchical, individualistic approach – one that values different gifts, forges the infrastructure to allow others to step up, and supports learning and experimentation. It is central to our organizing and our vision of a truly inclusive democracy.



OUR IMPACT

Safety Net for All

Our California staff and affiliates co-founded Safety Net for All with allies at the start of the pandemic to demand relief for undocumented workers excluded from unemployment benefits and federal stimulus.

Excluded workers won the 2020 Disaster Relief Assistance for Immigrants and \$779 million for undocumented families in the 2021 Golden State Stimulus.

We led the coalition's establishment of a vision beyond near-term relief to long-term structural change: a permanent system of inclusive unemployment benefits.

We also ensured that the coalition's relationships and systems grew to support its campaigning by facilitating the co-creation of resource-sharing principles, fundraising, strategic plans, a leadership structure with directly-affected workers at the helm, and capacity to navigate the racial and class diversity within the coalition.

With this infrastructure to support the coalition beyond crisis response, PowerSwitch staff stepped down from a coordinating role in 2022 and allies expanded their leadership.

What's Next

In crises ranging from the pandemic to police violence, movements for justice are pushing for and winning demands that were not politically viable a few years or months before, even while our opponents are seizing the same conditions to undermine democracy and fan economic and racial anxieties in a heightened contestation around what kind of country we will be. To contest for the power that will build lasting, transformative change and community well-being, we will:

- **Campaign to transform the goods movement industry.** As one of the fastest growing industries in the state, it boasts some of the lowest paid, most dangerous, and least stable jobs and worst climate impacts. Our network and partners have local, state, and national momentum:
 - o Workers and communities are organizing.
 - o State policy wins are strengthening worker rights and environmental standards;
 - o We co-founded and co-lead Athena, the national coalition that's challenge Amazon on dangerous working conditions and harmful climate and community health impacts.

We will campaign for environmental and community benefits in goods movement infrastructure; support worker organizing efforts within and outside of distribution centers; push for the enforcement of health, safety, and environmental regulations; and develop policies to increase oversight and standards in other impacted sectors.

- **Develop housing campaigns** that bring together the strengths of our affiliates across regions to build new power for tenants' security, agency, and ownership in their homes.
- **Continue to create the statewide economic justice organizing infrastructure** needed to move towards transformational solutions through our leadership of CCWP. In the coming year, we and our partners will launch a new, long-term statewide campaign to address systemic barriers to worker organizing and basic labor laws. CCWP will also pilot programs to develop the workforce of organizers needed for the coming decades.

Building on these lessons from our initial experiments, we enter our next chapter with growing determination to meet the moment with strategies that unite diverse bases of working people and advance bold, long-term visions of change across local, state, and national levels.