

# University of the Poor Concept Paper

*Updated April 2020*

## How we got here

The University of the Poor emerged from the collective experience of a broad network of organizations and efforts. It comes from our reflection on many past successes and failures in developing cadre committed to the unity and leadership of the poor. Our lineage includes work with homeless unions, welfare rights organizations, trade unions and various other grassroots and poor people's organizations.

This work has shown us the need to understand and respond to changes in the political and economic landscape, develop leaders with clarity and vision, as well as the commitment to unite the poor and dispossessed who have been historically divided to our detriment.

We have observed that without deeper education, people who are organized only on the basis of narrowly understood and short-term interests tend to leave the movement instead of becoming committed leaders. They leave once their immediate needs are met, or once they face failure in a campaign, or backlash, or other kinds of defeat. We've also seen that for every person you can help find housing, ten more become homeless. An approach that says you can solve homelessness, environmental injustice, racial oppression, war, or any other struggle one person or policy change at a time is not sustainable.

Although we have experienced victories, many of these were Pyrrhic or short-lived victories because we lacked the power to implement the changes we won, or because the campaign used up leaders instead of building them up, leaving them exhausted or demoralized. We find that it is not enough to be in motion without a clear direction, and setting that direction will require the best of our mental energies and serious study.

We see signs of hope across the country and the world in leaders of the poor — fighting for access to water or for welfare rights, or around other life-and-death issues — who are asking broader questions about why so many people are struggling to meet their basic needs.

We are seeking to learn from our collective personal and organizational histories, as well as from world history, which tells us that if we're serious about actually ending these unjust and immoral conditions, "fighting the good fight" is not nearly enough.

## **What we're up against**

The problem we face is poverty in the midst of plenty. Today some claim we are seeing an economic recovery, but this recovery hasn't reached many people who are still unemployed, homeless, working at low-wage or temporary or part-time jobs — or are otherwise struggling. Martin Luther King, Jr. said "an edifice, which produces beggars needs restructuring." This edifice, which is a poverty-producing system, also produces extreme wealth.

This inequality is not an anomaly, but an essential part of the edifice, which is the present capitalist economic or production system. It is a system that compels the majority who are without property in the economic enterprises of the system — the

dispossessed — to seek work and wages to be exploited and oppressed for the maximum profits of a tiny propertied class of capitalists. If poverty is the problem, then Global Capital is the enemy. Capital has an antagonistic relationship with the dispossessed and poor all over the world and affects people on many fronts—healthcare, jobs, housing, food insecurity, militarism, environmental crisis, racial, gender, and religious oppression, and more. The poor are the social embodiment of all of these social ills, bearing the brunt of all of them. The poor today is not the poor of yesterday. It is not the ancient slave, the feudal peasant, nor the industrial pauper of capitalism. Poverty today is no longer transient with the poor held in reserve for future expanding employment in production and circulation. It is now persistent and permanent.

The University of the Poor's curriculum studies program, research and analyses projects, and other types of leadership work will be directed at examining the currently unfolding conditions that are giving rise to and shaping these economics and politics. We will be examining what is arguably the most pivotal factor today: the most rapid, profound and comprehensive technological revolution in human history. It is at once changing qualitatively world production, trade, finance, government, and communication.

This new era of labor-replacing technology — cheaper and more powerful micro-electronics and computers, along with increasingly sophisticated machine learning and artificial intelligence — is causing fundamental shifts in the world capitalist economy. It is daily driving more of the middle income strata into the ranks of the poor while rendering disposable an increasing number of the most impoverished sections of the dispossessed.

Deeply tied to this technological revolution is the globalization of capital, which means the globalization of the poor and dispossessed as a class. The task we face today has an immediately global character to it, different from previous periods. The study of the globalization of economic and social relationships is an important aspect

of the University of the Poor's research.

Our opponents have think tanks, training centers, journals, universities and foundations to understand this transition, develop their ideology, advance the political organization of their class, and replicate their intellectual leaders. We need these kinds of organizations also. In order to successfully fight the ideological and political battle necessary to end poverty, we need to develop the unity of the poor and dispossessed in both thought and action, globally and domestically. This is the cornerstone of proletarian internationalism today.

## **The unity of the poor**

*“You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery.”*

*- “I've been to the mountaintop ” Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., April 3rd, 1968*

As stated in the University of the Poor's founding concept paper, the “mission of the University of the Poor is to systematically identify and develop leaders committed to the unity of the poor and dispossessed across color lines and other lines of division so as to build a broad-based and powerful movement to end poverty.”

We draw on the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King, whose active recognition during the last years of his life of the necessity of uniting the poor as “a new and unsettling force” was very prescient, anticipating the present global economic and political

situation:

*“The dispossessed of this nation — the poor, both white and Negro — live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life...”*

Getting the poor and dispossessed to “take action together” as the poor and dispossessed can today serve as a rallying point for attracting the greater mass of the people who are now being increasingly economically and politically assaulted. Because this united action poses the greatest political threat to the Powers That Be, it is no easy task. This is especially so in the US South because this region of the United States historically has always been used as the bastion of reaction against the unity of the poor and dispossessed. Therefore the first and indispensable step in the uniting the most exploited, excluded, and oppressed is the identification, education, and uniting of its newly emerging leaders, teachers, and organizers. Facilitating this first and indispensable step is the precisely the task of the University of the Poor.

The University of the Poor seeks to put key groups and leaders in relationship to one another to facilitate deep and rigorous study and research, develop materials for learning and teaching and serve as a central depository for resources and analysis.

We aim to produce curriculum in order to develop a cadre of leaders with a common analytical framework, who see themselves as leaders not just of particular struggles, communities, or sectors but also of our class as a whole. And we aim to apply those

analytical tools to research and in-depth study of the problems we face. This work cannot be disconnected from the everyday struggle and organizing of the poor, but instead must support and be fueled by that work.

## **Areas of study**

Alongside our other organizing, the University of the Poor develops our educational work through five main areas of study: economy, philosophy, history and political strategy, the organizing method of “the poor organizing the poor,” and the mental terrain (ideology). These areas have developed a focus on key texts such as Karl Marx’s Capital Volume I, History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), W.E.B. du Bois’ Black Reconstruction in America, and the Bible.

Capital Volume I provides a methodology and framework for understanding the economic system that is producing poverty, the laws of development of that system, and the class struggle waged in its context.

The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) explains the stages of the revolutionary process of the Soviet revolution from the perspective of dialectical and historical materialism, the philosophy of Marxism. These lessons and this philosophy are counterposed to the outlook and practices of American pragmatism. We recognize that the long history of red-baiting and anti-communism in the United States presents real challenges for seriously studying the history of this revolutionary process. This is due to the current domination by the ruling class – big and global capital – of the US educational, electoral, media, and religious systems and institutions. However, we know that the leading forces of this ruling class that we are up against do study this history (history of how the poor and dispossessed were able to organize, unite, and take and wield power) in their war against our class, and that we must use every resource we can lay our hands on: Especially the experience

of millions of poor and dispossessed people fighting for and winning emancipation from the power of capital.

Black Reconstruction is a key text on political strategy. It illustrates the causes and consequences of racial oppression as well as racial disunity and the lack of leadership among the working classes in the history of the United States. It also demonstrates a scientific and engaged approach to historical study.

We study the Bible because of its great influence on people's thinking in the US and around the world. Any fight for the hearts and minds of the American people has to involve a theological battle with the people power to reclaim the message and power of the Bible for the poor.