

USING AN

Action Council



TO BUILD POWER &
SUSTAIN OUR MOVEMENT



**FERGUSON
ACTION**

WRITTEN BY

Brianna Richardson, Arielle Klagsbrun, Lisa Fithian,
Maurice Mitchell, Derek Laney, Kaveh Razani, Julia Ho

COUNCIL DIAGRAM BY

Emily Simons

BOOK DESIGN & ILLUSTRATION BY

Angus Maguire

Illustrations based on photos by
Heather Wilson pages 5, 6 & 10,
Jessie Sandoval pages 7 & 8.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

fergusonaction@gmail.com

ON AUGUST 9, 2014, THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE, MOSTLY YOUNG AND BLACK, TOOK TO THE STREETS IN FERGUSON TO PROTEST THE MURDER OF MICHAEL BROWN JR. Every night for weeks, young people marched to honor Michael Brown Jr and to demand justice, facing off against the National Guard and a militarized police force. The bravery of those in Ferguson and St. Louis – who turned out in the streets night after night only to get tear-gassed, pepper-sprayed and arrested over and over – has shown the entire country what true direct action looks like in confronting and exposing state violence. Since the initial uprising, we in St. Louis are continuing to figure out a way to build an organized and sustained movement for racial justice and Black liberation.

CURRENTLY, THE ST. LOUIS ACTION COUNCIL IS A KEY SPACE FOR BUILDING OUR LOCAL MOVEMENT.



What is an Action Council?

AN ACTION COUNCIL IS A SPACE where different groups and organizations come together to share plans and strategize together about protests and direct actions. The St. Louis Action Council has been very successful in bringing Black liberation youth groups, faith groups, small self-organized groups that protest together, community organizations and individuals into conversation with one another. Essentially, anyone planning or participating in protests and being in the streets has a seat at the action council.

The action council is not a place where people need to agree on tactics, long-term strategy or goals. It is instead a coordination space. The purpose is to share information, resource-share, get assistance and discuss big opportunities and/or potential actions. Groups can share actions that they are planning and ask for any assistance they might need from other groups there: whether it be to turn people out to the action, make the necessary props or coordinate a group to do a diversion action. By opening up plans and sharing information, groups can often find places of unity and moments to work together on certain projects. For example, within the action council there are both moments when everyone can either be working on one specific large mobilization such as Ferguson October or on the indictment announcement. There can also be times when not everyone is working together. The key is that people in the movement are aware of what else is going on within the movement, and can plan and collaborate accordingly.

The groups that provide support to the movement – such as the St. Louis Legal Collective, the Greater Region Action Medics, legal observers and livestreamers – also attend the action council. This allows those support systems a communication pathway to those people in the movement about coordinating logistics. The support systems also have the most up-to-date information on the actions planned for the week.

The St. Louis Action Council continues to build relationships and trust between participants. In a lot of ways, the action council is representative of the protest movement. There are young Black leaders and older white peace activists sitting next to each other, discussing how to get arrested. There are faith leaders sitting next to anarchists. Because of the relationships being built, the action council also provides an important level of accountability. Those who participate are accountable to one another and to the principles set out by the movement.



"THE BATTLE OF SEATTLE" PROTESTING THE WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION, NOVEMBER 1999.

History of the Model

THERE IS A LONG HISTORY of using the model of action councils to form decentralized movements, including efforts to stop the US intervention in Nicaragua and the spread of nuclear power plants. Most recently, this model was used in the late 1990s and 2000s in the anti-globalization movement. As the World Trade Organization met in Seattle to come to agreements on how western corporations could trade with developing countries, tens of thousands of people shut down the trade negotiations by blocking all the streets to the convention center. While the trade talks collapsed in Seattle because of the unrest, protests in the streets emboldened the Global South – particularly African nations – to stand up to the USA's attempts to force trade agreements. After the "Battle in Seattle," the next rounds of World Trade Organization talks stalled and eventually the organization lost almost all of its power.

For the People, by the People

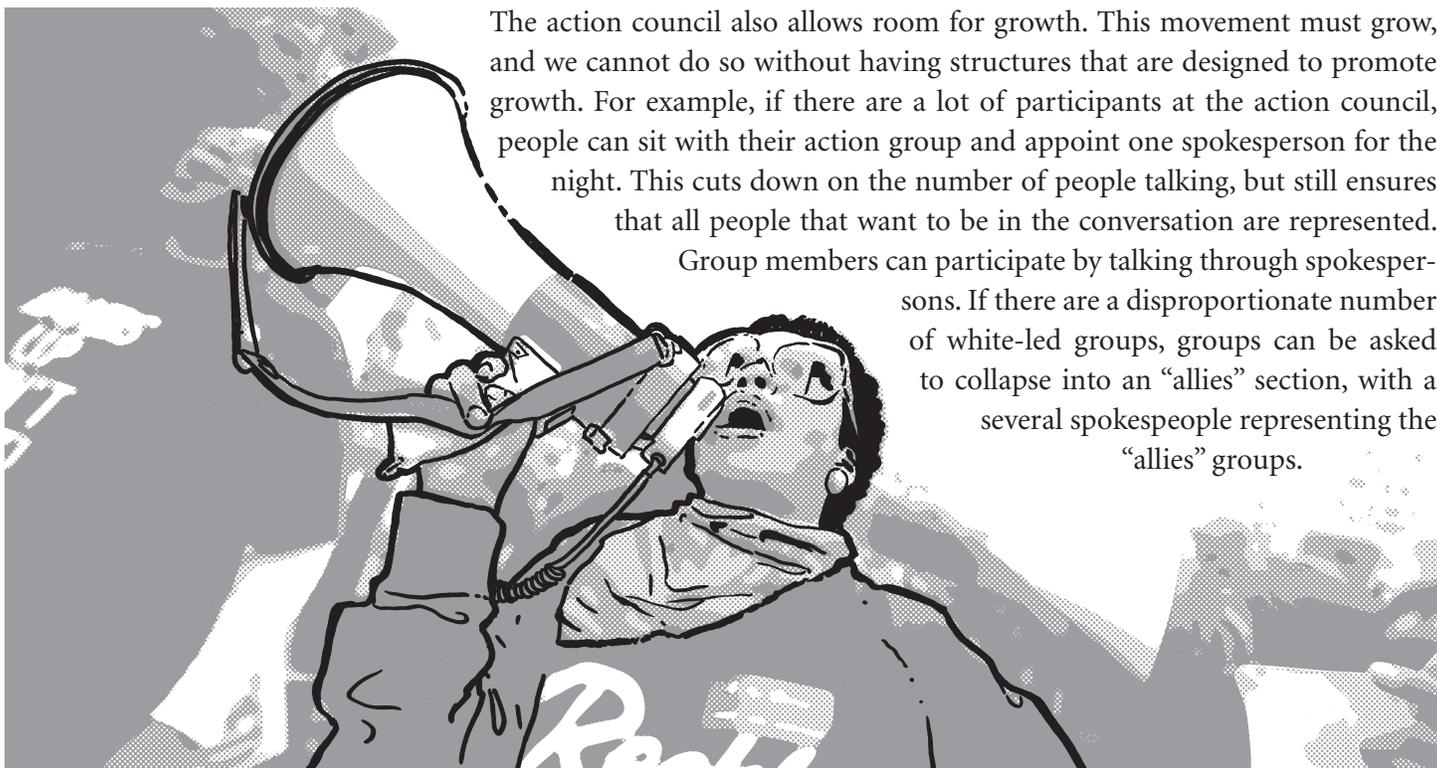
WHAT IS THE MODEL?

THE STL ACTION COUNCIL IS A SPACE that acknowledges the social constructs of white supremacy and patriarchy and how they can show up in structured spaces. It is important to intentionally try to counteract these systemic hurdles in a shared space, such as the action council. In order to function inclusively, we encourage active participation and representation for all marginalized people. The people involved set their own norms and values for the circle. This model can be recreated in any setting for optimum productivity. It is essential that all those that believe Black Lives Matter acknowledge and give way to Black leadership.

The thought of this model being implemented nationally adds a layer of cohesiveness to a movement that has a decentralized leadership structure. Action councils in multiple parts of the city or in multiple cities across the country will allow communication to flow in a way that is not hierarchical, but horizontal in nature. The purpose of the space is defined by those involved and creates accountability amongst participants, with effective communication and coordination at the core.

The action council also allows room for growth. This movement must grow, and we cannot do so without having structures that are designed to promote growth. For example, if there are a lot of participants at the action council, people can sit with their action group and appoint one spokesperson for the night. This cuts down on the number of people talking, but still ensures that all people that want to be in the conversation are represented.

Group members can participate by talking through spokespersons. If there are a disproportionate number of white-led groups, groups can be asked to collapse into an “allies” section, with a several spokespersons representing the “allies” groups.

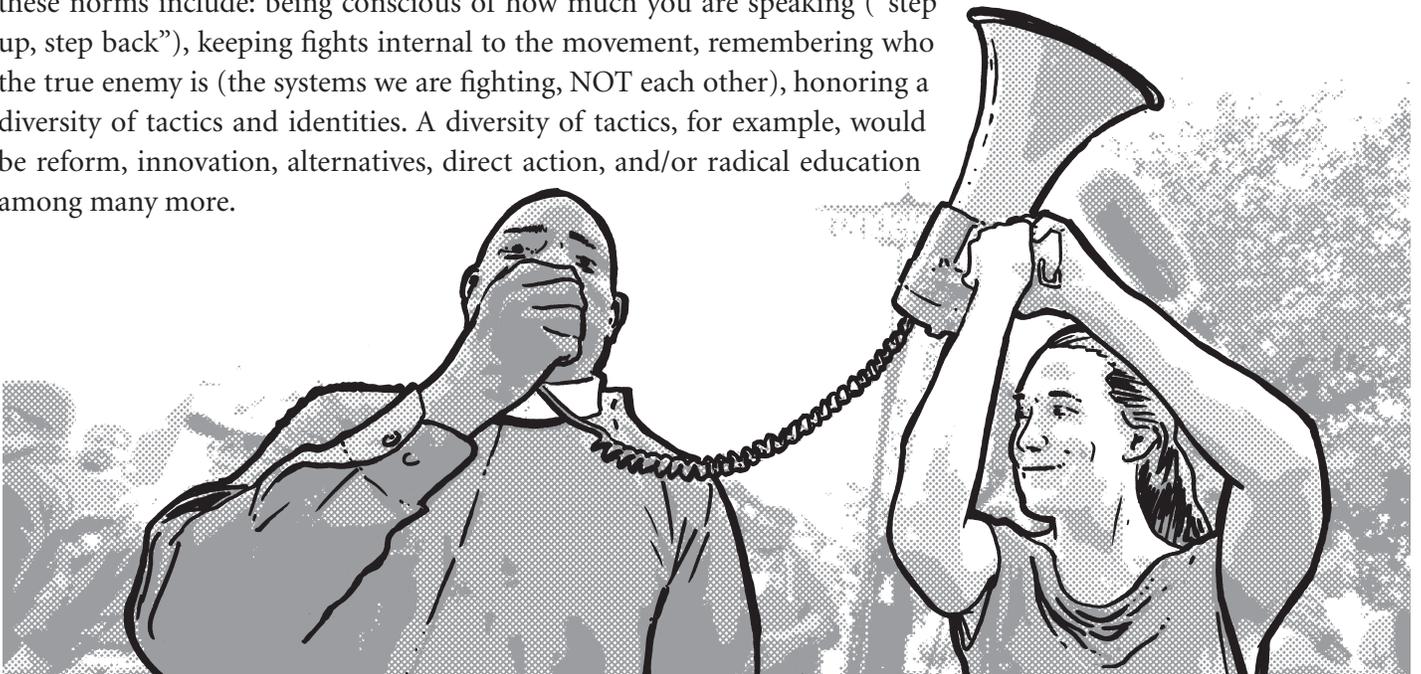


Values of the Action Council

THE ACTION COUNCIL IS A REFLECTION of the larger movement and should hold up the values of that larger movement. In particular, the action council must consistently center Black people and the fight against white supremacy this includes in leadership. Especially as more white and non-black people of color have become engaged in the movement, the St. Louis Action Council starts every meeting with a reminder about centering Black people in the movement. While this should seem unnecessary, we must understand that white supremacy exists not only in the systems around us but also inside us – in white people and in people of color. Part of the hard work of the action council is to model a world without white supremacy. The movement is diverse – and we must ensure it stays that way. That means we must also be aware of other forms of oppression that can be found in groups, such as patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia and ableism.

For centuries, the state has used a divide-and-conquer strategy to pit groups with different tactics against each other. To counter the state's attempts, one of the key values of the action council is to honor a diversity of tactics. This diversity is a strength as we build our collective power through the action council.

As a group, the St. Louis Action Council set its values and its norms. Some of these norms include: being conscious of how much you are speaking (“step up, step back”), keeping fights internal to the movement, remembering who the true enemy is (the systems we are fighting, NOT each other), honoring a diversity of tactics and identities. A diversity of tactics, for example, would be reform, innovation, alternatives, direct action, and/or radical education among many more.



Reflections from St. Louis

HOW WE FORMED THE ACTION COUNCIL.

THE ACTION COUNCIL WAS FORMED IN ST. LOUIS in the lead-up to the grand jury announcement of the charges against Darren Wilson. The intense moment of waiting (which lasted weeks) brought more people into the organized struggle. By November, there were already numerous Black youth-led organizations and different tables of groups. Knowing that massive numbers of people would be in the streets again, it was necessary to form a table where people could make plans together and talk about how to keep each other as safe as possible from the police.

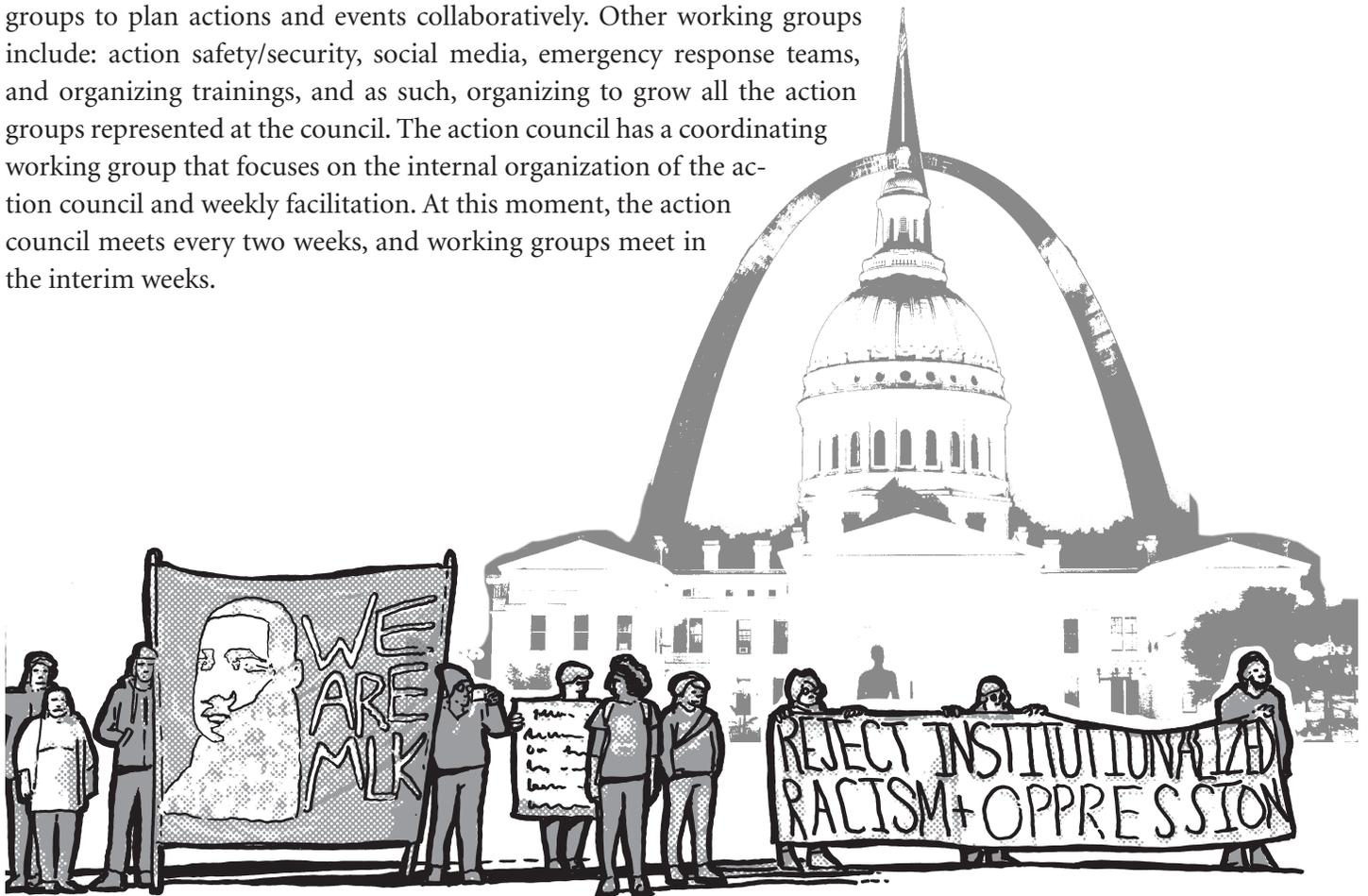
Action Council organizers began by making a big list of all the pre-existing groups and organizations who had been actively protesting. The only criteria for getting on the list was that the group had to be in the streets – many groups were active in the movement, but only some were the marching in the streets and shutting things down.

For groups that weren't yet organized, we hosted a series of mass meetings and direct action trainings over the course of three weeks that covered the basics in non-violent direct action, health and safety and legal information. At these trainings and meetings, attendees were encouraged to self-organize into groups. These groups ended up being mostly formed around geography because it was unclear how the state of emergency could impact travel on the night of the indictment announcement. These self-organized action groups made contact lists, picked meet-up spots and made sure everyone was hooked up with a protest buddy.



Groups in the action council range in size from 5 people to 100 people. Some have certain “flavors” — such as the Artists, a group of creative social justice artists, or Metropolitans Congregation United, a pre-existing group of faith leaders and members. Others continue to be geographically based — such as South City Solidarity, which within it has 4 subgroups split up by different neighborhoods. Groups that formed through the mass meetings and trainings are now planning their own actions and activities.

More than six months have passed since August 9th, the day Michael Brown was murdered. There are no longer thousands of people congregating in the streets daily. The action council has become an integral part in keeping alive the momentum of the movement by providing a space for people to come to each week. The action council has moved into a stage of forming working groups to plan actions and events collaboratively. Other working groups include: action safety/security, social media, emergency response teams, and organizing trainings, and as such, organizing to grow all the action groups represented at the council. The action council has a coordinating working group that focuses on the internal organization of the action council and weekly facilitation. At this moment, the action council meets every two weeks, and working groups meet in the interim weeks.



Facilitation & Coordination of the Action Council

THE FACILITATION OF THE ACTION COUNCIL is very important. The action council coordinating group usually facilitates and makes the agenda for the meeting, while leaving lots of ways for participants to give feedback and add things to the meeting agenda. The action council coordinating group must be primarily led by Black people. The action council coordinating group also coordinates the listserv of all the people who come to the action council meetings, sends around a sign-in list each week, sends out email reminders about the meeting to the list every week and notes from the action council meeting and coordinates a GroupMe texting app for all members of the action council.

The facilitator actively ensures that black voices are the center of the conversation. If white people talking too much, they are asked to step back and leave room for others to speak. Most of the facilitator's job is to make sure the norms of the action council are upheld in practice, particularly involving power dynamics. If the action council is not a comfortable space for those leading the movement, it is not a useful space at all.

The facilitator and coordinating group of the action council also discuss what sort of process should be used for decision-making within the action council. Historically, action councils have used consensus decision-making. In this model, a proposal is brought to the council that requires a decision from the council. After discussion, a round of questions and concerns, groups will either vote in favor, stand aside, or block the proposal (a block means that a group would leave the action council if this proposal occurs - not that they disagree with the idea).

A SAMPLE AGENDA

Introductions - what's your name and what's your group?

Reminder of the norms and values of the action council

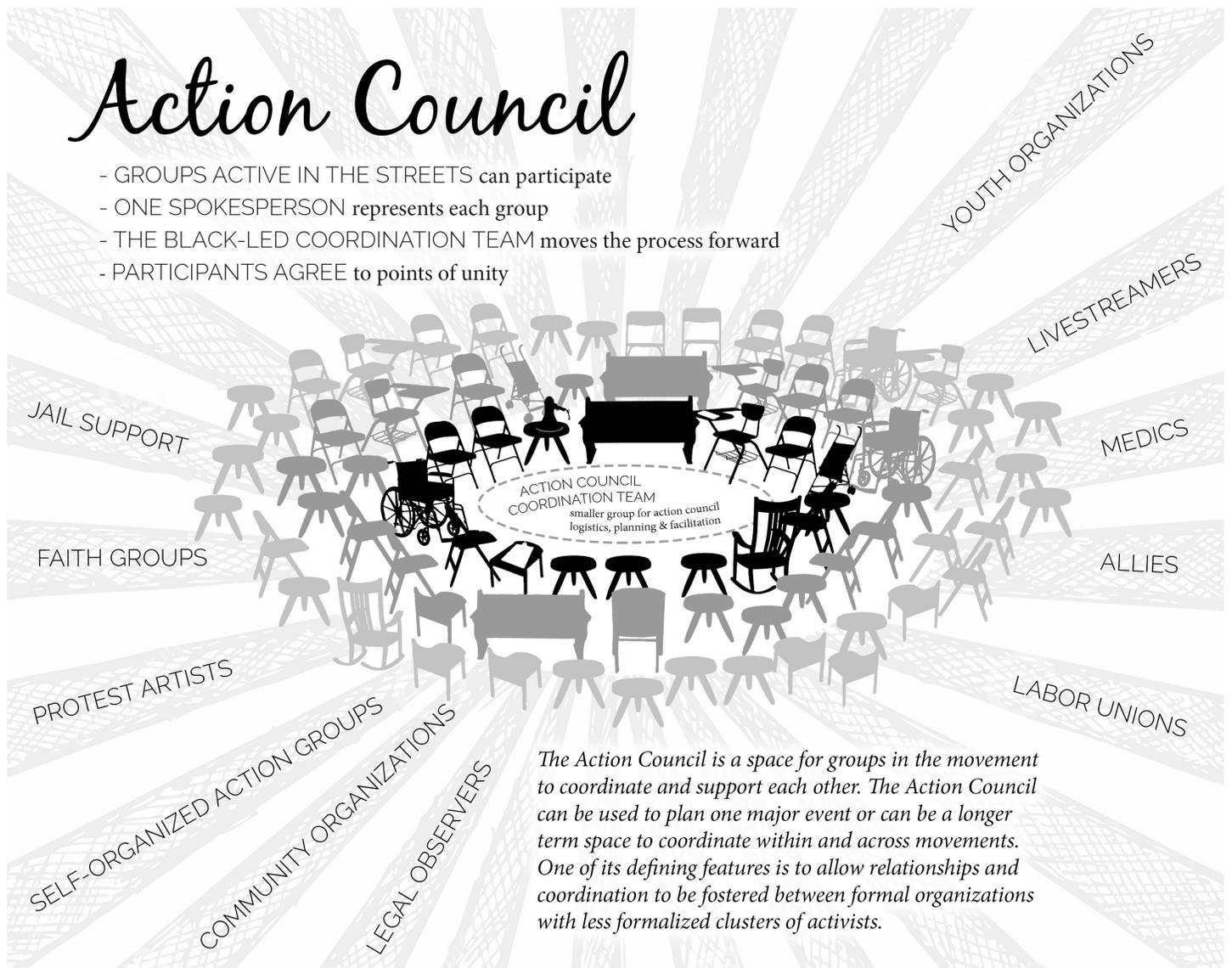
Updates on movement infrastructure

Who is planning upcoming actions? What support do you need?

Closing Activity/Clap/Song

Action Council

- GROUPS ACTIVE IN THE STREETS can participate
- ONE SPOKESPERSON represents each group
- THE BLACK-LED COORDINATION TEAM moves the process forward
- PARTICIPANTS AGREE to points of unity



The Action Council is a space for groups in the movement to coordinate and support each other. The Action Council can be used to plan one major event or can be a longer term space to coordinate within and across movements. One of its defining features is to allow relationships and coordination to be fostered between formal organizations with less formalized clusters of activists.

Sometimes conversations will emerge that should be given time by the facilitator, even if not on the agenda. For instance, recently in St. Louis, there was an important conversation about sexual harassment within the movement. The facilitator must use their judgement on what to spend time on. The facilitator should be conscious of triggers for other marginalized people in the group such as Black women and LGBTQ members.

As a movement space, the action council is an important place to reflect and build movement culture. At the St. Louis Action Council, we always have food, so that after the meeting, people can eat and socialize. Our movement cook prepares something simple -- sometimes hot chocolate, sometimes sandwiches. The coordinating team also try to figure out rides for anyone that needs them to the meeting, so that there is a culture of mutual aid. We also close each week in the same way, saying one word about how we feel.

Moving Forward

THE ST. LOUIS ACTION COUNCIL IS ONE PLACE in the movement where protesters, labor unions, community groups, lawyers, medics, artists and others can come together to strategize, plot and share plans. Though the St. Louis Action Council has been meeting for over three months now, we are learning as we go and constantly assessing. Some things have worked, some things haven't.

But the mission of the action council is clear. The action council, facilitated by young Black leaders in the movement, seeks to resist the divide-and-conquer tactics of the state and to build the relationships necessary for long-term organizing and resistance.

The action council can grow infinitely, just as our movement needs to, allowing room for new action groups as more and more people get involved. As local action councils grow, we can even think about what it would be like for action councils to communicate across regions or even across the country. What if we had regional or even national action councils? What if people could share plans and communicate about protest across the country or even the globe? Could we truly shut it down and get the justice we need?

