

RESIST. REVOLT.

A FIELD GUIDE FOR ORGANIZERS & ADVOCATES

Power Mapping

Know who rules. Know who they answer to. Know where the working class can strike.

What it is · Why it matters · How to build one · Worksheet included



01 What Is Power Mapping?

Power is never abstract. It sits in specific hands, flows through specific relationships, and is defended by specific institutions. Power mapping is how we make that visible.

A **power map** is a visual tool organizers use to identify the people and institutions that can deliver the change we are fighting for, and the web of relationships that can be used to move them. It answers three questions: **who holds the decision**, **who can influence that decision-maker**, and **what pressure will actually move them**.

Read through a class lens

Under capitalism, decisions about housing, wages, policing, schools, and land are rarely made by the people who live with the consequences. They are made by a narrow layer of officials, owners, donors, and executives whose interests are bound together by money, institutions, and social ties. Power mapping strips away the myth that “the system” is faceless. It shows us the actual architecture of ruling-class influence, and, just as importantly, where our own collective strength can be organized against it.

What a power map can win

- Moving an elected official’s vote on a bill, budget, or ordinance.
- Forcing an institution — a landlord, employer, university, or hospital system — to take a public stand or concede a demand.
- Winning resources for the movement, such as a grant from a foundation.
- Shifting the public narrative, for example pushing a newspaper toward a favorable editorial.

Power mapping grew up in community organizing and social-justice advocacy, where relationships and networks decide outcomes. It has also been adapted in community psychology and clinical practice, where Hagan and Smail (1997) used it to help people see how their personal struggles are tied to material conditions — home, work, money, policy, and culture — rather than private failings. That insight is the heart of the method: **personal hardship is political, and it has an address**.

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”

KARL MARX, THESES ON FEUERBACH (1845)

A power map is interpretation in service of change: we study power so we can move it.

02 Why It Matters

Our side does not have the money. We have numbers, organization, and each other. A power map tells us where to aim those numbers so our energy is not wasted.

- **It names the target.** Campaigns stall when the enemy is vague. A map pins the demand to the person or body that can say yes.
- **It exposes the network.** Officials answer to donors, party bosses, business associations, and their own social circles. Those ties are pressure points.
- **It finds our allies.** Unions, tenant groups, faith communities, and neighborhood associations already hold relationships with the powerful. Mapping reveals who can open a door.
- **It reveals our own base.** Mapping who is affected — and who is not yet organized — shows where to build.
- **It turns analysis into strategy.** Every line on the map becomes a possible action: a meeting, a delegation, a public action, a strike.



The Power Grid

One common map plots every actor on two axes: **how much power they hold** over the decision and **where they stand** on our demand.

The goal is to **move people toward the upper right** — and to move power itself, by organizing the people in the lower right until they become a force the top must reckon with.

Example: a citywide rent-stabilization fight.

03 How to Build a Power Map

Map it together, on paper or a whiteboard. Collective analysis builds collective ownership of the campaign. A map drawn by one person in an office is just a chart.

1

Define the problem and the demand

Name the injustice and the concrete, winnable demand. Then ask: who has the power to grant it? Research the issue and the major players before you draw anything.

2

Put the decision-maker at the center

Write the person or institution who can make the decision in the middle of the page. If power is shared, say a council or a board, map each vote that matters.

3

Ring the target with relationships

Around the target, list the people and institutions with ties to them: work, political, family, religious, and neighborhood. Look hard at major donors and the constituency groups they court. Be creative: even the barber counts.

4

Draw the connections

Link everyone with lines, and follow the second layer: who is connected to the people connected to the target? Count indirect ties, for example a family member who sits on a board the official does not.

5

Find the power nodes

Circle the people with the most lines running to them, and those with few lines but heavy influence. Where a relationship is unclear, assign someone to research it.

6

Map yourselves

Add your own organization, members, and allies. Who among us already has a relationship to a node on the map? Who is affected but not yet organized? Our base is a source of power, not an afterthought.

7

Turn lines into action

For every key relationship, decide how to use it: a delegation, a letter from a respected ally, a packed hearing, a public action, a boycott, a strike threat. Assign owners and dates.

04 The Relational Web



The second classic map puts the target at the center and builds rings of relationships outward.

Inner ring: people with direct access — donors, party, staff, family, congregation.

Outer ring: institutions tied to the inner ring, including us.

Notice the dark nodes: our organization already has a path to the target through staff and the union local. That is where the campaign begins.

Where Organizers Use It

- **Electoral and legislative fights:** moving swing votes on a council, school board, or legislature.
- **Workplace organizing:** mapping management, the owners and investors above them, customers and suppliers who give workers leverage, and the informal leaders on the shop floor who can carry a union drive.
- **Tenant and housing struggles:** tracing the landlord to the LLCs, lenders, property managers, and officials who protect them.
- **Community and mutual-aid work:** identifying who controls resources the neighborhood needs, and which existing networks can deliver people.
- **Coalition building:** finding which organizations share our interests and where their relationships complement ours.

05 Principles of Practice

Power concedes nothing without organized pressure. These principles keep the map honest and the work disciplined.

Power is relational, so build relationships

The map shows what relationships exist; organizing creates new ones. One-on-one conversations with the people most affected are how a base is built. No map substitutes for that.

Map institutions, not just individuals

Officials come and go; the interests behind them remain. Trace capital: who funds, who profits, who owns. Personal persuasion matters, but structural interests explain behavior.

Treat the map as living

Update it after every action. Who moved? Who dug in? Which relationships turned out stronger or weaker than we thought? Strategy is a cycle: map, act, evaluate, re-map.

Research rigorously and ethically

Use public records: campaign-finance filings, lobbying disclosures, property and corporate records, board rosters, meeting minutes, and news archives. Focus on public roles and institutional ties. Do not publish private individuals' home addresses or personal details. That endangers people and discredits the movement.

Protect your own people

Your map contains sensitive information about members and allies. Keep internal versions within trusted leadership, especially in workplace and immigrant-rights campaigns where retaliation is real.

Center the people most affected

Those living under the problem should lead the analysis. They know the terrain, and a campaign they own is a campaign that lasts beyond any single win.

06 Power Mapping Worksheet

THE PROBLEM WE ARE FIGHTING

OUR CONCRETE DEMAND

WHO CAN GRANT IT (THE TARGET)

WHO THE TARGET ANSWERS TO (DONORS, PARTY, INSTITUTIONS)

OUR ALLIES WITH ACCESS

OUR BASE: WHO IS AFFECTED AND NOT YET ORGANIZED

Plot the players

MORE POWER · OPPOSES	MORE POWER · SUPPORTS
LESS POWER · OPPOSES	LESS POWER · SUPPORTS

Next step for each key relationship: who will act, how, and by when?

They have the money. We have each other.

Map their power. Build ours. Organize until the people who do the work decide how the world is run.

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Sources & further reading

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