

UNDERSTANDING AND RESISTING DIVIDE AND CONQUER TACTICS

The act of dividing potential allies and communities who could come together to rise up is one of the oldest and most infuriatingly effective tricks in the book. Too often social justice movements have splintered as a result of not being prepared to counter such moves. A key tool for countering such tactics is learning from the stories of how previous organizations and coalitions have avoided the pitfalls of divide and conquer.

WHAT ARE WE FACING?

- We are witnessing white supremacy re-organize in response to destabilizations in racial capitalism, and to progressive social movement wins.
- We are witnessing a surge in both right-wing populism and the power-building of an extreme right-wing elite.
- The center cannot save us.
- This is not OK, but also not new.

SUSTAIN AND EVOLVE THE RESISTANCE

- Systems of oppression that target our communities are constantly changing shape, strategy and tactic.
- Our collective capacity for understanding this systemic harm is also always changing.
- We've got to challenge and build our political analysis and approach in an ongoing spirit of emergence *and* responsiveness.

WHAT IS DIVIDE AND CONQUER?

“Divide and conquer” is a strategy used by elites (often understood as “the oppressors”) to break down the relationships and unity between subjugated (often racial) groups struggling for justice, freedom, and liberation, in order to maintain the status quo.

TACTICS OF DIVIDE AND CONQUER

- Creating a narrative that blames each group for the other group's problems. This works to foster mistrust amongst groups and to obfuscate the systematic inequalities of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy.
- Bribing some groups with access to *some* resources (material and psychological). This works to align some groups with the elite over other subjugated groups. The resources offered are never close to the original goals of the movement.

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- Threatening to withdraw resources and/or to enact violence against group(s) if they continue to ally with other subjugated groups. This creates a culture of fear that not only breaks down inter-group relationships but also leads to groups being overall less bold and taking fewer risks in their pursuit of justice, freedom, and liberation.

A Few Examples:

Bacon's Rebellion

In the 1600s, the concept of “race” as we know it today did not yet exist in the British colonies that would come to be the United States. Rather, Indigenous people, enslaved Africans, and Europeans (active settlers and indentured servants) were categorized by their national and religious backgrounds. European colonial settlements were characterized by brutal work and intense warfare as they sought to hold on to stolen land through enforced labor. In Jamestown, a moment of crisis emerged in 1676, when one settler—Nathanial Bacon—attempted to seize more land by starting a war against both Indigenous peoples and the official colonial government. Enslaved Africans and indentured servants joined together to take advantage of this instability to rebel for their collective freedom. In response, Britain sent the royal navy to disarm the rebels, and hung 23 European and African freedom fighters. Most importantly, the colonial government set in motion a legal system to keep enslaved African and indentured Europeans divided by outlawing African possession of weapons, consolidating the slave system as distinct from (and worst than) indentured servitude, and inventing the privileged status of whiteness. Together, these changes served to have indentured servants identify with the European elites through whiteness, rather than working in solidarity with enslaved Africans.

Post-Katrina New Orleans Labor

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, federal policies were put in place that pitted Black New Orleanians against mostly Latino immigrant workers. In the first two weeks after the storm, President Bush's administration suspended a range of labor laws that protected federal disaster workers' health and prevailing wages to lower the costs of rebuilding. In addition, the Department of Labor suspended its affirmative action and non-discrimination policy that would have required that Black and local contractors be given preference in bidding procedures. Simultaneously, the Department of Homeland Security suspended sanctions against employers who hired individuals without immigration documentation, leading to the active recruitment of undocumented workers. In the words of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, under these policies “African American workers were locked out of the reconstruction while immigrant workers were locked in” which in turn furthered the false racist narratives that Black people don't want to work and immigrants steal Americans' jobs.

DISCUSSION/REFLECTION GUIDE

- How does Divide and Conquer function as a strategy?

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- Why is it important to you/your organization to challenge the strategy of Divide and Conquer?
- Where have you seen the strategy of Divide on Conquer show up in social movements or in your political work?
- Was this resisted? If so:
 - Which groups worked in coalition? What potential divides were bridged?
 - What tools, actions, or strategies did organizers use to bridge these divides and resist divide and conquer tactics?
 - How can we use the lessons of this moment to build stronger and more resilient movements today?
- If not:
 - Which groups might have worked in coalition? How could potential divides have been bridged?
 - What tools, actions, or strategies could organizers has used to bridge these divides and resist divide and conquer tactics?
 - How can we use the lessons of this moment to build stronger and more resilient movements today?

TOPPLE THEIR DIVIDE-&-CONQUER GAME

1. **Make way for healing.**
Demand reparations for past harm. Practice consent. Create intentional space and time for healing from trauma, and repairing relationships.
2. **Spark and sustain internal transformation** (personal and organizational).
People with access to power, learn to honor the leadership of people who have historically been denied power. Oppressed peoples of the world, determine your destinies, unite.
3. **Respond at the needed speed.**
4. **Be willing to slow down**
We don't have to move at the pace of emergency. Be willing to be flexible and agile; we might have to rapidly change tactics or quickly forge alliances to meet a given moment
5. **Practice being powerful.**
Understand losses in relationship to wins. Build institutions to replace the ones that don't work for us and that we are simultaneously targeting in our organizing campaigns. Practice cooperation and liberatory governance. Build a solidarity economy.

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6. Coordinate like you want to win the world.

7. Refuse to participate in turf battles and pettiness. Share everything. Build authentic alliances through shared agreements and radical honesty. Recognize that dismantling the systems requires us to give up our attachment to them, in all of the ways they enable our survival but nothing beyond.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

- How does the reconfiguration of white supremacy impact our current work?
- How do we lift the lessons from past and recent history to resist the system's divide and conquer tactics?