AT THE BEGINNING OF 2017, Center for Political Education (CPE) rolled out a strategic plan to guide a regeneration of the Center’s work from 2017 to 2019. Longstanding members and supporters of CPE had been involved in a community assessment process that examined CPE’s role and impact and whether the project should continue. The community assessment included input from movement organizers and thinkers with working relationships with CPE. Former CPE staff members and collective members, organizational allies, members of the board of directors of the Kendra Alexander Foundation (CPE’s fiscal sponsor) and Bay Area movement leaders were invited to participate. The assessment resulted in a series of recommendations that guided CPE’s regeneration process.

The recommendations included:

- transition from a volunteer collective and half-time staff person structure, to a co-directorship with two full-time staff members.
- establish a community advisory board
- regularly map the political landscape
- reinvigorate programming
- develop deeper ties and connections with Bay Area-based organizations and movements
- increase CPE’s public presence
- implement a diversified fundraising plan

The two-year strategic plan incorporating these recommendations was approved in late 2016, which included a slow, steady implementation. The pace and scope of CPE’s strategic plan implementation was dramatically affected, however, by the election of Trump and the ascendency to power of his regime. As thousands of people hit the streets in response to moves by the Trump administration, many social justice organizations scrambled to defend against a wave of reactionary policies while simultaneously attempting to incorporate an influx of new members. While many organizations related to the moment as one of political crisis, they also expressed a genuine interest in deepening their analysis and sharpening their strategy. Questions of left unity also persisted in this period. CPE responded by accelerating the pace of its strategic plan and by rapidly increasing the quantity and diversity of its programming as a way to respond to needs expressed by its movement partners.

Overall, feedback on CPE’s regeneration over the past two years has been positive. Organizations and community members have noted that CPE has been an important space for thinking across movements, issues and strategies, as well as to dig deeper into relevant social movement history and theory. Here are some highlights of how CPE did in meeting each of the recommendations made from the community assessment.

Co-directorship

Bringing on two full-time staffers to lead CPE put the project at an advantage. Directors Rachel Herzing and Isaac Ontiveros led CPE in responding to the pace and urgency of Bay Area organizing in the wake of the Trump regime’s rise. They spearheaded the development of relevant programming, fortified and maintained the organization’s internal infrastructure, and represented the Center in a breadth of movement spaces and conversations. The co-directors’ leadership
has helped CPE grow into a larger, more responsive movement resource. As such, CPE will continue to be led by two full-time co-directors. In April 2019, Isaac Ontiveros transitioned out of his directorship position. While transitions can be difficult, Isaac and Rachel’s work during the regeneration period has positioned the organization well to integrate and support a new leadership team of Rachel and one new co-director.

Community advisory board

During the first year of the two-year plan, CPE convened its first community advisory board to support the organization’s ongoing work. Advisory board members come out of migrant justice, left refoundation, Black liberation, Latin American solidarity, anti-imperialist, anti-prison industrial complex, and broader anti-capitalist, economic, racial, and social justice organizations and movements. The advisory board has helped CPE’s staff analyze current political conditions and the state of the left, while also aiding in the development and execution of programming, outreach, and fundraising.

Regular mapping of the political landscape

At the beginning of the past two years, CPE met with dozens of Bay Area organizations to understand the critical issues, challenges, and opportunities confronting those organizations’ work. These meetings have been invaluable in shaping CPE’s programing and collaborations. In turn, the landscape conversations with CPE’s community partners have also provided space for organizations to pause, reflect, and think intentionally about political strategy across organizations and movements. As noted above, CPE’s community advisory board has also assisted in mapping the political landscape and helping the staff develop programming that responds to the period.

Reinvigorated programming

For the Center to meet its goals, it is vital for CPE to have regular, rigorous, and reliable programming. In 2017 and 2018, CPE convened nearly 100 programs. These have included two major conferences, multi-week classes, closed-door strategic conversations with movement leaders, thinkers, and activists, and dozens of one-time public events responding to current events and pertinent issues facing the Bay Area left. Almost 200 organizations have shaped CPE’s programming as speakers and facilitators, and over 4200 community members have participated in programming during the past two years. CPE has also provided organizational development facilitation and run campaign and strategic planning processes for dozens organizations and coalitions.

CPE’s rebuild over the last few years under the leadership of Rachel and Isaac has had an important impact on the Bay Area’s organized left. Shared political education spaces that CPE has organized and hosted have deepened strategic alliances between grassroots organizations — allowing us to build trust with one another, see how our struggles intersect, and mobilize more effectively in the face of increased attacks on our communities. As a Coordinator of the Alliance of South Asians Taking Action, I saw first hand how terrified our membership was in the wake of Trump’s election. CPE helped ASATA channel our energy through workshops, strategy meetings and panel presentations. This gave me a clarity of purpose as a leader of the organization and created accessible ways to empower our base. We look forward to more collaborations with CPE and are so grateful to be in this work together.

Sabiha Basrai, Alliance of South Asians Taking Action
Deeper ties and connections with Bay Area-based organizations and movements

A driving concern of CPE’s work over the past two years has been to forge stronger relationships with Bay Area-based organizations and movements. These connections not only provide the base of CPE’s program participants but also help shape the programs themselves through co-planning and facilitation. This work has been successful—reflected in strong and continued collaborations and a high level of repeat participation among CPE’s priority communities. Moving forward, CPE wants to continue this work with a particular focus on forging stronger ties with environmental, disability justice, and labor organizations, as well as with youth and student activists and organizers.

Increased public presence

In addition to increasing programming and forging deeper ties with Bay Area organizations, CPE’s overall public presence has also been bolstered by participating in movement events and mobilizations, launching a new website, making most of our programming available on video, and increased social media activity. CPE is also an active member of the Bay Area Third World Resistance network, and the national Movement for Black Lives network.

2017-2019 Programming Highlights

People Get Ready: Building Resistance in the Trump Era

Reading Black Reconstruction

Visualizing Revolution: Creating Visual Culture in a Time of Destruction (with Melanie Cervantes)

Facing the Right (with Tarso Ramos)

In the Dark Times Will There Also Be Singing? (a collaboration with the San Francisco International Arts Festival)

War and Liberation series

Marxism 101 class

Cooperation and Solidarity (with FAME and Cooperation Jackson)

Series on Fighting Political Repression (with NLG-SF)

Long Bitter, and Beautiful Struggle for Freedom (with Vijay Prashad)

Spirit of ‘68 class

People Get Ready 2

Red Power, Internationalism, and National Liberation

Lara Kiswani, Arab Resource and Organizing Center
A diversified fundraising plan

To support the regeneration of the Center, CPE expanded its yearly budget from under $50,000 to over $150,000. Executing a robust fundraising plan that draws from a diverse range of funding sources will continue to be an area of growth for CPE. That said, CPE has brought in major donors, received new grant funding, and built a fee-for-service income stream from the organization’s technical assistance work. Running a tight ship has helped CPE maintain a reserve that will help fuel its work in the coming year. CPE will continue to help funders and donors understand the unique and vital role an institution such as CPE plays in a dynamic organizing environment such as the Bay Area.

The National Lawyers Guild SF Bay Area (NLGSF) has worked closely with CPE for the past two years. Partnering with CPE has allowed us to move our membership closer to political alignment and to deepen our collective understanding of the current political moment. What is invaluable about CPE is its ability to see above the tree line and help communicate trends, victories, and limitations of the movement to its partners. Organizations like NLGSF can then use this information to determine strategy moving forward and to build with like-minded organizations to meet the needs of the movement.

Jay Kim, National Lawyers Guild, SF Bay Area

The past two years of regeneration for Center for Political Education have coincided with a period of high activity and urgency for many Bay Area social change organizations. This period has presented some serious challenges to Bay Area organizations and the communities with which they work. The period has also seen groups building new alliances, breaking down sectoral silos, and learning about movement history in order to develop stronger winning strategies. In just two years the Center has dramatically increased its level of activity to become a central hub of Bay Area left discussion. Requests from the community for more programming continue to come in. Furthermore, the Center is in a stronger position to tackle challenges that may lie ahead. CPE is ready to move into the next phase of its organizational life and to continue to work in the service of more freedom and self-determination.

CPE has long been an invaluable resource for movements in the Bay Area. In the last couple of years, it has become an even more important vehicle to ground and support left organizations in rigorous analysis, strategic planning, and bridging across the wide range of issues we are all working on. Critical Resistance has partnered and participated with CPE in a number of events, conversations, and planning sessions, and there’s no question that our theory, practice, and work overall are much stronger because of CPE’s contributions.

Mohamed Shehk, Critical Resistance

We are lucky and grateful to have a resource like CPE that is readily available to provide political education to make our work at generative somatics (gs) as strong and effective as we need to be to meet our strategic goals. gs brings Embodied Leadership Development and Transformation to left movements, and since 2017, we have committed to two strategic priority areas; Freedom from Political Repression and Climate Justice. CPE has supported the development of our staff, teachers and practitioners in becoming more rigorous in our political grounding and analysis around these sectors of work and more. Their skills, knowledge and breadth of relationships have been an essential part of our ability to be of service to the leaders and efforts we’re committed to.

Chris Lymbertos, generative somatics

The National Lawyers Guild SF Bay Area (NLGSF) has worked closely with CPE for the past two years. Partnering with CPE has allowed us to move our membership closer to political alignment and to deepen our collective understanding of the current political moment. What is invaluable about CPE is its ability to see above the tree line and help communicate trends, victories, and limitations of the movement to its partners. Organizations like NLGSF can then use this information to determine strategy moving forward and to build with like-minded organizations to meet the needs of the movement.

Jay Kim, National Lawyers Guild, SF Bay Area

The past two years of regeneration for Center for Political Education have coincided with a period of high activity and urgency for many Bay Area social change organizations. This period has presented some serious challenges to Bay Area organizations and the communities with which they work. The period has also seen groups building new alliances, breaking down sectoral silos, and learning about movement history in order to develop stronger winning strategies. In just two years the Center has dramatically increased its level of activity to become a central hub of Bay Area left discussion. Requests from the community for more programming continue to come in. Furthermore, the Center is in a stronger position to tackle challenges that may lie ahead. CPE is ready to move into the next phase of its organizational life and to continue to work in the service of more freedom and self-determination.

CPE has long been an invaluable resource for movements in the Bay Area. In the last couple of years, it has become an even more important vehicle to ground and support left organizations in rigorous analysis, strategic planning, and bridging across the wide range of issues we are all working on. Critical Resistance has partnered and participated with CPE in a number of events, conversations, and planning sessions, and there’s no question that our theory, practice, and work overall are much stronger because of CPE’s contributions.

Mohamed Shehk, Critical Resistance

We are lucky and grateful to have a resource like CPE that is readily available to provide political education to make our work at generative somatics (gs) as strong and effective as we need to be to meet our strategic goals. gs brings Embodied Leadership Development and Transformation to left movements, and since 2017, we have committed to two strategic priority areas; Freedom from Political Repression and Climate Justice. CPE has supported the development of our staff, teachers and practitioners in becoming more rigorous in our political grounding and analysis around these sectors of work and more. Their skills, knowledge and breadth of relationships have been an essential part of our ability to be of service to the leaders and efforts we’re committed to.

Chris Lymbertos, generative somatics

The National Lawyers Guild SF Bay Area (NLGSF) has worked closely with CPE for the past two years. Partnering with CPE has allowed us to move our membership closer to political alignment and to deepen our collective understanding of the current political moment. What is invaluable about CPE is its ability to see above the tree line and help communicate trends, victories, and limitations of the movement to its partners. Organizations like NLGSF can then use this information to determine strategy moving forward and to build with like-minded organizations to meet the needs of the movement.

Jay Kim, National Lawyers Guild, SF Bay Area

The past two years of regeneration for Center for Political Education have coincided with a period of high activity and urgency for many Bay Area social change organizations. This period has presented some serious challenges to Bay Area organizations and the communities with which they work. The period has also seen groups building new alliances, breaking down sectoral silos, and learning about movement history in order to develop stronger winning strategies. In just two years the Center has dramatically increased its level of activity to become a central hub of Bay Area left discussion. Requests from the community for more programming continue to come in. Furthermore, the Center is in a stronger position to tackle challenges that may lie ahead. CPE is ready to move into the next phase of its organizational life and to continue to work in the service of more freedom and self-determination.

CPE has long been an invaluable resource for movements in the Bay Area. In the last couple of years, it has become an even more important vehicle to ground and support left organizations in rigorous analysis, strategic planning, and bridging across the wide range of issues we are all working on. Critical Resistance has partnered and participated with CPE in a number of events, conversations, and planning sessions, and there’s no question that our theory, practice, and work overall are much stronger because of CPE’s contributions.

Mohamed Shehk, Critical Resistance