

Building a Social Work for Social Movements: What Movement Lawyering and the Chicago Reparations Case Can Teach Us

Sophia Sarantakos
Shannon Sliva

Abstract: *On May 6, 2015, Chicago became the first city in the United States to make formal reparations to the victims of racist law enforcement (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). The Chicago Reparations Ordinance sought to systematically address the unspeakable violence perpetrated by Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge and his crew of fellow white detectives who, from 1972 to 1991, tortured more than 120 predominantly Black men and women while in custody. The reparations ordinance was a legal and cultural win, achieved through a collaborative, creative, solidarity-based relationship between torture survivors, community members, and movement lawyers. As longtime organizers and social workers, we find the approach of movement lawyering to be a particularly useful framework for thinking through how social workers can better contribute to progressive social movements. In this paper, we: (1) define movement lawyering, clarify how it differs from traditional legal practice, and describe its ethos and tactics as demonstrated during the Chicago Reparations Ordinance case; (2) reveal how the political and social realities that stimulated “movement lawyering” are the same realities calling for “movement social-working”; and (3) offer a conceptual structure for “movement social-working” based on our analysis of the social-change levers of movement lawyering.*

Keywords: *Community organizing; social movements; social change; social work practice; movement lawyering; solidarity*

The Chicago Reparations Ordinance as an Instructive Case Study for Professionalized Social Work

On May 6, 2015, after forty years of local organizing, investigative journalism, and litigation, Chicago became the first city in the United States to make formal reparations to the victims of racist law enforcement (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). The Chicago Reparations Ordinance sought to systematically address the unspeakable violence perpetrated by Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge and his crew of fellow white detectives, who self-identified as the “A-team.” From 1972 to 1991, Burge and his “A-team” tortured over 120 men and women in custody, all but one of whom were Black. The methods of torture were varied and gruesome, physical and verbal, and included beatings, suffocation, rape, burning, electric shock, and the constant use of racist epithets (Hayes & Kaba, 2023; Mogul, 2016). The goal of this physical and verbal abuse was to coerce false confessions from the men and women in custody, which were then used in court to guarantee their convictions.

Joey Mogul (2016), a partner at the People’s Law Office who represented Burge torture survivors, drafted the ordinance, which demanded from the City of Chicago:

Sophia Sarantakos, PhD, MSW, Assistant Professor, and Shannon Sliva, PhD, MSW, Associate Professor, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, Denver, CO.

Copyright © Authors, Vol. 26 No. 1 (Spring), 256-275, DOI: 10.18060/28873



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

the creation of a \$5.5 million reparations fund to pay up to \$100,000 to each eligible Burge torture survivor still alive; the provision of counseling services to police torture survivors and family members at a dedicated facility on the South Side of Chicago; free tuition at Chicago's City Colleges for Burge torture survivors and their family members, including their grandchildren; job placement for Burge torture survivors in programs for formerly incarcerated people; priority access to City of Chicago's re-entry support services, including job training and placement, counseling, food and transportation assistance, senior care, health care, and small business support services; a formal apology from the Mayor and City Council for the torture committed by Burge and his men; a permanent public memorial acknowledging the torture committed by Burge and his men; and a history curriculum on the Burge torture cases to be taught to all Chicago Public School students in the 8th and 10th grades. (pp. 223-224)

The four decades of organizing that brought about these demands first started with torture survivors who worked with their families in the free world while still in custody. This effort eventually blossomed into a group called the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials (CTJM) that included survivors, artists, organizers, and movement lawyers. As Hayes and Kaba (2023) describe in their book, *Let This Radicalize You*, "CTJM sought to spark the collective imagination of communities to conceptualize what was necessary for the city to provide in order for individuals and communities to begin to heal from torture" (p. 18). CTJM's vision and efforts centered the needs and wants of the men and women tortured by Burge, while also deeply considering how the harm extended far beyond each individual survivor. The complex, communal processes of justice, healing, and repair required the inclusion of the survivors' families and the people of Chicago, for generations to come.

CTJM's collective effort to "focus on holistic means of meeting the material needs of all members of impacted communities, and [offer] positive visions for healing and repair" (Hayes & Kaba, 2023, p. 18) is a powerful, instructive case study for the field of social work. The reparations ordinance was a legal *and* cultural win, achieved through a collaborative, creative, solidarity-based relationship among torture survivors, community members, and movement lawyers, and we find the approach of movement lawyering to be a particularly useful framework for thinking through how social workers can better contribute to progressive social movements and advance transformative justice, healing, and repair.

In this paper, we will: (1) define movement lawyering, clarify how it differs from traditional legal practice, and describe its ethos and tactics as demonstrated during the Chicago Reparations Ordinance case; (2) reveal how the political and social realities that stimulated "movement lawyering" are the same realities calling for "movement social-working"; and (3) offer a conceptual structure for "movement social-working" based on our analysis of the social-change levers of movement lawyering. Our geography of focus in this paper is the United States (i.e., the Chicago reparations case in Chicago, Illinois, as well as movement lawyering and professionalized social work in the United States). We conclude by offering implications for social workers in all fields of practice.

Movement Lawyering for Social Change

The centrality of movement lawyering in the achievement of the Chicago Reparations Ordinance is why it drew our focus and is the chosen framework for analysis in this conceptual manuscript. This idea of “movement lawyering” is distinct from “movement law,” which is a methodology focused on “investigation and analysis *with* social movements” (Akbar et al., 2021, p. 825). Akbar and colleagues (2021) delineate between the two by naming that “movement lawyering aims to create space within public-interest practice to work with social movements to build grassroots power,” while “movement law approaches scholarly thinking and writing about law, justice, and social change as work done in solidarity with social movements, local organizing, and other forms of collective struggle” (p. 826). Cummings (2020) defines “movement lawyering” as

the mobilization of law through deliberately planned and interconnected advocacy strategies, inside and outside of formal law-making spaces, by lawyers who are accountable to politically marginalized constituencies to build the power of those constituencies to produce and sustain democratic social-change goals that they define. (p. 98)

Lawyers bolstering the work of social movements can come from any political orientation, but recent interest in and practice of movement lawyering is driven by leftist legal academics and practitioners (Cummings, 2020). In this approach to legal work, lawyers offer their expertise to communities and social movements working toward progressive transformative change, and act as contributors and collaborators as opposed to leaders and experts. Movement lawyering abandons the idea that economic, political, and social change that makes the world more equitable for all people is led by lawyers and occurs through the courts. Instead, practitioners of this praxis think creatively about how legal skills, strategies, and tactics can be stretched and manipulated, and combined with various other skills, strategies, and tactics, to advance progressive lawmaking and culture changes. This approach to lawyering gained traction in the 1970s as a rebuttal to “legal liberalism,” which critical legal scholars argue has been ineffective at advancing large-scale transformative social change:

Critical scholars have claimed that the legal liberal approach hampered social movements by diverting political challenges into legal channels, emphasizing individual rights over collective actions, confusing rule change for social change, and empowering lawyers to make crucial political decisions without accountability to the constituencies they purported to represent. (Cummings, 2017, pp. 1650-1651)

Alternatively, movement lawyering offers an ethos and a set of tactics for advancing transformative social change by working beyond traditional legal sites of struggle.

The Ethos and Tactics of Movement Lawyering as Seen Through the Chicago Reparations Case

The forty-year struggle for healing, justice, and repair for the torture survivors, and their families and communities, included numerous legal “wins,” like the 2010 conviction of Commander Jon Burge, but as movement lawyer and co-founder of CTJM Joey Mogul states, it was a hollow victory:

While Burge’s conviction was significant, the victory was a hollow one. Burge’s conviction failed to address the material needs of the torture survivors. Many of the survivors continued to suffer psychologically from the torture they endured, experiencing flashbacks and nightmares of their interrogations, but there was no place for them to obtain any psychological counseling or assistance. Moreover, the vast majority of torture survivors...had no legal recourse to seek any financial compensation or redress. The statute of limitations on any civil claims they could have brought expired decades ago, as many languished in their prison cells fighting their criminal prosecution and convictions. (Mogul, 2016, p. 11)

Litigation was always part of CTJM’s strategy, but those involved in the reparations movement understood that the courts were incapable of providing the extensive, holistic redressing that the survivors, and their families and communities, needed and deserved. The clarity around the limitations and insufficiency of the courts pushed the survivors, organizers, and movement lawyers to look beyond the discrete cases and legal levers of accountability, and think through the public, cultural organizing work that needed to be done outside of the courtroom. By mapping on the two key features of movement lawyering, which are the representation of mobilized clients and the use of integrated advocacy (Cummings, 2020), to the Chicago reparations case study, we can gain a sharper conceptual understanding of how CTJM, and the movement lawyers in particular, developed successful strategies outside of traditional legal channels. While we are guided by Cummings’s (2020) conceptualization of movement lawyering, we also draw from public interviews with Chicago reparations movement lawyer Joey Mogul, to offer a synthesized analysis of the ethos and tactics that contributed to the powerful outcomes in this case.

Movement Lawyers Work Alongside Mobilized Clients

We suggest that the defining ethos of movement lawyering is its commitment to working alongside mobilized clients. Mobilized clients can be understood as “organized groups that have the capacity to disrupt, and thereby influence politics” (Cummings, 2020, p. 100). Within the Chicago reparations case study, prior to the formation of CTJM, the torture survivors and their families were a coalesced group who were doing all that they could to bring attention to the racist state violence Burge and his men were responsible for. The unity and synergy of the survivors, their families, and community members, offered a different power relation than an individual legal client, untethered to a coordinated political movement. Different from the legal practice of using discrete cases to advance individual rights, which was the paradigm under legal liberalism, collaborating with organized groups

is viewed by movement lawyers as a “holistic strategy to influence policy and social outcomes, while building movement power” (Cummings, 2020, p. 100).

While Cummings (2020) emphasizes the tactical selection of clients by movement lawyers, a key component to appropriately and successfully enacting this strategy is the mindset movement lawyers have about their role and positionality. Guinier and Torres (2014) say that the practice of lawyering with mobilized groups, and centering their agency and vision, “involves a transformation of the lawyer/client relationship to build sites of democratic accountability internally and externally. Such a transformative process depends upon a participatory, power-sharing process within the lawyer/client relationship” (p. 2753). Joey Mogul, the movement lawyer who worked with Burge torture survivors for over two decades, co-founded CTJM, and wrote the Chicago Reparations Ordinance, spoke of the reparations movement and the partnership with survivors in this way:

I understand it's the organizing that creates the container that, in Mariame Kaba's words, allows us to all come in and fight alongside one another. It's how we are horizontal in our work together. When we are doing this organizing work, the torture survivors are with us side-by-side. In fact, they are the ones whom we center. They're the voices we need to hear. (Loew & Feeley, 2021, paras. 37-38)

Crucial to the side-by-side partnership between movement lawyers and mobilized clients is the lawyer's ability to take direction from the organized folks on the ground and think through ways to support and advance their self-identified aims (Cummings, 2020). Mogul, and the other organizers committed to the reparations campaign, took this collaborative work on by first altering the questions that were typically asked of survivors of state violence:

In the reparations campaign, the questions were: What do you want in a reparations campaign? What do you want in the legislation? What do you want to tell people?

Often when we ask people directly affected by police or state violence, we ask them, Tell us what happened to you? The question forces them to relive their trauma. Instead, we need to ask them: What should be done? What are your hopes and dreams? What can provide you with healing and nourishment? (Loew & Feeley, 2021, paras. 39-40)

These questions kept the Burge torture survivors at the helm of the movement and centered their stories and desires. These questions were also future-focused, rooted in imagination, and invited survivors to think beyond what feels achievable. The focus instead was on what was needed and wanted for themselves, their families, presently and intergenerationally, and the city of Chicago.

Movement Lawyers Engage in Integrated Advocacy

If connecting with mobilized clients is the overarching strategy of movement lawyering, integrated advocacy describes the tactics of the legal practice. Integrated advocacy moves the idea of lawyering “from the narrow lens of technical legal skill (especially litigation) to the broader art of persuasion” (Cummings, 2020, p. 114). The

vision here is to think beyond the courtroom as the central site of struggle, and litigation as the primary tactic. Through this conception, advocacy becomes a “process of telling compelling stories to those in positions of decision-making power and the wider public” through different, interrelated methods: “litigation, policy advocacy, organizing support, media work, and community education” (Cummings, 2020, p. 114).

CTJM was formed, primarily, to engage in integrated advocacy work. Here is movement lawyer Joey Mogul discussing what prompted the creation of CTJM, and sharing some of the integrated advocacy work that group executed to advocate for reparations for the Burge torture survivors:

After Burge was convicted, I felt the conviction was not meeting the material needs of the torture survivors...We convened a group of artists, educators, torture survivors, family members, activists. We put out an open call and invited everyone under the sun to submit a speculative memorial. How would they memorialize the Burge torture cases? We wanted not only reckoning with the heinous racist violence that these cases involved, but to do justice to the perseverance and resilience of the torture survivors and their family members. We promised everyone that all submissions would be in the exhibit.

In October of 2012, we had an exhibit of over 70 submissions at the Sullivan Galleries, which is part of The Art Institute of Chicago. In addition to sculpture, photographs, and audio, we had people submit how they would teach the torture cases in their sociology class or international human rights class...As part of the speculative memorial, I drafted a reparations ordinance. Never in my wildest dreams did I think we were going to file this. (Loew & Feeley, 2021, paras. 46-50)

This advocacy and healing work brought the torture survivors’ cases, and the reality of racist state violence, out of the courts and into neighborhoods and art galleries for the public to wrestle with in visual, visceral ways. Chicagoans were invited to hear and hold the survivors’ stories and needs, and help build the path toward collective healing, repair, and justice.

This effort to move the stories of the torture survivors into the court of public opinion continued until the reparations ordinance passed in 2015. From 2010 to 2015, CTJM engaged in six public initiatives and programs, two art exhibitions, and over 10 direct actions, including a “Reparations Now” light installation outside of Mayor Emanuel’s home, staged by The Chicago Light Brigade and Project NIA (Chicago Torture Justice Memorials Foundation, n.d.). When discussing the reparations case, Mogul emphasizes that “it was the organizing campaign that won [the] reparations, not a legal battle” (Loew & Feeley, 2021, para. 66). The historic reparations ordinance was a legal, policy win, but it could only be achieved by building and exerting pressure outside the courts, which then forced Chicago’s powerful elite to concede.

Emergence of Movement Lawyering as a Rebuttal to Legal Liberalism

While we have established that movement lawyering emerged as a rebuttal to legal liberalism, it is important to more fully explore the context it responds to as a means of

drawing parallels to professionalized social work. In the 1970s, the legal liberalism prevalent in the mid-century began to garner harsh critique. The two main criticisms directed at legal liberalism by critical legal scholars during this time were the following: (1) lawyers were not accountable to the clients they claimed to represent and serve, and (2) the law was not an efficacious way to meaningfully change the economic, political, social, and cultural landscape (Cummings, 2020). Cummings summarizes these two interrelated issues by saying that the practice of legal liberalism “asserted standing to speak on behalf of the underrepresented, misinterpreting their needs and misdirecting their dissent into legal channels where it withered and died” (Cummings, 2018, p. 362). Derrick Bell’s 1976 critique of legal liberalism used the example of NAACP lawyers fighting for integration when Black people were more concerned with their children receiving a quality education, even if they were receiving it in segregated schools (Bell, 1976; Cummings, 2020). This critique is more overtly tied to the problem of lawyer accountability under legal liberalism, elevating the motivations and concerns of the lawyer above those of the community, but it is also related to the issue of efficacy. We are now nearly 70 years beyond the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that named state-sanctioned segregation as a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, and that legal decision did not meaningfully impact racial reform, nor did it secure quality schooling for Black communities (Bell, 2004).

Social Work as a Neoliberal Enterprise

Since its inception, professionalized social work has been criticized for issues of accountability and efficacy, and these critiques have only become more prominent in recent years. It is well known among social workers that the modern social work profession in the U.S. originates from Charity Organization Societies (COS) and the Settlement House Movement (SHM; Finn, 2016; Trattner, 1998). Around the turn of the 20th century, predominantly white women from privileged backgrounds took up the mantle of “friendly visitors” and sought to uplift the poor through moral counsel, advocating against traits such as idleness, intemperance, and thriftlessness, and the giving of alms to those deemed worthy of relief (Becker, 1963; Prevey, 1899). COS would become the foundation for micro-level casework, while the SHM would become the groundwork for mezzo- and macro-level social work.

Unlike the COS, the SHM focused on group work and aimed to partner with mainly white immigrant community members to help make the present more survivable for them, while also working to change the social conditions that were constraining their everyday lives. While the SHM, in many ways, moved away from the hierarchical charity model favored by the COS, it was “also informed and constrained by a white-middle-class worldview” (Finn, 2016, p. 63). The settlement house workers were guided by racist and classist politics similar to their COS counterparts; one of their central goals for the families they worked with was assimilation into U.S. society, and the SHM commonly refused to work with communities of color, Black communities in particular (Finn, 2016; Lasch-Quinn, 1993). The SHM was an important strand in the development of professionalized social work but does not represent a true politic of solidarity, as it is often discussed within

mainstream texts on social work history (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Finn, 2016; Lasch-Quinn, 1993).

Over the past century, social work has evolved along with the social and political context of the United States. Social workers have played contested roles in the development of the New Deal, in the American Civil Rights Movement, and in the expansion and shrinking of the welfare state. While many modern social workers eschew connections to the “friendly visitors” of the past, we argue (along with many others) that the profession has made limited advancements from the charity model (Abramovitz & Sherraden, 2016; Brady et al., 2019; Krings et al., 2019; Lane & Pritzker, 2018; Reisch, 2013; Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014; Specht & Courtney, 1995). Further, social work and social welfare services in the United States today are heavily shaped by a predominantly neoliberal political paradigm that emphasizes market dynamics, individualism, privatization, and managerialism (Brady et al., 2019; Harris, 2014; Toft et al., 2023). Abramovitz (2012) posits that neoliberalism

argues for market rules to govern societies in the belief the advancement of human well-being depends on the liberation of the individual initiative within an institutional framework based on free markets, free trade, and private property rights, and in which the government’s main role to create the conditions for profitable market activity then to step back. (p. 33)

Within this context, the social work profession has helped to advance the privatization of social services, attempted to harness market forces through fee-for-service and social enterprise models, and adopted increasingly bureaucratic accreditation and licensure processes in the name of professionalization (Ferguson, 2009; Reisch, 2013).

Perhaps most significantly, social work has deepened rather than forgone its hyper-focus on the individual and on the advancement of personal well-being in response to social problems. Many social work scholars have already documented the outsized emphasis among social work education and practice on mental health assessment and diagnosis, group work, and clinical skills (Hill et al., 2017; Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014; Reisch, 2016; Specht & Courtney, 1995). The 2018 National Social Work Workforce Study found that 82% of social workers were serving in a clinical capacity with individuals, families, or groups; less than 10% were engaging in indirect work; and less than 6% in direct work with communities (Salsberg et al., 2020). Social work programs do offer “macro” courses, but they are more likely to focus on topics such as nonprofit administration and policy advocacy than grassroots organizing or social action. Like lawyers working in the context of legal liberalism, even macro social workers have relied on the courts and other bureaucratic sites to advance incremental, reformist social change.

While the above-mentioned forms of social work practice can have value and impact, neoliberal social work, by design, neglects and even undermines real social change. Helping social work clients to survive (or indeed thrive) within a deeply inequitable social context, while making no meaningful effort to upend that social landscape, upholds the charity model of professional social work. Further, the newer generation of workers in the field, who are now facing a crescendo of global economic, political, and social crises, are interrogating and, in some cases, rejecting the profession’s outsize focus on within-system

advocacy efforts (e.g., legislative efforts) that have kept our social landscape stagnant. This is not unlike the experiences of movement lawyers, who have realized the limitations of the courts as spaces for the pursuit of real justice. As a result, we invite the social work profession to learn from and extend the work of movement lawyers and mobilized clients as they develop new, collective strategies for advancing social change.

Movement Social-Working and Abolitionist Praxis

Movement social-working can be situated within abolitionist praxis, which has been a growing area of study and struggle within professionalized social work, most notably, since the rebellions for Black liberation in the summer of 2020. Prison-industrial complex (PIC) abolition is a theory of change and practice that is committed to disrupting the economic, political, and social arrangements that create the conditions for social problems, needs, and harms to occur. Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie (2022) define PIC abolition as “a structural analysis of oppression, a political vision of a restructured society, a ‘theory of social life,’ or how we relate to one another, and a practical organizing strategy” (p. 14). PIC abolition is a tool that helps us understand the root causes of the harms happening across the world; the interconnectedness of the global struggles for liberation, health, and equity; and how we can behave and organize ourselves on various scales to remake our world to be one where all life is treated as precious.

The nationwide organizing efforts to defund the police during the summer of 2020 helped spark deep interest in PIC abolition among the newer generation of social workers and in the profession at large to wrestle with the praxis in ways it never had before (Jacobs et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024; The Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work, 2024). Around the time of those rebellions and since then, several abolitionist social work formations have emerged, such as the Network to Advance Abolition in Social Work (NAASW), the Abolitionist Social-Change Collective and the Abolition and Social Work Special Interest Group at the annual Society for Social Work and Research conference. These spaces welcome all people, with and without social work degrees and licenses, committed to progressive social change, and provide the education and resources to advance abolitionist praxis within all forms of social-change work.

Jacobs et al. (2021) defines anti-carceral or abolitionist social work as being “one that is life-affirming and supports the health, self-determination, and sustainability of all communities, particularly Black, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC), and others most oppressed and impacted by state violence” (p. 38). This growing movement within professionalized social work is the paradigm guiding and supporting movement social-working.

Conceptualizing a Social Work for Social Movements

Following the definition of movement lawyering, we define *movement social-working* as an approach to social-change work that centers solidarity with people and communities, and that practices integrated advocacy beyond the bounds of the professional worksite. Situated within the realm of macro social work, its primary purpose is to collaborate with

communities in non-hierarchical ways and to leverage the skills, access, and resources granted by professionalization (e.g., training, funding, networks, space, technology) to advance community-based movements that increase equity, health, and well-being for all people. In the following sections, we offer a conceptual structure for movement social-working practice. We map the two core elements of movement lawyering onto social work, understanding clients as mobilized and using integrated advocacy, and conclude by offering practical strategies for social workers to engage in this work, personally and as a profession.

Mobilized Clients: An Ethic of Solidarity

We have argued here that—with its roots in charity work and under the influence of neoliberal forces—the social work profession in the U.S. has continued to primarily serve marginalized people and communities through direct aid, and less frequently, through community organizing and advocacy. Modeled after the ethos and tactics of movement lawyering, *movement social-working* serves mobilized clients. Mobilized clients are those who are organized, engaging in movement work or embedded in communities unified around their issues of concern. This orientation requires a fundamental shift from top-down service provision to side-by-side (or, we argue, bottom-up) movement support. Movement social-working serves movements by responding to their direct needs (for instance, collaborating on mutual aid initiatives) and bolstering their political power (e.g., refusing to carry out harmful social welfare policies).

But what if our clients aren't mobilized? What if they are isolated and disconnected from the collective labor that might advance their liberation? Drawing from Cummings' definition, mobilized clients are those who "have the capacity to disrupt, and thereby influence politics" (Cummings, 2020, p. 100). We suggest that this includes all social work clients, viewed differently. Seeing our clients as mobilized, or having the capacity to mobilize, is a shift in professional ethos that influences not only which services we provide, but more importantly, how we relate to our clients and to our collective work. This does not require us to forgo survival work like connecting clients to food, housing, and coping strategies. However, it asks us to view ourselves as collaborators with our clients and to view our mutual survival and livelihoods as inextricable. Under our conceptualization of movement social-working, there is no separation between direct service and movement work. As direct service providers, movement social workers would join with clients in solidarity to not only navigate but circumvent and overturn harmful systems. Direct service and immediate survival work should be viewed as an entry point on a trajectory of social-change work. Movement social workers view their clients, even in direct service settings, as having agency, power, and the capacity to mobilize, and are willing to join those clients and leverage their role and resources to enact social change.

Paradigmatic shifts aligned with those we are articulating have been in development for some time in the international context, as social workers around the world contend with neoliberal globalization and socio-political upheaval. Since 2010, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), International Association of Schools of Social Work, and the International Council on Social Welfare have advanced a Global Agenda

for Social Work and Social Development focused on improving social work's contributions to social development, politics, and social change. Among others, social workers in Portugal, Greece, and Spain have been working toward the "(re)politicization of social work" (Ioakimidis et al., 2014, p. 286). Ioakimidis and colleagues (2014) describe this process as being "characterized by active mobilizations, activist interventions, facilitation of grassroots alliances and articulation of powerful political arguments, which have largely replaced the mainstream academic and professional jargon of the past" (p. 293). In Greece, social workers have joined in mass mobilizations to refuse the implementation of oppressive tax policies, engaged in radical street-work to provide support and solidarity on the ground level, and participated in public protests alongside community and student groups (Truell, 2015). Social workers in Spain have joined with their clients in an "Orange Tide," mobilizing against government austerity measures and cuts to social services (Truell, 2014). In these cases, social workers have put themselves at risk alongside their clients, even forgoing pay (Truell, 2015). During its 2014 general assembly, the IFSW (2014) ratified a new definition of social work as "a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that facilitates social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people" (para. 4). Further, IFSW's (2018) Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles extends social workers' ethical call toward social justice to include obligations to "[challenge] discrimination and institutional oppression," (para. 13) "[challenge] unjust policies and practices," (para. 20) and "[build] solidarity" (para. 23).

While there are, and always have been, social workers in the United States who move from a politic of solidarity and collaboration (Bell, 2014; Lasch-Quinn, 1993; Reid-Merritt, 2010; Reisch & Andrews, 2002), this approach to professionalized social work labor has largely been at the margins. There are many reasons for this, including the field's historical roots in and unabated commitment to whiteness (Gregory, 2021), as well as the governing ideologies and systems of racial capitalism and neoliberalism. Stemming from these roots, present commitments, and overarching oppressive systems comes a practice of professionalized workers overlooking the extent to which our clients are mobilized (or mobilizing) social-change agents, and instead viewing them as vulnerable subjects in need of charity. Documenting the rise of empowerment discourse within social work since the 1960s, McLaughlin (2016) notes the shift, even within empowerment theory, from politicized to individualized, moralistic narratives. Moving into an ethic of solidarity will require social workers to interrogate paternalism and white saviorism in social work, along with our desire to maintain our power as "professionals."

Integrated Advocacy: Expanding and Reconsidering Social Work's Sites of and Approaches to Collective Struggle

In movement lawyering, "thinking outside the courts" is the precursor to deploying integrated advocacy, and social workers adopting a more emancipatory view of where our work is needed, and possible, is required for movement social-working to take root. By and large, professionalized social workers are trained to view their social-change work as being singularly bound to their place of employment (i.e., the agency, organization, or institution that pays them for their labor). Just as movement lawyers understand that the courts are not

the central sites of policy contestation, social workers must understand that their paid work environments are not the key avenues for transformative, anti-oppressive social-change work. All paid work environments are intentionally constrained spaces because people in power will not pay their workers to disrupt the social arrangement that created and maintains their elitist position (INCITE!, 2017). This is not to say that impactful work cannot or does not come from these environments, but rather that (1) the job sites themselves are critical sites of struggle and must be faced with opposition, and (2) social workers must connect with people and efforts outside of their paid work environments to contribute to social change. While the organizations governing professionalized social work in the U.S. have not articulated our labor and goals in this way, the IFSWs' Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles has: Principle 3.5, "Building Solidarity," states "Social workers actively work in communities and with their colleagues, *within and outside of the profession*, to build networks of solidarity to work toward transformational change and inclusive and responsible societies" (emphasis added; International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). Bringing this vision into domestic professionalized social work opens up endless opportunities for care, collaboration, and movement advancement.

The #StopCopCity movement in Atlanta, Georgia, is one of the most powerful current examples of a mobilized effort combining "modes of advocacy...to maximize political pressure" (Cummings, 2020, p. 105). For more than two years, Atlanta residents, forest defenders, bail fund organizers, faith leaders, movement lawyers, and countless others have come together to denounce, through a variety of tactics, city leadership's desire to destroy the Weelaunee Forest and develop a \$90 million police urban-warfare center in its place (Akbar, 2023; Herskind, 2023). The unrelenting, decentralized, coalitional movement to protect the Weelaunee Forest—one of the "four lungs" of Atlanta—has included a variety of efforts by community members working outside the boundaries of their traditional sites of professional practice. For example, two Unitarian Universalist clergy cast a striking scene in September 2023 when they, alongside fellow activists, chained themselves to construction equipment while wearing their clerical robes (Lennard, 2023; Scott, 2023). Social workers may be involved in the #StopCopCity movement, but they have not been professionally visible. In this case, movement social workers would leverage their professional status and resources in solidarity with the movement—activating professional networks and organizations to amplify movement demands, coordinating the addition of skilled services to existing mutual aid initiatives, and engaging in legal advocacy for jailed demonstrators, for instance.

We are not arguing that these struggle-site expansions and collaborations never happen among professionalized social workers and organizers/movements in the U.S., but rather that they are viewed and taught as peripheral to our work as opposed to integral. The whiteness and capitalistic values embodied by the elite who have shaped professionalized social work in the U.S., means that legitimacy, recognition, and power have been prioritized over radical economic, political, and social transformation. A continued centering of the survival and growth of professionalized social work requires a workforce dedicated to the trappings of "specialization" and licensure, and to individual-level interventions that ignore organized abandonment and structural violence. We, workers within the field, across all job sites, must problematize "professionalization" and

(re)educate ourselves and each other about the intentional constraints of this labor model, and the myriad ways it discourages workers from being antagonistic to oppression and inciting real social change.

Discussion and Implications

We have argued in this manuscript that engaging in movement social-working requires fundamental shifts. First, the social work profession must embody a true ethic of solidarity with its clients, disentangling itself from decades of charity-minded service. The separation between professional social workers and our clients is a comforting illusion for many, yet it is untrue and detrimental to radical movement work. Living under the oppressive systems of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy means we are all in a burning house together. Movement social-working is collective labor for our collective well-being. Second, social workers must alter our shared understanding of how and where change happens. Historical and present-day movements show us that transformative social change rarely happens in paid work environments and state-sanctioned processes. Workers within the confines of the profession must bring their contributions to the varied sites of struggle that are proliferating in communities around the world. We conclude with practical ideas for what may be required of U.S.-based professional social work to enact this vision, what professional social workers can do individually in the absence of the field's engagement, and finally, a set of questions that invite deep reflection on our roles and responsibilities in forging solidarity and expanding sites of struggle.

Implications for the Social Work Profession

We are in a political moment of deepening fascism: “authoritarian nationalism, heteropatriarchy, hyper-militarism, dominance, exclusion, elitism, and supremacy” (Critical Resistance, 2021, p. 4). In this context, professional social work bodies in the U.S. should once again reflect on our code of ethics and appraise how it may be contributing to a defanged social work. The last major revision of the NASW Code of Ethics was in 2017, what the organization itself called “the most substantive revisions to the NASW Code of Ethics since 1996” (NASW, n.d., para. 41). At minimum, the code should be reexamined in response to increasingly rapid changes in the economic, social, political, environmental, and technological contexts, and in response to emerging understandings of how the field should uphold its mandate to affect social justice and systemic change. For instance, ideas such as shifting the code of ethics’ language and guidance from “values” to “political commitments” can and should be considered (Sarantakos et al., 2026). This change refutes the long-held notion that “social workers’ ethical behavior should result from their personal commitment to engage in ethical practice” (NASW, 2021, Purpose section, para. 10) and insists that our field must also have a *collective* understanding of and commitment to social justice.

Academic institutions are also a primary site for shaping the social work profession through education, workforce development, and knowledge creation and dissemination. Institutions of higher education must thoughtfully evaluate the congruence of existing curriculum designs (including field work protocols and partnerships) and social work’s

aspirations related to social change. Social work course work is currently fragmented, falsely suggesting that social work students can choose between micro and macro work (Finn & Molloy, 2021). The thoughtful integration of direct aid and movement work can be cultivated in the classroom, where educators de-emphasize specialization and help students develop a holistic understanding of their responsibilities toward direct action and social change. Further, social work programs can cultivate field work sites outside of traditional social work contexts, addressing the barriers that prevent students from completing their field education in movement spaces. These actions may introduce tensions related to some of social work's traditional ethical "givens," such as the management of professional boundaries, dual relationships, and mandatory reporting, requiring educators to wrestle with the application of ethical guidelines inside and outside of the classroom. The academy can further support the evolution of movement social-working through the development of movement social work, or research investigations and analyses "done in solidarity with social movements, local organizing, and other forms of collective struggle" (Akbar et al., 2021, p. 826). Conducting research with social movements and the organizers building them can glean crucial, real-time insights into how to sharpen efforts. This timely analytical work is often difficult for organizers to engage in while movement-building.

Implications for Professional Social Workers

While this paper is an invitation to the field, it is our view that professional social workers should engage with the ideas of movement social-working even in the absence of action by our professional bodies. By forging a sense of solidarity with their clients and expanding their view of when and where social-change work occurs, social workers can choose to orient themselves within a philosophy of movement social-working. This could manifest in many ways:

- A social worker leverages their professional networks to call attention to a transformative social movement and its demands via social media, email listservs, or other opportunities to educate and ask for action;
- A social worker with clinical, conflict resolution, or transformative justice skills offers to facilitate a free or low-cost recurring space for organizers within a movement to discuss and work through complex emotions, harms, and burnout;
- A faculty member in a department of social work explores free or low-cost meeting-space options on their campus for local community organizers to gather, and helps facilitate the organizers' access to these spaces, including assisting with the university's reservation requirements;
- A practitioner or researcher with experience writing successful grants can work with organizers struggling to access funds for their work and help them develop a competitive grant application. They can also run free workshops for organizers to help provide them with a stronger overall toolkit for grant writing.

These four examples represent simple ways for social workers to share resources, skills, and power with mobilized community members. These are services that, though seemingly small, are often highly sought-after and difficult for grassroots organizers and organizations to access. They can also be viewed as entry points from which more detailed integrated advocacy plans can be developed.

To engage in the collaborations named above, a relationship and a baseline level of trust needs to be established between the social worker and the mobilized group, as with any collaborative effort. For example, showing up to meetings because of political alignment and commitments and not for self-gratification or professional interests (e.g., academic research and writing or resume fodder); spending more time listening and understanding than speaking; volunteering for the unglamorous, behind-the-scenes labor of organizing; and making connections between what is needed to advance the mobilized group's work and what resources and skills you have access to. Through this principled engagement and needs assessment, social workers can proactively approach mobilized groups with ideas for integrated advocacy and build new strategies and tactics from these discussions. This boundary-spanning social movement work is not peripheral to professionalized social work, but integral to it.

An Offering for Reflexive Engagement and Continued Development

We hope the conceptual structure we present in this paper will prompt further reflection, conversation, and development. To assist others in engaging with the concepts of movement social-working, we offer several questions broken into three sets (see Table 1). The first set of questions is focused on preparing professionalized social workers for direct engagement with mobilized communities. These questions guide social workers to look outside of their professional worksites and envision opportunities to be in solidarity with movements. Questions two and three are adapted from a list of prompts created by the abolitionist writer and organizer Mariame Kaba called "Questions I regularly ask myself when I'm outraged by injustice" (Abolition, 2019, para. 1).

The second set of questions prompts professionalized social workers to interrogate the approaches to social change that have been uplifted in their professional training and reinforced culturally and politically, as well as to examine the inner workings of a political shift they think was pivotal. This set of questions can be thought of as a political education tool, best utilized through a group process. The third set of questions invites social workers to consider, both individually and in community, their personal and professional capacities to engage differently with social-change work, including an examination of the risks and responsibilities that this work presents. The final question is slightly adapted from one found on a list called "As you strategize in the face of cynicism, ask yourself these questions," created by Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba (Hayes & Kaba, 2023, p. 101). We hope that these questions prompt continued conversation about the role and responsibilities of professionalized social work in forging solidarity with clients and expanding our sites of struggle, and additional conceptual development of theories and practices for engaging with movement social-working.

Table 1. *Reflexive Question Sets to Forge Solidarity and Expand Sites of Struggle*

A Reflexive Exercise For Movement Social-Working	
Set One Preparing to Engage with Mobilized Communities	1. Why is it my duty as a community member, and worker committed to social change, to labor in spaces outside of my paid work environment? 2. What movement work is happening within my geography, around the issue(s) I care deeply about? 3. What is my capacity to engage in this work?
Set Two Interrogating Our Approaches to Social-Change Work	1. What levers of societal change have been taught and reinforced to me (both inside and outside of the profession), and why are these levers being uplifted so powerfully and privileged over others? 2. What specific changes have come as a result of those traditional levers, and what can I identify as the limitations of those levers? 3. Identify an economic, social, or political shift that occurred that you believe made the world more equitable, and explore the following: a. Who were the key players involved and where was their power center located (e.g., the courts, the community, the legislature)? b. What role did policy makers play in making the needle move? c. What role did mobilized community members play in making the needle move? d. Was the resulting shift one that met the needs of those most directly in need of, and demanding, change? If not, what prevented that result from coming to fruition?
Set Three Exploring Our Capacities to Engage in Movement Social-Working	1. What specific skills, resources, and power do I possess, and how can I leverage those things to advance the social-change efforts? 2. What are the risks of engaging in this work, and how can they be individually and collectively mitigated?

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored movement lawyering, particularly its application in the Chicago Reparations case, as an ethos and a set of tactics that centers mobilized clients through the use of integrated advocacy that stretches beyond the courts. We have drawn parallels between the tradition of legal liberalism, which movement lawyering responds to, and neoliberal social work. Finally, we have offered a definition and conceptual exploration of movement social-working as a social work approach that forges solidarity with their clients and expands the site of struggle beyond the professional workplace and into the community where movements for transformative social change are unfolding. Petitjean (2023) states that

professional work...requires a particular form of detachment on the part of the professional: they have no personal interest in the case at hand, yet they have an

interest in solving it through the application of the body of knowledge they master (p. 29)

As longtime organizers who also labor within professionalized social work, we see this detachment within the field of social work and find it incongruous with the stated values of the profession and the reasons we came to this work. Our hope is that movement social-working can help strengthen our field's ability to embrace our fundamental interconnectedness and "[connect] struggles to make life differently" (R. Gilmore, personal communication, November 9, 2023).

References

- Abolition: A Journal of Insurgent Politics. (2019, May 15). [Questions I regularly ask myself when I'm outraged about injustice](#) [Repost of M. Kaba (@prisonculture) status update]. Facebook.
- Abramovitz, M. (2012). [Theorising the neoliberal welfare state for social work](#). In M. Gray, J. Midgley, & S. A. Webb (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of social work* (pp. 33-50). Sage.
- Abramovitz, M., & Sherraden, M. S. (2016). [Case to cause: Back to the future](#). *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52(sup1), S89-S98.
- Akbar, A. A. (2023, Spring). [The fight against Cop City: The protests in Atlanta build on a history of organizers challenging prison construction as a force for environmental destruction](#). *Dissent Magazine*.
- Akbar, A. A., Ashar, S., & Simonson. (2021). [Movement law](#). *Stanford Law Review*, 73, 821-884.
- Becker, D. G. (1963). [Early adventures in social casework: The charity agent, 1880–1910](#). *Social Casework*, 44(5), 255-261.
- Bell, D. (2004). [Silent covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the unfulfilled hopes for racial reform](#). Oxford University Press.
- Bell Jr., D. A. (1976). [Serving two masters: Integration ideals and client interests in school desegregation litigation](#). *Yale Law Journal*, 85(4), 470-517.
- Bell, J. M. (2014). [The Black Power movement and American social work](#). Columbia University Press.
- Brady, S., Sawyer, J. M., & Perkins, N. H. (2019). [Debunking the myth of the 'radical profession': Analysing and overcoming our professional history to create new pathways and opportunities for social work](#). *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 7(3), 315-332.
- Chapman, C., & Withers, A. J. (2019). [Violent history of benevolence: Interlocking oppression in the moral economies of social working](#). University of Toronto Press.
- Chicago Torture Justice Memorials Foundation. (2023). [Reparations history](#). Author.

- Critical Resistance. (2021, June 30). *The Abolitionist Issue 34: Fascism & Neoliberalism*. Author.
- Cummings, S. L. (2017). [Movement lawyering](#). *University of Illinois Law Review*, 2017, 1645-1732.
- Cummings, S. L. (2018). [The social movement turn in law](#). *Law & Social Inquiry*, 43(2), 360-416.
- Cummings, S. L. (2020). [Movement lawyering](#). *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 27(1), 87-130.
- Ferguson, I. (2009). [Another social work is possible! Reclaiming the radical tradition](#). In V. Leskosek (Ed.), *Theories and methods of social work: Exploring different perspectives* (pp. 81-98). University of Ljubljana.
- Finn, J. L. (2016). *Just practice: A social justice approach to social work*. Oxford University Press.
- Finn, J., & Molloy, J. (2021). [Advanced integrated practice: Bridging the micro-macro divide in social work pedagogy and practice](#). *Social Work Education*, 40(2), 174-189.
- Gregory, J. R. (2021). [The imperative and promise of neo-abolitionism in social work](#). *Journal of Social Work*, 21(5), 1203-1224.
- Guinier, L., & Torres, G. (2014). [Changing the wind: Notes toward a demosprudence of law and social movements](#). *The Yale Law Journal*, 123(8), 2740-2804.
- Harris, J. (2014). [Against Neoliberal social work](#). *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 2(1), 7-22.
- Hayes, K., & Kaba, M. (2023). *Let this radicalize you: Organizing and the revolution of reciprocal care*. Haymarket Books.
- Herskind, M. (2023, August 15). [Decarceral pathways: A constellation of tactics](#). *Inquest*.
- Hill, K., Erickson, C. L., Donaldson, L. P., Fogel, S. J., & Ferguson, S. M. (2017). [Perceptions of macro social work education: An exploratory study of educators and practitioners](#). *Advances in Social Work*, 18(2), 522-542.
- International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW]. (2014, July). [Global definition of social work](#). Author.
- IFSW. (2018, July 2). [Global social work Statement of Ethical Principles](#). Author.
- INCITE! Women of color against violence. (Ed.). (2017). [The revolution will not be funded: Beyond the non-profit industrial complex](#). Duke University Press.
- Ioakimidis, V., Santos, C. C., & Herrero, I. M. (2014). [Reconceptualizing social work in times of crisis: An examination of the cases of Greece, Spain and Portugal](#). *International Social Work*, 57(4), 285-300.
- Jacobs, L., Kim, M. E., Whitfield, D. L., Gartner, R. E., Panichelli, M., Kattari, S. K., Downey, M. M., McQueen, S. S., & Mountz, S. E. (2021). [Defund the police](#):

- [Moving towards an anti-carceral social work](#). *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 32(1), 37-62.
- Kaba, M., & Ritchie, A. J. (2022). [No more police: A case for abolition](#). The New Press.
- Kim, M. E., Rasmussen, C., & Washington, D. M. (Eds.). (2024). *Abolition and social work: Possibilities, paradoxes, and the practice of community care*. Haymarket Books.
- Krings, A., Fusaro, V., Nicoll, K. L., & Lee, N. Y. (2019). [Social work, politics, and social policy education: Applying a multidimensional framework of power](#). *Journal of Social Work Education*, 55(2), 224-237.
- Lane, S. R., & Pritzker, S. (2018). [Political social work: Using power to create social change](#). Springer.
- Lasch-Quinn, E. (1993). *Black neighbors: Race and the limits of reform in the American settlement house movement, 1890-1945*. UNC Press Books.
- Lennard, N. (2023, September 7). [Defying RICO indictment, faith leaders chain themselves to bulldozer to stop Cop City](#). *The Intercept*.
- Loew, L. & Feeley, D. (2021, July/August). [Torture, reparations, & healing: Interview with Joey Mogul](#). *Against the Current* (No. 213).
- McLaughlin, K. (2016). [Empowerment: A critique](#). Routledge.
- Mogul, J. (2016). [The struggle for reparations in the Burge torture cases: The grassroots struggle that could](#). *Public Interest Law Reporter*, 21(3), 209-225.
- National Association of Social Workers [NASW]. (n.d.). [Highlighted revisions to the code of ethics](#). Author.
- NASW. (2021). [Read the code of ethics](#). Author.
- Petitjean, C. (2023). *Occupation: Organizer: A Critical History of Community Organizing in America*. Haymarket Books.
- Prevey, C. E. (1899). [Economic aspects of charity organization](#). *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 14(1), 1-17.
- Reid-Merritt, P. (2010). *Righteous self-determination: The Black social work movement in America*. Black Classic Press, Inprint Editions.
- Reisch, M. (2013). [Social work education and the neo-liberal challenge: The US response to increasing global inequality](#). *Social Work Education*, 32(6), 715-733.
- Reisch, M. (2016). [Why macro practice matters](#). *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52(3), 258-268.
- Reisch, M., & Andrews, J. (2002). *The road not taken: A history of radical social work in the United States*. Routledge.

- Rothman, J., & Mizrahi, T. (2014). [Balancing micro and macro practice: A challenge for social work](#). *Social Work*, 59(1), 91-93.
- Salsberg, E., Quigley, L., Richwine, C., Sliwa, S., Acquaviva, K., & Wyche, K. (2020). [The social work profession: Findings from three years of surveys of new social workers](#). George Washington University.
- Sarantakos, S., Toraiif, N., & Samimi, C. (2026). [Abolitionist pedagogy and its invitation to rethink and remake our world](#). *Abolitionist Perspectives in Social Work*, 4(1), 1-18.
- Scott, M. (2023, September 7). [Construction work stopped briefly as Cop City protesters enter site](#). *Rising Tide North America* [Cross-posted from *Atlanta Community Press Collective*].
- Specht, H., & Courtney, M. E. (1995). *Unfaithful angels: How social work has abandoned its mission*. Simon and Schuster.
- The Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work. (2024, June 10). [Abolitionist social work](#). Inquest.
- Toft, J., Lightfoot, E. B., Calhoun, M., Choy-Brown, M., Merighi, J. R., Renner, L. M., Soffer-Elnekave, R., Mendel, J., & Marsalis, S. (2023). [Effects of neoliberalism on social work practice in the United States: A scoping review](#). *Social Work Research*, 47(2), 99-110.
- Trattner, W. I. (1998). *From poor law to welfare state: A history of social welfare in America*. Simon and Schuster.
- Truell, R. (2014, July 11). [Spanish social work leader wins award for ‘inspirational’ anti-cuts movement](#). *The Guardian*.
- Truell, R. (2015, May 19). [Social work in Greece: ‘I haven’t been paid for nine months’](#). *The Guardian*.

Author note: Address correspondence to Sophia Sarantakos, 2148 S. High Street, Denver, CO, 80208. Email: Sophia.Sarantakos@du.edu

ORCID:

Sophia Sarantakos  [0000-0003-0147-0365](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0147-0365)

Shannon Sliva  [0000-0002-9351-8217](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9351-8217)