Purpose

The purpose of the Tree of Oppression/Tree of Liberation exercise is to get folks thinking about the root causes of the problems they experience and see in their workplaces and communities, and to introduce the concept of doing “root work” to transform the underlying systems.

Flow

- This is usually a group discussion, but can work as a conversation. Begin with a tree drawn on butcher paper.
- Ask people to identify some of the issues they deal with in their workplace or community, and write these on the leaves. If folks offer what are really “root” causes (such as “racism”), push them for specific manifestations (for example, “racial profiling”).
- Ask the group to identify the institutions that support those leaves, and write these in the trunk of the tree. Examples of these could be “state policies,” or “the school system.”
- Then ask the group to identify what are some of the root causes of these problems. Facilitator should push folks to who offer up vague things like “greed” or “prejudice” to get to words that are more descriptive of systems (“corporate domination” or “capitalism,” “institutional racism” or “white supremacy”). Write these on the roots of the tree.
- We call this the Tree of Oppression. Introduce the concept of “root work” – that while work to prune the leaves is important to people’s day to day lives, we can’t uproot the tree of oppression without also doing work that gets at the roots of the problem.
- If time permits, have people do five minutes in pairs thinking about the Tree of Liberation – what are the leaves (things we want to see in society) and the roots (the underlying systems that make that possible), followed by popcorn-style report-backs on leaves and roots and short time for discussion. If running short on time, give folks a minute to think silently about it, then pull responses from the large group, perhaps going around to ensure equal participation, following with short time for discussion.

Key Points

- We have seen that a lot of effort is spent trying to deal with these “leaves” as a way to address the problems. When people are homeless we build homeless shelters, for example. While it is important to address the leaves, because these issues are impacting our lives in very real ways, we believe that it is not enough, because without addressing the roots, or the causes of these problems we are experiencing, we will just see new leaves popping up.
- To use the Healthcare Is a Human Right Campaign as an example – the leaves are the un- and underinsured, and we can prune the leaves with free clinics. The roots are not only the current system, but (deeper) corporate power in government (the trunk) and
(even deeper) the commodification of health (roots).

- The key to this exercise is to push participants to think all the way up and down the tree: there are some participants who may spend a lot of time thinking about the root causes, but haven’t engaged in their community and have a harder time identifying the leaves. Similarly, some participants may have a lot of personal experience with the leaves, but may not have had experience exploring the root causes.

- The Tree of Liberation is an open visioning process and can be facilitated with a pretty light hand, but do make sure that it addresses gender, racial and class liberation.

- Make sure everyone gets a chance to contribute to the Tree of Liberation.

- Coming up with the “roots” for the Tree of Liberation is really difficult; this is because we do not have a common language (and especially because we do not have a common understanding of capitalism). This is a weakness in our movement, and will require a lot of dialogue and discussion to develop. If we were industrial workers 100 years ago in Europe, for example, we would label the roots of the Tree of Liberation “socialism,” if we were peasants in China in the 1940s we would say “communism,” etc. Movements in Latin America are beginning to use the term “21st Century Socialism.”