

Fair Compensation for Southern California Organizers: A Summary of Organizer Focus Groups

Background and Overview

Community organizers in Southern California are working day in and day out to win big fights, build power and support their communities. They are also navigating rapidly rising costs of living, as even in a state like California (where the statewide minimum wage was recently raised to \$16 an hour), too many organizers still struggle financially and face hard choices about the longevity of their organizing careers as a result.

In November and December 2023, All Due Respect set out to hear directly from organizers about their experiences navigating decisions around compensation. Across four focus groups, we spoke with 23 organizers from 18 different base-building organizations. The majority of participants work in the greater Los Angeles region, including Long Beach, while others also came from San Bernardino and Ventura County. For some, this is their first organizing job, while others have been organizing for years across multiple organizations. They represent groups working on housing, workers' rights, LGBTQ and gender justice, faith-based organizing, immigrant rights, environmental justice and racial justice. For the sake of anonymity, all identifying details have been omitted.

From these conversations, three key takeaways stand out:

- **Many organizers are struggling to make ends meet.** As organizers consider current or future financial pressures, they face hard choices about “moving out or up”—leaving organizing, or having to pursue director-level work that takes them away from organizing—in order to support themselves.
- **Compensation policies aren't always clear to staff.** Many organizations have compensation policies that keep changing, or are not made transparent to staff. Organizers report that they want to be able to talk to their colleagues about compensation, but depending on their organizations, don't feel comfortable doing so or struggle to successfully advocate for themselves and others.
- **Organizers want to better understand budgets and fundraising.** Organizers may be aware of some of the pressures their organizations are facing when making decisions about budget and pay, and may generally recognize funders' roles, but organizations can do more to involve them in pushing for change.

What organizers are asking for is not unreasonable. **Many cite salaries ranging from \$80K to “six figures” to a few dollars more an hour, with health coverage for themselves and their dependents, investment in their retirement, and support to cope with the specific challenges of frontline organizing jobs.** Yet given the current state of the sector—with years of underinvestment in organizing, unrealistic funder expectations and the normalization of low pay—organizations often struggle to meet those expectations.

What Are Organizers Currently Experiencing?

- Organizers rely on second jobs and support systems to supplement organizing work
- Benefits and paid time off help keep organizers in their jobs
- Low pay greatly impacts morale

Wages

While a handful of participants feel comfortable with their pay, many organizers are living paycheck to paycheck. As one organizer explains, “It’s the best pay that I’ve ever had in my life, but I still feel like I’m struggling to get by.” Another organizer names the perception that this is typical, noting, “When asking for a raise, they’re like, well, this is the standard rate in the industry, and the reality is, it’s kind of true.” Several participants speak about having to hold second jobs or side hustles, and know other organizers who have to do the same. Even those who mention receiving wage increases acknowledge that it isn’t enough given the rising costs of living. Another participant reflects,

We were able to get a pay raise, but before that, it was really difficult and my morale was really low because of that. It felt like I was paycheck to paycheck . . . And so there was a sigh of or a feeling of relief when we got that pay raise. But I know that there was also a lot of work to put into that, [and] I know we deserve so much more, all of us.

For the few who are financially stable, making more money is not a deciding factor to keep them in their jobs, but they acknowledge they might feel differently if they didn’t have the pay they do. As one organizer states, “It’s really serving the community and believing in the mission that makes me want to continue doing this work. [But] I will say if I wasn’t making a livable wage, that probably would affect it a little bit more.”

Another organizer shares, “It’s not the pay [that incentivizes] continu[ing] here, but also, we need to have something to feel safe, to feel comfortable, and not to worry about what will happen to my family if I don’t have enough money to cover the necessities.”

Benefits

Organizers express the importance of generous and supportive benefits, while at the same time emphasizing that they don’t always make up for low pay. As one participant reflects,

Benefits have a lot of impact on how you thrive in your role and your experience and how you feel about your pay . . . [Getting health benefits] kind of relieved some stress off my shoulders because that . . . took care of an expense that I was worrying about.

Another participant adds, “I am grateful for the benefits . . . At the same time, I do wish for pay specifically—that we were paid a bit more—just because everyone knows that wages are pretty stagnant and cost of living is going up so fast.”

Paid time off is a key benefit that helps keep organizers in their jobs, especially when they know friends and family in other industries without the same options. One person notes,

Something that has made me feel motivated to continue doing my job has been the amount of sick days, the amount of paid time off . . . we have organizational weeks off throughout the year . . . we have a whole month off starting December to January.

Another person cites their organization's unlimited vacation policy as “definitely a motivating factor to stay.” Others express gratitude for mental health days, regular flex days, a month off for winter holidays, and in one instance, the adoption of a four-day work week.

Organizers cite varying experiences with health care benefits. Those with fully paid premiums and plans that include dependents are appreciative, with one person sharing, “I'm so grateful to my organization for allowing this type of benefit.”

For others, however, they note the financial strain when they have to shoulder some of the cost. Even small changes are noticeable, with one organizer noting that their organization covers 70% of premiums and wishing they could cover 80% or 90% instead. Others cite the challenge of having to pay to cover dependents. One person tells a story of signing their partner up for benefits, then learning it was an additional \$1,000 a month and having to remove their partner from coverage. For other organizers, dental is not included in their plan and can be an added expense. As one organizer explains, “You can waive out of [dental] instead of paying, and that's what I do, because it's just one way that I can save money.”

Support Systems and Sustainability

Several organizers cite specific support people in their lives who enable them to continue organizing. One person speaks about feeling blessed to be able to live at home with a parent, sharing, “If I didn't have this situation, yeah, I think I would be worried.” Another organizer reflects,

A lot of organizers I know who can't access these benefits through their own workplaces are reliant on their partners or other people . . . who hold more access to wealth or financial stability in order to sustain themselves in organizing. And folks who don't have those relationships, [who] I've known, have had to switch or move out of the field or have just really struggled in continuing their organizing work.

As organizers look to the future, many also find that thinking about caregiving needs and family stability impacts their decision-making. As one participant shares, “I'm going to stay in this work for a bit, but if I want to be able to support my mom [after she retires] and take care of everything, yeah, that's a different setup.” Another organizer states,

When it was just me, then it didn't matter. I could have cared less. I didn't care about how much I was making, I didn't care if there was a retirement plan, if I had health insurance or not . . . And that has changed [with] my little baby . . . it's making me question whether or not I'm going to be able to do this for the long term.

Even those without immediate responsibilities speak about organizing as something they can do now, but anticipate that will change. One states,

I've only been in this organizing job for about three years now . . . because I don't have a family to take care of, I don't have any big responsibilities right now, I can afford to do that. But I do think about how, long-term, I will leave the field . . . just because the salary is not sustainable for raising a family or whatever it is that I want to do.

Others want to continue organizing, even giving up previous personal and retirement savings to support their work, but worry about what it will cost them. As one person confesses,

I'm worried about being priced out of my apartment. I'm worried about being elderly and homeless on the street. And when I think about my skill set, I have the skill set to make a lot more money, and I don't even like talking about that. But when things get more expensive . . . I can't help but think about that and think about, what's my long term plan to avoid the very outcomes I'm organizing against?

Morale

Organizers' experiences with pay and benefits deeply impact their morale on the job. One reflects, "I've been feeling very burnt out lately and so just even that little bit more help financially, I think, would make a huge difference." Another organizer recounts, regarding a past role: "My morale was just so low and it was just really hard to show up to work because I just didn't feel that our team was being compensated enough."

Multiple organizers comment on the many roles organizers hold and the emotional labor they do, building relationships and navigating second hand trauma in their work. As one person says, "You're a therapist, you're an organizer, you're a data keeper, you're a party planner . . . where is the limit?" Organizers also note that they are often told they are critical to the work of organizations or thanked for their labor, but that isn't always seen in their pay. As one states, "If we supposedly value this work so much and we're doing all this labor for the whole, to make us look good or whatever the intention is, then why can't the wages reflect that?"

What Are Organizers' Experiencing in Their Organizations?

- Compensation decisions can feel arbitrary or subjective when policies aren't clear
- The nature of organizing work creates specific challenges for organizations around balancing work schedules and overtime pay
- Organizers value transparency and want to be involved in co-creating solutions

Beliefs and Assumptions

As organizers reflect on the attitudes that they've encountered related to organizer compensation, they raise the perception that the only way to make more money is to become a director or move out of organizing altogether. One organizer shares,

There's this attitude that really normalizes, like, low pay for organizers, and that's if you want to have higher pay or like a living wage, then you have to move up this hierarchy in an organization, which is frustrating because that's not necessarily like, the work I want to be doing . . . There aren't a lot of models of folks who get to stay in community organizing long-term, with a long-term living wage, because people are pushed either out or up.

Some organizers speak about moving into other departments where the process for promotion is clearer, or moving into other roles in other organizations. One person explains, “I can't leave this job because looking around, the salary is pretty the same. The only way [to get a higher salary] is to leave the title organizer itself.” Participants also note the attitude that organizing shouldn't be about money, and how that can be used to justify low wages, with one sharing:

I have heard a lot of people say like, you do it for the outcome, not the income. I do, however, think that that's like backhandedly insulting to try to force people to humble themselves and just accept what may not be a livable wage for them.

Regarding a past job, another organizer says, “I could not move within the pay band even though they had the funds for it, and when I questioned that . . . I was told that this work is not all about money. ‘Why do you care so much about money?’ kind of messaging.”

Compensation Policies and Decision-Making

As organizers navigate their organizations, they run into compensation policies that are not yet established or may be unclear. For one person, when they needed parental leave and their organization did not have a policy, “The team worked very diligently . . . to create an entire maternity leave plan, which now can be used for whoever has a baby next.” As they reflect, the creation of this policy, as well as going above and beyond to ensure they could keep their health benefits, “just makes me want to stay in my position even more.”

In other cases, however, inconsistency can feel inequitable or subjective. For one organizer, they saw a difference in how their coworkers navigate compensation processes and their own experience without a consistent supervisor:

Other coworkers who do have supervisors, I've seen how their supervisors have advocated for them to get raises, to get promoted. I haven't been able to have that . . . I've had to do a lot of self-advocacy for myself and that, I haven't been supported with. I haven't had a raise in the past three years, and when I've asked for it, they said no.

For another organizer, they recall being hired for the same role as two others and all three being offered different salaries. From their perspective, “It just shows that management has this very subjective form of assessment when they offer a salary to someone.”

Raises

Many organizers are unsure how to ask for a raise. Some have suggested an annual review or evaluation process to their organizations, hoping that would create a clear pathway for raises. Even with evaluations, however, organizers express challenges with performance-based raises and the power that gives the evaluators. As one person recounts,

If I don't have a job description that actually, accurately reflects what I'm actually doing, then how can I be evaluated [on] it, right? And if my evaluator is saying, oh, I never mark anybody outstanding, I just don't do that . . . they're not being objective in their criteria and the way that they're applying it.

Someone else shares,

I remember giving all of these examples where I did my work, like, above and beyond, and all of these things, and it seemed like there were always reasons to find why I wasn't deserving of a raise . . . It felt like, no matter what I said, there was going to be something to counteract what I just said. So it made me feel really helpless.

When the evaluation process is the only path to a raise, it can add pressure to an already complicated process for organizers whose own economic security is at stake. And even if organizations decouple raises and performance evaluations, that can also leave organizers uncertain about how to proceed. As one organizer expresses,

[It feels like there's] a moment, a special moment when you ask for the raise. I don't know what is that moment? Because let's say that when they do . . . your evaluation . . . you think, oh, okay, I think I can ask for a raise. But they say, oh, you know what? This is only an evaluation, it's not to see if you can get a raise That's why I don't feel comfortable to ask for a raise, because I don't know what will be that moment to ask.

Transparency

For many of the organizers, they appreciate steps their organization has taken toward transparency around budgets and decision-making. One participant notes, “We're transparent about the books, so folks know how much of our budget is going to our salaries versus programming.” Another participant recalls a staff retreat where finance and development staff presented on the budget, including how much was spent on salaries and raises, which they found helpful. Another organizer reflects:

We all see how much each person makes, and I know how much the person in my role before me made as well. And so there's a lot of transparency around that and also in terms of how much money we have as an organization, which I appreciate. But my last organizing job was not like that at all. It was really difficult and frustrating.

As one participant shares, “I wish every organization and company was transparent about pay. I don't think this one is. If it is, it just might be like in documents that I haven't seen. But I just think it's a more transparent way to do business and to relate to one another.”

Workloads and Overtime

One ongoing challenge for organizers is managing workloads, schedules and legal requirements regarding overtime. One participant speaks about having compensatory time but not being sure their organization is utilizing it legally. Others comment that while they are asked to adjust their schedules to avoid overtime, they'd rather have overtime pay. The nature of organizing work can also create situations where, to avoid overtime, organizers are off in the middle of the day. One person explains how their organization has approached that:

For example, [if] we had to work in the morning and then we have an event in the evening, they'll pay us a percentage of our pay during that time. It was only because a lot of us were . . . like, this is annoying that we have to schedule our whole day for work and then are not getting paid for the middle of the day, but can't really do anything.

Another person expresses frustration at overtime and scheduling restrictions, when they don't match the nature of the work and are applied punitively. As they share, "If I work on a Sunday to write a quarter million dollar grant, even if it only takes me an hour and a half, then it's the 8th day in a row and so that's an overtime penalty and I get written up The way that 'we got to follow the law' stuff plays out, [it] ends up actually hurting . . . workers like me."

Finally, organizers note that sometimes paying staff higher salaries means hiring fewer staff, so those remaining may be making more money but have more to do as well. The cost of getting a raise is having an even bigger workload to bear.

Talking About Compensation

For some organizers, raising these topics within their organizations is daunting. A few mention having to prepare or work up the courage to do so. One shares, "I think we took probably like a good two months to prepare, like quadruple checking that we had the correct information We were very nervous." Another organizer offers a similar example, stating, "We had to strategically think about how we were going to ask for a raise for months in advance. Be like, oh, we can't be too forward, or we can't let them know that we're talking behind their back or whatever."

For others, previous experiences have led them to expect backlash or to be hesitant to raise the topic again. Someone says, "A lot of us will always agitate for change, but . . . it doesn't come free, right? There'll be a bite on the other end when you try and assert yourself." Another organizer adds their own experience, explaining, "Benefits and pay inevitably came up, and that was not received very well It felt like we antagonized them. That was difficult to experience and has also kind of made me refrain from bringing it up later on." Someone else shares,

It can definitely feel taboo, especially . . . [if] they're already talking about how strained they are in terms of the budget, in terms of resources. So that when you and your

coworkers start to sort of commiserate about needing just a little bit more hourly, it can make it seem like you're kind of undermining the mission.

As one participant notes, talking about these issues in general can feel off limits: “There's a lot of stigma about talking about money anyway. There's a lot of fear about talking about pay in organizations or companies.” Others add that—whether through unionization processes or simply having coworkers to strategize with—bonding over shared experiences is meaningful. One person notes the benefit of having the guidance of a more experienced coworker, stating, “If not for him, I don't think I would have been as brave to demand a higher raise. I would have been scared because I'm still new.”

In one focus group, a participant notes that often the defensiveness seems to come from the perception that organizers are demanding that their leadership fix everything, as opposed to naming a challenge they themselves want to be part of helping to address:

It feels almost like instead of seeing it as like, we're a team and we're naming this as a problem, it's like, this is a problem and we want you to fix it . . . it's met with hesitation and almost just assumed responsibility. We're like, yeah, there is some responsibility for sure, in some of these positions, but then there's also like a collective process here.

A few organizers do state that raising these topics within their organizations would likely be welcomed. As one person reflects, “It seems like everyone seems happy with their pay and their benefits and it's just not a conversation. But I do think that it would be easy to have that conversation if we wanted to bring that up.”

Where Do Funders Fit In?

- Organizers have a general sense of how funding restrictions limit organizations
- Organizations can further involve organizers in pushing funders to shift practices

While organizers have varying levels of awareness on the funding landscapes their organizations are navigating, they report a general understanding of some of the barriers. As one organizer explains,

There's just this overlying sentiment of just undervaluing and lack of understanding of what true community engagement looks like and the dollar cost of that. It's not just, like, door knocking and leaving a leaflet. It's . . . the relationship building and how important and essential that is and how undervalued it is.

Others speak about the limitations of receiving grants that are earmarked for specific campaigns or coalitions, and therefore cannot go toward salaries. Another person shares,

The funding that is funding maybe half the team's pay is from a three year grant And I know I've heard the board talk about wanting to diversify funding sources. So that's probably a source of pressure for them when they're making [pay] decisions.

The way organizations have to pull together different funding sources also impacts organizers. One person gives an example of purchasing refreshments for a program and having to separate and turn in the receipts twice, “because the budget only covers the snacks and not the drinks.” As they comment, about their organization, “They have a lot of pressure on who's reviewing what they're spending on.” Other organizers note receiving wellness stipends or wellness days, but being aware that because they are through a one-time grant or implemented without funding, there are no guarantees they'll be renewed.

Finally, as one organizer reflects, “I'm constantly raising [these issues] now to funders But how are other organizations doing that, and being advocates for their teams . . . ? Because you can change one [organization] but that doesn't change an entire system.” As they note, while individual groups raising these issues with funders may yield some shifts, it will take a more concerted effort to see meaningful change on a sectoral level.

What Southern California Organizers Want

- Organizers want to be able to both afford basic costs and save for the future
- Meaningful benefits for organizers include time off, healthcare coverage, retirement and mental health supports

When asked what they would need to remain and thrive in their roles, some participants are initially hesitant to name a number, but offer calculations like, “You should be able to afford an apartment and rent,” or, “It would be nice to comfortably be able to afford a vehicle It would be nice to comfortably look at home ownership Those would make things a lot easier and definitely help me thrive in this role.” Similarly, one organizer suggests, “I would like to see my biweekly pay cover rent without any concern or any trouble. Then I have my extra biweekly pay for other necessities.”

For most organizers, recognizing that not every area in Southern California has the same cost of living, their eventual answers range between \$30-\$35 an hour up to “six figures,” with a number of participants naming “\$80k” or “\$100k” as potential numbers. As one person states, “I feel like \$80K is like where people can feel like they can continue in their role and thrive in their role.” For someone else, they reflect, “Is it too greedy to ask for a six figure salary? But actually I know what organizing is, and it's like, yeah, no, everybody should be getting six figure salaries.” Someone else agrees, “I'll just echo the six digit salary. I'm thinking of, like, for folks who do want to . . . do this, like, lifelong.” And as another person comments, “I think it's like, you need, like, at least \$100K to be comfortable in SoCal That's wild, because I'm sure none of us are paid \$100K or anywhere near to it.”

What also stands out as important is not only a specific number but the opportunity to revisit it annually, given inflation and rising costs of living. Some also speak about a compensation model that includes some level of accounting for need, suggesting,

It'd be like a sliding scale of pay Like pay that met the cost of living of where folks were at and also support[ed] their financial needs, so it was adjusted for caregiving or children, [or] like debt, generational wealth, those kinds of things.

Organizers also note the value of a compensation model that includes budget transparency and some level of participation across the organization. As one person shares,

I would like to be considered throughout the decision-making process . . . [and] if they're not able to compensate what I'm asking for, I would like to be able to see why not. Or I would hope that they would look into how we can make that possible.

Organizers are looking for benefits that allow them to support themselves and their families. That means healthcare, including dental and vision, covered by their employer, with the inclusion of dependents, as well as some type of retirement plan with employer contributions. Several mention time-off policies that could include sabbaticals or 32-hour work weeks. Notably, in every focus group, organizers also raise the specific mental health challenges they face in their jobs, suggesting wellness stipends or flexible spending accounts that could support their access to mental health care and help them cope with the specific stresses that come with frontline organizing. Ultimately, as one organizer reflects,

I think that we should be getting paid . . . in the sense of actual money, but also compensation in the sense of having the luxury of free time, the luxury to be able to also pursue the things that I enjoy and appreciate outside of life. So I don't feel like my life is always just work, because how are we going to be able to metaphorically feed our communities that we work with, if we can't feed ourselves as well?

Conclusion

Organizers in Southern California are passionate about their commitment to the work. They are thinking deeply about how to help create organizations that reflect their values and want to be actively engaged in that process. At the same time, many of them are also facing the reality that these jobs may not be enough to support themselves or their families long term.

The challenges these organizers are facing are not unique, nor are they organization-specific, yet often the conversation about addressing these challenges is focused there: between one staff person with their director, or between one organization and a funder. By tackling these challenges at a sectoral level to set new labor standards across the field, we can ensure that organizers aren't having to make impossible choices about their families and their futures because they can't support themselves, and that organizations have the experienced organizing staff they need to lead effective campaigns, build durable power and win lasting change for their communities.