

How to build change from the ground up

Author
Eric Liu
believes
You're
More
Powerful
Than You
Think'

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

“You're More Powerful Than You Think" isn't about personal empowerment.

"There is no chicken soup for anyone's soul here," author Eric Liu writes in the book.

Instead, it's a self-help book for communities, rather than individuals. Liu, founder of Citizen University, lays out how citizens can create their own power, summarized in three main principles:

Change the game: Find the arena where the rules work in your favor, and attack your opponent's plan.

Change the story: Give people a vision and an alternative story justifying your cause.

Change the equation: Create power by organizing, and work in solidarity with allies.

Real Change, Street Roots' sister paper in Seattle, talked with Liu about why he wrote "You're More Powerful Than You Think" and his take on the current political situation.

Mike Wold: Tell us about the meaning of your book's title.

Eric Liu: We live in this age of radical severe inequality. When you have levels of inequality and concentrations of wealth at levels not seen since before the Great

Depression, you have a very sick body politic. That plays out a hundred different ways. One is this self-fulfilling doom loop of cynicism and ignorance: "Well, the game is rigged, so I may as well check out."

The actual history of this country is that every time things have gotten concentrated to this level, people have

pushed back. People have remembered that they are not atomized individuals, that we together, when we organize and amplify our voices and go after things together, can rebalance the power equation.

In recent years, we've been waking up. Occupy Wall Street, the emergence of the Tea Party, Black Lives Matter, the Dreamers, \$15 an hour, and, of course, now the resistance to Trump. The next step is, "OK, you're awake; do you know what to do?" My book is, and our work at Citizen University is, about trying to give people a pathway from wakefulness to action.

M.W.: Explain your advice to "attack your opponent's plan."

E.L.: I paraphrase from Sun Tzu's "Art of War": "Don't attack your enemy's forces; attack your enemy's strategy." A good example has been the Fight For 15. The dominant strategy of people, particularly the business community, who have opposed

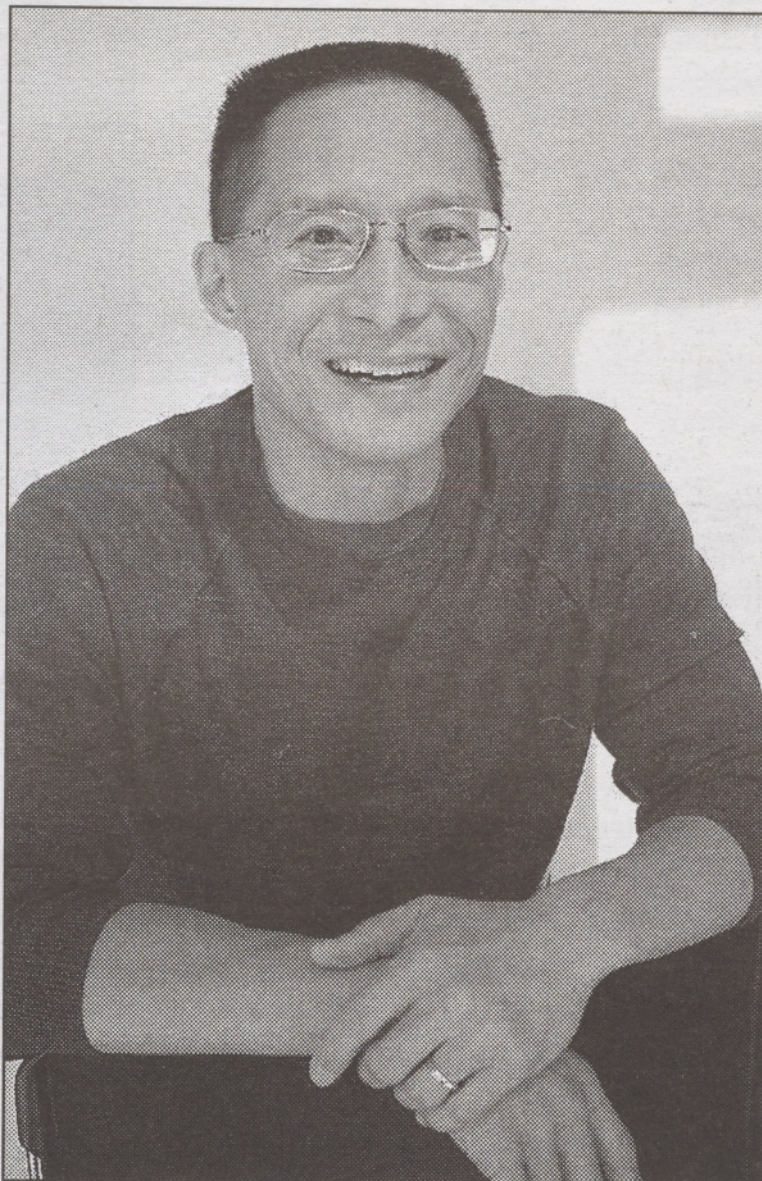


PHOTO BY JON WILLIAMS

Eric Liu is the founder of Citizen University.

raising the minimum wage was intimidation. "If you force me to raise wages, I'm going to have to fire you," which is connected to a storyline, a rationalization, in which business people are the job creators and it's only by coddling and taking care of job creators that they let their prosperity leak down to everybody else.

In the past, the approach; "I'm trying to raise the minimum wage" was, "Hey, that's not nice. It's mean to pay wages that are so low." That's not enough to get you across the line. What the low-wage workers in SeaTac did was to attack that trickle-down strategy and say, "We're the source of prosperity. We the workers. When we have more money in our pockets, then businesses have more customers. And the whole economy gets healthier."

When I'm making \$9 instead of \$7 or \$15 instead of \$11, I can buy my kid new clothes. I can pay rent. I can get my spouse a dinner on her birthday. Who benefits? Every business owner, every participant in the wider community. That flipped storyline wasn't just making an argument from charity; it went directly at the heart of the strategy of intimidation and self-justification.

M.W.: So they changed the game and changed the story. But isn't that the story that we're always given for not regulating business?

E.L.: You see variations of the trickle-down story all over the place. The idea that you shouldn't push developers too hard for concessions on affordable housing because "they're the goose that lays the golden egg. You don't want to chase them out of Seattle, do you?" I reject that argument fundamentally. When you see the way that trickle-down argument is being used, that's step No. 1. Step No. 2 is flipping that script in a way that reminds people that it's the many, not the few, who are the source of community vitality.

M.W.: But under the rules of the game, businesses can eventually pick up and leave,

and that's the threat they've used all over the country. How would you address that?

E.L.: Among the places that Boeing has taken jobs to is Kansas. Kansas has been running this experiment in trickle-down economics, which has been an absolute, catastrophic failure. Any self-interested corporation is going to realize that if they relocate in a race to the bottom to the lowest-wage, lowest-tax place, they're going to get a place in which the schools stink, public services aren't funded and the community's breaking down. Chasing the lowest cost is literally penny wise and pound foolish.

It is true that a company can say, "We're going to pull up stakes," and that threat of intimidation is real and you have to do some negotiating. But you don't have to negotiate from weakness. Uber threatened the city of Austin, Texas, when Austin was beginning to contemplate a ballot measure that would have regulated ridesharing services responsibly.

Uber said, "If you regulate us, we're going to pull out." But the people of Austin organized and they said, "We dare you. Go ahead. Leave." Uber left, and guess what happened. New services came in to fill the vacuum to do ridesharing in an ethical and responsible way.

It's not an either-or, 100 percent or zero percent in any negotiation. It's better to have Boeing in this state than not. But how much are we willing to give away, and how much are we willing to press Boeing to actually make investments in our education system? To make investments in the affordability of housing?

M.W.: Don't businesses have a much easier time accessing power than citizens?

E.L.: You bet. We the people and workers can organize and generate power out of thin air. That's the sense in which I mean power is infinite. What seems like a fixed zero-sum situation can always be reshuffled. But once you've activated your side, the other side is also free to activate new power. There's a word for this continuous back and forth of activating power and counterpower, and that word is politics.

When democracy works, because there are more of the many than the few, then the interests of the many get reflected in public policy-making. The problem right now is that too many of the many are sitting it out. It makes it too easy for the few to rig the game. I don't mean that those who lack power can suddenly become infinitely, perpetually powerful; I just mean that they can change the equation in a way that gives them another round to fight.

M.W.: So what's the solution to the housing market running amok in Seattle?

E.L.: Agendas like what was put together in the HALA (Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda) plan are in the right direction. But what's needed is wrapping that bundle of proposals in a narrative of our responsibility to each other that says, "If you don't do these things, this city will die." This city will eventually become a disconnected

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"As long as there are workers in other cities and other countries that are worse off than us, who are willing to accept worse-off conditions just to get the jobs, the jobs will move; the companies will move," says Kshama Sawant, Seattle's socialist City Council member. Street Roots spoke with Sawant about her solution to "this race to the bottom." Read the interview at news.streetroots.org.