

# THE BIG TRAP

## When (and When Not) to Negotiate

### A ONE-PAGER

Reports can get long. Here's a one-page breakdown of what you need to know:

*What is the Big Trap?* Over and over in our research we saw a troubling dynamic emerge when movements agreed to negotiate with the political leadership they were trying to move: that the agreement to negotiate, or the act of negotiating, could break the movement's momentum, thereby diminishing the very leverage it needed to successfully assert its interests at the table. Without sustained pressure on the political leadership to agree to the movement's demands, those negotiations would then break down.

*Why does this matter?* Negotiations can be a core part of a movement's organizing strategy. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Saul Alinsky, one of the fathers of community organizing, advocated using direct action and protest for the express purpose of sitting down at the negotiation table across from the political leadership with a strong enough hand to get what you want. The Big Trap stands as a cautionary tale: not all offers to negotiate should be pursued or accepted.

*Why does this happen, and what should organizers look out for?* Sometimes movements simply don't yet have the long-term, durable power to withstand what can sometimes be weeks or months of policy negotiation. But other times, the political leadership a movement is trying to move may use an offer to negotiate as a means to break its momentum. Organizers should look out for signs of intentional slow-walking; offers with strings attached; signs that the offer to negotiate is simply a divide-and-conquer tactic; and signs that an offer to join a government commission, group, or project would just be inclusion in name only.

*How do I avoid the Big Trap?* In short, preparation. But not in the way you might think. We suggest doing everything possible in the run-up to a negotiation to (1) strengthen your hand at the table and (2) weaken theirs. We suggest doing three things in particular:

1. **Build up your ability to walk away** with little consequence (and weaken theirs).
2. **Prepare internally to negotiate.** Figure out: who is representing you? On what issues can they commit? Do you have a unified negotiation strategy?
3. **Structure the table to your advantage.** Think about how you can set preconditions, the agenda, and even the parties to maximize the chances of negotiating a deal that meets your interests.

*Interested in reading more? [Download the full chapter for free on the webpage.](#)*