Young People for Policy Change

By Rani Chor (16, United States)

Generation Z is not afraid of speaking out against policies that assault democracy and the American people: we are starving for justice. Behind each youth activist is a gargantuan crowd fueled by determination. But during that post-rally rush, even I have to admit that there is a nagging question in the back of my mind: is this going to change anything?

As someone born into Generation Z, my world seems to be surrounded by alarm bells: there is the constant fear that we have indeed reached Plan Z, the last plan, which is dependent on what could be the last generation. But through that haze of anxiety, my little brother comes to mind: a reminder that our fight isn't just a scramble to save ourselves but to fight for generations to come.

Because we aren't naturally born organizers and activists, I have compiled actionable steps that we can all take to ensure that action fuels our advocacy.

Make good trouble.

U.S. Senator Alan Simpson told The Washington Post that nothing would change until a young person “could walk into his office and say, ‘I’m from the American Association of Young People. We have 30 million members, and we’re watching you, Simpson.” Generation Z activists are unique in the vitality with which we attack today’s most pressing issues-- from climate change to mass incarceration, housing inequality, and school segregation. If you live in a critical state, engage the members within your community. Take initiative. Schedule training for hard organizing skills and stress the importance of supporting local organizations with financial resources so that they can continue to organize despite the difficult circumstances of the pandemic.

It is incredibly important to remember that not everyone can be out protesting in the streets. Some students are waking up at the crack of dawn as young workers laboring to support their families or to afford a college education. Their stories are woven into the American narrative and need to be told. After placing their votes, companies, unions, and perhaps even your parents have lobbying organizations that will continue to represent them. However, young people, even college
graduates just entering their fields, can lobby local congressional officials about issues and policies that impact them. This is an opportunity to directly expose a congressional staffer to the heart of America, its people, and the impacts of their proposed policies.

Pay attention to the world around you, especially to current events.

American author Alfie Kohn once said, “Students should not only be trained to live in a democracy when they grow up; they should have the chance to live in one today.” It is not enough for policies to be non-racist, they must actively be anti-racist. With 81% of Gen Z saying that protests have made them more aware of race issues in America, they’ve not only taken action but also taken initiative: About half (46%) have made an effort to learn more about actions they can take to support racial justice in the United States, and 64% have initiated conversations with their friends and family on the topic.

The mighty “We” holds power because of the words “the people” that directly follow.

Upholding our democracy and saving this planet is not our burden to hold alone, especially when we have 7 billion other people to support us. Politicians are expected to put their finger on a set of answers to very large questions that tend to perplex humanity as a whole. Who are we fighting for? And how do we arrange our priorities and policies to reflect not just an audience but the safety and psychological needs of our people? We need to send a clear message to the next generation that being political doesn’t principally mean caring about what party wins the next election; to be political should mean to care for the wellbeing of all people.

Operating under the umbrella of American democracy, policymakers are strangely ambivalent when it comes to honoring the needs of those who are most vulnerable in this world, children. America might love its families but its policies sure don’t show it. The 2019 UNICEF report, “Are the world’s richest countries family friendly?,” details that, when compared with 40 other countries, the United States ranked last in terms of paid leave for mothers and fathers. It is a disheartening reminder that policymakers need to center more policies around families and children. Meanwhile, millions of youth organizers around the nation are operating under the guise of facing extinction otherwise. Talk about priorities.

It is no secret that the current administration is using our fears and vulnerabilities during this shutdown to undermine our ability to vote in what could be the most important election of our lifetimes. For instance, the funding cuts to the United States Postal Office (USPS) are being
administered amidst quarantine, when many polls are closed due to COVID-19. As a result, the number of mailed-in votes this election season is set to explode, but without proper funding, the USPS is not set to handle such a heavy load.

We cannot stand for such actions. We cannot be heard if we do not speak up, speak out, and fight back. As Barack Obama once said, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” Our intention is not to cause fear. Rather, we hope that by recognizing the truth of our future we can ignite change.

This year, justice is on a ballot. Please register to vote, check your registration, and tell your family and friends to vote for your future. You can request your absentee ballot by visiting vote.org today.

Note: As we are still in a pandemic, the most precautionary thing you can do is to wear your mask, stay safe, and social distance.