



Institute on Race, Power
and Political Economy

Re-Imagining California:

A Call to Action and Framework for Building a Human Rights Economy in the Golden State

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Introduction

California is, and always has been, a [center](#) of innovation, wealth creation and multicultural vitality. Its economy would be the [fifth](#) largest in the world if it were a nation. And its standing as a [forerunner](#) in technology, creative culture, and trendsetting is unsurpassed. All of these factors have made the Golden State a uniquely popular destination and [bellwether](#) for people all across our nation and world, even in difficult times such as those in which we presently live, and during which our state has been [challenged](#) by stiff political and economic headwinds, and growing skepticism about its continuing capacity to lead.

Notwithstanding significant [recent setbacks](#), California is uniquely-situated to re-establish its singular leadership as a center of inclusive economy and prosperity-sharing over the coming years. But such a recovery is neither preordained nor likely to happen just because. Rather, bold decision making and forward-looking choices, significant changes in approach, and substantial public reinvestment will all be required to right our course.

We believe that California can best achieve these outcomes by pursuing and implementing a comprehensive suite of next generation policy, budget, and tax reforms that are intended to support an inclusive [Human Rights Economy](#) for all of its people.

An inclusive Human Rights Economy policy and public reinvestment framework would build on major reforms in state law and spending, and increased taxation of wealthy individuals and corporations. And it would involve guaranteeing new rights to all of our state's residents related to individual and household asset building, criminal justice, public education, employment, environmental sustainability, healthcare, housing, transportation, and voting, among other areas of focus.

This vision largely defies the prevailing political winds of our current historical passage—a time defined by a persistent, if [illogical](#), policy bias towards supply side economics and allied neoliberal impulses that privilege markets and privatization over the commons and the interests of the vast majority of humanity. But seen from a long term perspective, California's leadership in economy and civic culture, its civil peace and safety, and its overall quality of life cannot be long sustained during the coming years without a significant policy rethink and multi-decade public reinvestment in its human capital base.

Our state has the means, the leadership, and the power to concretely advance such a vision. By doing so, it would establish a bold new social contract for California's nearly 40 million residents, encourage more inclusive and sustainable local and regional business development, create good new living wage jobs, and reinvigorate our waning middle and working classes.

This timely statement is intended to establish the essential case and parameters of this vision in ways that can help to build broad public and leadership commitment to its successful advancement in law, policy, and practice during the important next phases of statewide governance and economic priority-setting.

The Case

The 2024 election cycle vividly revealed the iterative and inseparable relationship between politics, economics, and social-identity. By capitalizing on real and growing economic grievances, Donald Trump and his supporters have once again sewn division between identity groups. But division never has offered—and never will offer—a solid platform for durable public problem solving. To root out the divisive, dead-end politics that increasingly define our times, we must defang that which gives it power: an economy grounded in extraction, despair, risk, insecurity, and a growing chasm between haves and have nots.

We seek an economy that ensures essential resources and agency for all—and especially those in greatest need.

In California, leaders in racial, gender and economic justice across our state stand at the forefront of resistance to the persistent policy trends that seek to further divide us. We hold a light that shines brighter. Ours is a vision of a more unifying political culture and economy centered around people and the environments in which they live. We seek an inclusive democracy and economy that is rooted in a shared commitment to human rights and human dignity.

This work is not merely about posing alternatives to a broken system. Rather, we seek to advance a worldview that fundamentally redefines the very [purposes of our economy](#). **We seek an economy that ensures essential resources and agency for all—and especially those in greatest need. We seek new commitments in state policy and spending over the coming decades that guarantee quality and affordable housing and healthcare, living wage income and good jobs, new opportunities in civic culture and engagement, and equitable access to capital, child care, education and smart transportation—so that every individual and family can thrive** in healthy, tranquil, and sustainable environments.

In these connections, California has an outsized role to play and a strong track record to build on. Even in the face of serious setbacks over recent decades ranging from the [conservative wins of the 1970s](#) through the 1990s on tax, immigration, and affirmative action policy, our state's inclination to lead needed change is well-established by its long history of shaping more progressive and transformational political and economic trends that have ultimately had broad national and international impact. These include significant and largely successful social movements for [farm labor](#) and other [workers' rights](#), [environmental justice](#), [marriage equality](#), and [new economy innovations](#). This rich history underscores the Golden State's status as a perennial driver of forward-leaning change.

Now, Californians of conscience are called to lead a vital new chapter in our state and national history. We are called to join forces in service to a generational reinvestment and reform agenda that supports essential human rights through a massive refocusing of state priorities from tending to the interests and fancies of the privileged and the powerful to lifting up and protecting the interests of common people and the planet. **This call to action is offered in response to the urgent next generation imperatives before us to resist the nation's current trend in authoritarian policy making and its ill-advised, continuing reliance on exploitative, neoliberal models of economic growth.** The pages that



follow are intended to outline the framework for a Common Agenda that all change-oriented leaders, organizations and movements can align around over the coming years in ways that can help to move California, the nation, and the world towards far greater economic justice and prosperity-sharing. We believe that this is essential work, because the very foundations and vitality of multicultural democracy hang in the balance.

The Context

Despite challenges and setbacks over recent decades—from excessive sprawl and urban decay to untenable cost-of-living increases and persistent crime, homelessness and natural disaster in many regions of the state, California remains a magnetic beacon of cultural, economic and political power. Its economy—the largest in the U.S. and one of the largest in the world—is as high performing in GDP as the economies of Florida and Texas [combined](#). It remains the center of gravity for many of the nation’s most important industries, including [aerospace](#), [agriculture](#), [entertainment](#), [renewable energy](#), and [technology](#).

California is ground zero for many of the nation’s next century drivers of economic innovation and wealth creation—from [artificial intelligence](#) and [quantum engineering](#) to [high speed rail](#), [desalinization technology](#), and [lithium production](#). And across the nation, the Golden State continues to rank first among all states as America’s [most popular travel destination](#). In addition, our state’s rich [multiculturalism](#), its civic dynamism, its world class system of [higher education](#), and its robust creative culture substantially distinguish it among other states and nations in the early 21st century.

That said, **despite California’s many and distinct assets, like so much of the rest of our nation, it suffers from important shortcomings in governance and [structural barriers to change that must be tackled](#) if the Golden State is to achieve its full potential in the decades to come.** California is one of the [richest](#) states in our nation, but it is also home to more people in [poverty](#) per capita than any other state in the union. And most of our our state’s poverty is disproportionately experienced by [people of color](#), [women](#), [immigrants](#), and [youth](#)—all high growth population groups that are both increasingly vulnerable as well as vital to the state’s future well-being.

In addition, significant constraints on raising public revenues stemming from the [legacy of Proposition 13](#) (the conservative property tax measure of the late 1970s) and corresponding [supermajority voting requirements](#) to raise state and local taxes, continue to hamper California’s ability to fund essential public investment in key areas of need. Largely as a result, **our state perennially struggles with vast and growing disparities by race, gender, and class relative to [educational performance and](#)**

[completion](#) in our public schools, [employment](#)- and [income](#)-stability, [wealth equity](#), [environmental quality](#), [good health outcomes](#), [home ownership](#) and [housing security](#), [accessible and affordable public transit](#), and household and public [violence](#).

Adding to these troubling data is the glaring absence of a thoughtful, consensus-based business plan for California's more equitable and strategic economic future. The absence of a more cohesive global roadmap for inclusive state policy making and reinvestment leaves California unduly vulnerable to social, political and economic calamity in today's increasingly risky and uncertain environment. As a result of all of this, the economic landscape and the political issues facing most Californians today, like the rest of the nation, strikingly resemble the conditions recorded a hundred years ago, during the [1920s](#). Massive accumulations of private wealth and political power flowing from our contemporary hi-tech, finance, energy, media, and agribusiness sectors are disturbingly reminiscent of the [Robber Baron era](#) that defined the early 20th century and later contributed to the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The absence of a more cohesive global roadmap for inclusive state policy making and reinvestment leaves California unduly vulnerable to social, political and economic calamity in today's increasingly risky and uncertain environment.

In order to address this lengthy and growing list of challenges, **more than ever, it is essential for California leaders across geography, sectors, and issue concerns to join forces in pursuit of a Common Agenda for change that is rooted in making human rights aims and public reinvestment the centerpieces of our statewide economic policy making and associated budget processes.** In this context, it is vital for our state leaders to embrace a wholly new conception about the very purposes of our economy. Our economy should not be understood to be merely an engine for the wealthy and the privileged to generate, aggregate, and hoard financial resources for purely private and selfish interests.

Rather, a more ethical and sustainable perspective on the essential purpose of our economy should be to ensure that every Californian has meaningful opportunities and supports to achieve economic security, agency, and belonging. **Only an inclusive economy that is centered on the essential human rights principle that all people should be entitled to certain basic protections and public goods can help us build more broadly-shared prosperity, more sustainable production, and a more healthy society and democracy in the future to come.**

California's Human Rights Legacy and the Work Still to be Done to Advance Economic Justice

[Globally-recognized human rights](#) reflect the international community's acknowledgement that people all across the planet are entitled to certain basic protections, wherever they might live. These include social rights, like the rights to privacy, family formation, and free association. They include political rights, such as the rights to asylum, suffrage, and free expression, as well as freedom from state persecution and torture. They additionally include cultural rights, like the right to education; and religious rights, like the freedoms of faith and worship. Last, but not least, internationally-accepted human rights include economic rights, like property rights, the right to economic security, and various protections from workplace exploitation and unemployment.

It is this last area of human rights doctrine—namely, economic rights—that underscores the essence of our appeal here in the context of California's forward-going public policy. That is to say, that it is the quest for broader state protections and guarantees leading to economic justice and far broader opportunity- and prosperity-sharing that sits at the heart of our appeal. The Golden State's stake in advancing a more inclusive Human Rights Economy is deeply rooted in its unique history relative to the formation of international standards in public governance dating back to the early post-World War II era. In June of 1945, now fully 80 years ago, the [United Nations Charter](#) informing the current regime of international public law—including the subsequent adoption of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), was drafted in San Francisco.

During the 1950s and 1960s, despite many enduring injustices in state law and policy, California introduced important innovations and movements that advanced far-reaching human and civil rights gains. These included the [1959 Unruh Civil Rights Act](#) that served as a model for the subsequent U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, as well as the [Fair Employment Practices Act of 1959](#) which prohibited racial discrimination in hiring and promotions. In 1960, the [California Master Plan for Higher Education](#) established a robust framework for making public college and university education more affordable and accessible for low-income and nonwhite students. And in 1964, California was ground zero for the [Free Speech Movement](#) that defined so much of the nation's—and the world's—subsequent political discourse.

Over more recent decades, building on this rich history, California has helped to lead efforts to legally recognize [farm laborer](#) and [domestic worker](#) rights, as well as [same sex marriage equality](#) and [transgender](#) rights; and various communities and jurisdictions across our state have supported local and regional human rights commissions to advance standards and goals for achieving greater justice in areas ranging from civil and equal rights for various multicultural groups to fair access to education, housing, legal services, and workforce opportunities for all Californians. Such commissions remain active across the state in diverse communities and regions ranging from [San Francisco](#) and [Richmond](#) to [Humboldt County](#) and [Palm Springs](#).



But, California lacks a statewide policy shaping body that could help to propose human rights-based goals and standards for power- and prosperity-sharing, champion allied legislative and regulatory change proposals, build consensus for supporting state industrial and public reinvestment policies, and identify new financing mechanisms to support and sustain such work in all of its jurisdictions. Nor does the Golden State have any real future-looking, comprehensive strategy to grow its economy in ways that maximize racial, gender and economic justice. As such, California continues to deny fundamental human rights and benefits to a growing majority of its people, and especially those who make up its waning middle class, as well as its working, poor, and increasingly dislocated classes of residents.

As economic insecurity grows, in turn, so do the spillover effects of inequality in the form of expanding societal challenges in essential areas ranging from [child](#) and [family](#) well-being, to [health](#) and [housing](#); and from [education](#) and [employment](#) to [crime](#), [intergroup conflict](#), and [domestic violence](#). All of these factors make it more and more challenging for our state to continue magnetizing the kind of private investment, innovation, and quality of life that has made it such a singular destination for people and businesses all around the world. In these connections, we believe that California is not being well-served by its political, business and civic leadership. We believe that, in the absence of a next generation strategic commitment to inclusive economy based on fundamental human rights and corollary new investments in certain essential public goods, our state is at risk of losing the essential qualities that have distinguished it since it began to dominate the public imagination in the [late 1840s](#).

Essential Elements of a Human Rights Economy Framework: Our Call to Action for Policy, Institutional & Grassroots Leaders

As we see it, achieving the level of change that California requires to advance a Human Rights Economy—and with it a much higher level of economic justice and prosperity-sharing—will take more than mere marginal or incidental policy reforms. Rather, we believe that a significant generational shift in policy priorities and supporting constitutional law, budgeting, and taxation will be needed to reposition the Golden State for renewed leadership and success on the national and international stage.

After nearly a half century of tax cuts and deregulation favoring the wealthy and the powerful, our state needs to advance a Human Rights Economy policy agenda for structural reform and public reinvestment that together support broader economic security, vitality, and benefits for all Californians. To accomplish this, our state must be committed to making significant new, sustained investments that uplift its increasingly strapped multicultural middle class, working class, and poor populations. In service to these aims, California needs to advance an enabling public policy framework that can facilitate more broadly equitable outcomes through progressive constitutional, legislative, tax, and public investment reforms.

In addition, the state needs to remedy disturbing inconsistencies between our self-image of the Golden State as a bastion of progressive policy and the hard reality of persistent state-sanctioned abuses that bear down heavily on many of our most vulnerable populations. For example, longstanding and hard working undocumented residents of California contribute mightily to our economy and pay abundant state [sales and income taxes](#) that support our public treasure. But, notwithstanding the founding tenet of '[no taxation without representation](#)' that inspired our nation's original formation, California immigrants are [largely precluded](#) from participating in state and local elections that bear on their fundamental rights. Moreover, they are barred from receiving important public benefits, such as [state unemployment insurance](#) and [loan assistance](#) for first-time home-buyers.

Similarly, tens of thousands of incarcerated Californians remain subject to forced labor, packaging agricultural and consumer goods, making license plates, and crafting furniture for less than 75 cents an hour; and California [prison volunteer firefighters](#) across the state are customarily engaged in dangerous deployments (such as helping

to combat the recent fire storms that raged across Los Angeles County) for [less than \\$12 per day](#) (compared to the average earnings of the state's most junior firefighters, totaling just over [\\$28 per hour](#), or about \$245 per day).

We think that California is a state that can do much better by being much better than that. By promoting greater respect for essential human rights and fairness in our state laws and practices, we can do much more to build an inclusive society and economy that works for all. We can build a more responsive framework for prosperity-sharing that in turn can better sustain our business community while also reducing our tendency to support short-sighted trade-offs and punitive public policies and investments—such as investing in [ever-expanding prison maintenance costs](#) versus [prevention and educational programs](#) that would radically reduce crime and violence. We can do more to optimize the essential contributions of every resident of our great state in ways that lift all boats and make us all more healthy, happy and safe. But to gain those worthy outcomes, we would need to bring substantial change to many of the ways in which we presently govern our affairs.

Our call for such change envisions a new commitment of public, private, and civic leadership - one that prioritizes our most vulnerable people and communities over privilege, power, and profit; and one that embraces government's appropriate role as the central driver of needed resource

allocation and reinvestment. To these ends, at a minimum, we need to advance a comprehensive, Common Agenda for needed policy change; and, within that framework, we need to commit to new public investment priorities in California. Namely, a decided majority of our public outlays over the coming decades should be committed to aggressive new spending on:

■ **permanent high quality, [universal childcare](#) for poor and working families**

Working families and single moms simply cannot get and keep employment without safe, high quality and affordable child and family care. And our young children in need in every region of the state cannot thrive and succeed in their journeys without early state support for their proper formation. California should permanently guarantee good, cost free early family and child care support to all parents and children living at or below the poverty level. Such investment would help to enhance child health and early learning preparation for later school success. It would additionally encourage family stabilization and overall well-being in place of economic vulnerability, stress and dislocation.

■ **family economic security and asset building programs (like [Baby Bonds](#))**

Wealthy families are able to guarantee their children an economically secure, debt-free future through inheritance and the passing of family assets from generation to generation. Over time, the cumulative impact of such

generational wealth transfers is to exacerbate already large racial and economic inequalities. Through innovative asset building investments, like baby bonds for all children born into poverty across the Golden State, we can somewhat level the playing field, building a nest egg that at the time of each beneficiary's adulthood that can be used to pay for education and training, a retirement investment account, a new business start up or a first time home purchase.

- **K-14 public schools (including [fully tuition-free community college education](#))**

Our public schools and employment training institutions continue to play vital roles in preparing Californians of all ages to expand their learning, social, employment, and life skills. We should vastly expand the quality of our public instruction and the beneficial reach of our education and training systems to include entirely tuition-free community college education programs that help to better prepare our evolving student populations for success in the world of work. We should reinvent the standard school curriculum to reflect the new economy and societal shifts of our day, and also reintroduce civics education programs that help emerging generations of Californians to become more animated stewards of our democracy and civic culture.

- **[living wage state income and job guarantees](#) for people who are unable to secure gainful employment in the private economy**

For Californians who want to work but are unable to find suitable

employment in the private sector, the state should provide guaranteed living wage public sector employment, or alternatively offer monthly living wage income supports. Such investments would greatly benefit the state by reducing unemployment, expanding money in circulation within the regional economy, reducing crime, and activating California's talent pool to provide essential public goods and services. Recent guaranteed income [pilots](#) in important California cities like Stockton and Los Angeles reveal that such programs help the local economy, as well as the direct beneficiaries, to better sustain themselves and thrive.

- **[single-payer health care insurance](#)**

In all of the developed world, only the United States [denies](#) its people single payer health care insurance coverage. As a [result](#), among the world's most advanced economies, despite spending more on healthcare than comparable countries, America has the lowest life expectancy and performs poorly on a variety of health outcomes, including the highest maternal and infant mortality rates, and among the highest suicide rates. Among the states, California ranks [last](#) among the top ten in healthcare quality and outcomes according to recent rankings by Bradley University. As the nation's most populous and multicultural state, we can and should do much better; but to get there will require moving to a statewide single payer healthcare plan that would dramatically lower cost and access barriers to care for low income and otherwise economically-challenged Californians.

- **safe, quality [public housing](#)**

Over recent years, housing prices and acquisition have become simply astronomical for average California families. According to recent reporting by the Public Policy Institute of California and [CalMatters](#), California housing costs have risen nearly 60 percent over the past 30 years, with housing values now totaling more than twice the national average and rents at about 50 percent higher. Private speculation, construction red tape, and rapid continuing population growth have conspired to make the problems of housing and homelessness intractable in the early 21st century. In response, the state needs to make far more aggressive use of public lands and designated land trusts to produce government-sponsored affordable housing units at scale for low- and moderate-income Californians all across the state during the coming years.

- **[restorative justice](#) reforms across the state's juvenile and adult criminal systems**

While California has made important reforms in its carceral state since the passage of [Proposition 47](#), it has continued to produce a large state prison population with extremely high [costs](#) to administer its still significant facilities footprint. During the [last election cycle](#), California voters elected to increase punishments for various offenses and to maintain forced labor policies for the state's prison inmate population. All the while, only [three percent](#) of prison expenditures across our state are committed to inmate rehabilitation. Its time to advance systemic criminal

justice reforms that meaningfully expand restorative justice investments in areas like prevention and early intervention, literacy and conflict resolution, enhanced educational opportunity, and workforce training and placement.

- **expanded [immigrant rights to essential public services and local voting](#)**

Many millions of non-citizen Californians have lived in the Golden State for decades, constructively contributing to our state and county tax coffers. They work hard, support our essential businesses and industries, and broadly serve our communities as coaches, teachers, clergy, essential workers, and volunteers. Yet, as referenced here earlier, they are denied essential public services as well as the right to vote in local elections that bear on their childrens' rights and opportunities in public education, and their own agency over the uses of their tax dollars in other important domains. It is time for California to expand statewide rights to longstanding California noncitizen residents, including access to essential public service benefits for which they pay taxes and to voting in municipal and county public elections.

- **more accessible, affordable, and energy-efficient [public transportation](#)**

Last, but hardly least, it is well-past time for California to make public transit across the Golden State more accessible, affordable and energy-efficient, so that working class and striving residents of the state can have more safe, easy and agreeable

options to get to work or school. By making our transit options more available, easy and cheap, California can more aggressively mobilize its worker, consumer, and talent capital for increased efficiency, productivity and agency. And in the process the state can produce more good jobs to build and maintain high quality transit options and corridors that link people to the places, the jobs, the shopping, and the amenities they want to build their lives around.

This is the bucket of expanded rights and [guarantees](#) that all middle- and working-class Californians will require to thrive in the years to come. This is the bundle of public goods and the supporting tool kit that will be needed to ensure greater economic opportunity, prosperity-sharing and sustainability across our state and nation in the future ahead. They are the building blocks upon which we must resuscitate our material, civic and social capital. They are the core investment centers that will fuel our continuing leadership in inclusive new economy achievement and innovation.

Accordingly, **we believe that, as a measure of basic human rights and more responsive public policy, California's leaders across sectors and regions should act now to energize movement in these directions. They should engage in sincere and active efforts to analyze and then act on the short- and longer term benefits of advancing needed new investments and reforms such as those enumerated here in a cohesive and mutually-reinforcing way.** They should focus on enhancing economic security across our state, and increasing state [fiscal fairness](#) and revenues through the introduction of a [state wealth tax](#), as well as new taxes on [business services](#) and [unrealized capital gains](#). And they should make allied policy and constitutional reforms that lower the barriers to state and local taxation as a result of Proposition 13 and its progeny of supporting supermajority legislative voting requirements for raising public revenues. We are persuaded that a generational commitment to major changes of this kind in state law, policy, budgeting, and taxation would dramatically help California to revive its historic role as a leader among states and nations in advancing essential human rights and economic mobility gains.

In furtherance of this work, we believe that funders and other charitable donors who are committed to needed social and economic change in California must come together now as never before to redouble and align their resource commitments to leading nonprofit change networks and organizations across our state that support the kind of proposals presented here. California is home to some of the nation's most potent and innovative policy and community change organizations, including those involved in our cooperative work, and others ranging from [California Calls](#) and [PICO](#) to [Catalyst California](#), the [Economic Security Project](#), [PolicyLink](#), and [Liberation in a Generation](#), to name only a few. But too few of our leading change organizations and coalitions are adequately-funded at a level of private and philanthropic support

that would truly optimize their public policy influence and effectiveness. This is a major impediment to our forward-going progress as a state in achieving more responsive economic policies that can meaningfully expand essential human rights and opportunities for our neediest populations.

In addition, **we believe that nonprofit and community leaders from various currently disconnected fields must come together more collectively to prioritize Human Rights Economy organizing and advocacy efforts that help to increase their power and impact at the statewide level.** Without applying that collective power more coherently and more strategically in ways that compel state leaders and systems to pursue new and better approaches to wealth building and distribution, it is unlikely that the level and kind of change that we seek will ever be achieved. We can and must do better as a community of shared interest in the Common Good to coalesce our efforts more aggressively in the direction of needed Human Rights Economy reforms.

Conclusion

California is and always has been a harbinger of things to come. It has always set new standards and defied conventional thinking to achieve major breakthroughs resulting in new human potential, possibilities, and opportunities. And, despite recent challenges and persisting imperfections, the Golden State remains a place of enduring promise. Its inclinations to create, to explore, to think expansively, and to include people of many diverse backgrounds in its forward evolution is at the heart of the American Dream. Its economy, though recently captured by excessive capital concentration and inequality, nevertheless continues to produce great wealth and innovation. But without the broader and more purposeful distribution of this wealth and innovation, our state faces grave continuing risks in the future to come relative to its civil peace, its fidelity to the Common Good, and the effective functioning of its increasingly multicultural democracy.

“**...despite recent challenges and persisting imperfections, the Golden State remains a place of enduring promise.**”

In order to do better, we need to adopt a new and better conception of what our economy is there to do—namely to lift the prospects of *a//* Californians; and we need a new Human Rights framework to guide what California’s public and private leaders are responsible to produce in service to that economy. It can’t just be all about privileging the investor class to make more and more money and things for an increasingly exclusive class of luxury consumers. Rather, if democracy, public confidence, and civil society are to flourish in our state during the years to come, something better and different is required.

We are not merely inventing this argument as an isolated assertion by ‘uninformed’ community activists. Many respected global, national and state leaders have recently advocated similar approaches as those suggested here, including: [The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), [The Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy](#), and leading California elected officials, like immediate past-Assembly majority leader and current state senator [Eloise Gómez Reyes](#) (D-Colton).

Such leading voices understand, as we do, that we are in an all-hands-on-deck moment in our state’s and our nation’s history. The failure to act now to remedy the persistent, underlying causes of California’s recent setbacks, our growing wealth and income inequality, and corresponding threats of further decline will only ensure more dislocation, division, and disrepair in the future to come. Moreover, it will further degrade our already waning democracy, leaving a growing majority of our multicultural and increasingly strapped populations behind in the dustbin of history. It doesn’t have to be that way. We have the power to chart a different and better course. We have the power to demand more of our political and civic leaders and institutions. That said, we must move now—quickly, decidedly, and collectively, in a markedly new direction if we are to face a more worthy future in the decades to come. The time to act on these imperatives is long past due.



Voices From the Field

Following in the prompts below are recent recorded interviews with leading California grassroots and policy advocacy executives concerning the issues and ideas covered in this report. They reflect the opinions of key advisors to the [California Explorations Project](#) (the report's sponsor) and offer important supporting resources for any and all interested individuals, organizations and networks that are committed to a better way forward for our state, our nation, and our world.

[Marisol Franco](#), The Women's Foundation of California

"...[H]ow we are actually going to get to a human rights-based society is...through connecting with our values and seeing each other for our human dignity."

[Chris Hoene](#), California Budget and Policy Center

"Human rights: I think of it as [meeting] basic needs. [L]ike we're starting from a place of you don't have to worry about housing. You don't have to worry about healthcare. You don't have to worry about having a basic level of income..."

[Angelica Salas](#), Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles

"When we think about access to healthcare, good jobs, access to education, access to all the safety net...that comes from a framework of human rights."

[Victor Sánchez](#), Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy

"[T]he center of gravity has to be aligned with a human rights economy that works for everyone...Principles are really important. All jobs should be family sustaining jobs, union jobs with protections and benefits that...allow workers to live and retire with dignity..."

[Dr. Gabriela Sandoval](#), Excessive Wealth Disorder Institute

"When I think of human rights, and I think when lots of people think about human rights, we think about those issues in a global context...The fact is we need to come together on this [at every level]. We're facing an existential crisis...[and] California has a special role to play."

[Calvin Williams](#), Think Common Entertainment

"When we're in a position where we're starting first with how do we care for the mutual humanity of every person...that changes the equation of what policy should look like..."

About The California Explorations Project

[The California Explorations Project](#) is sponsored by The Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy at The New School. Since 2022, with support from The California Endowment, the James Irvine Foundation, and San Francisco Foundation, the Project has regularly convened California progressive leaders to align, adopt, or endorse new policy concepts, and explore action research and new narratives to advance related public advocacy efforts. In these connections, the Project examines opportunities to advance a broad-based, next generation Common Agenda of policy reform priorities enabling far more generous, strategic, and long-term public and private investments in human and community capital formation over the coming decades.

About The Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy

Founded by renowned economist and university professor, Darrick Hamilton, and housed at The New School, a University founded on the values of economic inclusion and anti-fascism, [The Institute](#) hosts a Hub of activities with a reach of nearly 70 active researchers, analysts, and organizers, powering the adoption of transformative ideas and policy solutions, and stewarding economic inclusion. Presently, The Institute supports innovative applied research programs focused on Baby Bonds, Budget Equity, Education Equity, Guaranteed Income, and Health and Political Economy issues, among other endeavors.

The photos featured herein are from a late February 2025 convening of the California Explorations Project and the Excessive Wealth Disorder Institute in Oakland, CA. Participants included the Project's advisory board members, various leading allied California racial, gender and economic justice leaders, and California Attorney General Rob Bonta.

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and allied presenters highlighted throughout.



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Shimica Gaskins is the President & CEO of End Child Poverty CA, powered by GRACE.

Dr. Angie Kim is the President and CEO of the Center for Cultural Innovation (CCI).

C.M. Samala is the Chief of Strategy & Operations at Court Accountability.

Dr. Gabriela Sandoval is the Executive Director of the Excessive Wealth Disorder Institute.

Victor G. Sánchez is the Executive Director of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy.

Calvin Williams is the Senior Advisor for Social Impact & Advocacy at Think Common Entertainment.

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