The concept of privilege - and the power that comes with it - is better understood than ever before. But it remains a sensitive topic in many situations. Members of the UK-based New Economy Organisers Network (NEON) seek to make issues of power and privilege easier to discuss and resolve within a campaigning context, and so produced this guide for organisers and activists to use within their own groups and organisations.

A NOTE ON DISCOMFORT

Power and privilege can be uncomfortable or upsetting to explore when it relates to your own advantages. This is natural and if you stick with the challenge at hand, the feeling can become something much more positive. Further tips on managing discomfort are on page 21.
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY POWER?

1. The ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way.

2. The ability or capacity to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PRIVILEGE?

Privilege refers to the collective advantages that a person can inherit from birth and/or accumulate over the course of time.

Here, we use the word power to particularly describe the inherited and learnt abilities and behaviours that help people influence their community and wider society. Power itself is neutral. In an abstract sense power can damage or strengthen a community, sometimes both at once. It’s all about being mindful to how power is applied.
We all know that white hot feeling of injustice - we're activists and campaigners, it comes with the territory. The grassroots groups, trade unions, faith groups and NGOs that many of us might be members of - or work at - understand that it's important to call out organisations that use their power to treat people badly. If we don't call out the Home Office or Shell, who will?

A sharper view of power and privilege will help us spot more injustices to fight. You have to see it first to tackle it. Moreover, always focusing on what's wrong outside of your organisations and campaigns means that problematic power structures in our own movements, organisations and groups often go unscrutinised. We are part of an unfair system, and it takes active work to not replicate it. Luckily, resources and advice that can help us do that are more accessible than ever before - and hopefully this guide will come in handy as a starting point.

Recognising injustices of power and privilege is an ongoing process. We've all spent many years adapting to inequality and it can take a while to challenge it. This isn't a free pass to...
Active listening is a key practice to make sure certain voices are not dominating in meetings, workshop spaces, etc. It's a great habit to practice if you've ever caught yourself talking over someone else, and opting to silently listen to someone is a good way to earn their trust. Here are a couple of articles to help you hone your active listening skills:

ACTIVE LISTENING

“The opposite of listening is preparing to speak.” - Three Faiths Forum.

INFO:

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Theatre of the Oppressed

It's dramatic but is actually pretty good fun, and gives participants a chance to learn acting out scenarios rather than talking, and identify the role body language plays in dynamics.

You don't have to be 'The Hoff' to act!

Check your self before you wreck yourself.
FIND AN ALLY

Who is the most open to conversations about these topics? Start with them - it’s possible that they feel as strongly as you do. If they’re cautious but open-minded, make time to chat about your shared perceptions of power and privilege. Exploring this may lead to a deeper alliance that enables you to share ideas, support each other and change the wider culture together.

START TEAM-WIDE CONVERSATIONS

If you feel confident about raising the topic and proposing a meeting to discuss power and privilege within your campaign group, department or organisation, take that leap! Making it a series of workshops or conversations will help develop a sense of shared awareness and accountability.

USE EXISTING PROCEDURES

Raise concerns with your trade union representative, staff forum convenor, or a member of your group that holds power over setting agendas and facilitation. See what kind of structured support they can offer you.

GATHER RESEARCH

If there have been instances where people have been systematically disadvantaged in some way, get the background on this. Find out about recruitment practices and sound out what most people’s take on diversity is. Is it a sore point? Something they feel they do well already? Use this information to build your case and arguments.