

The First Revolution is Internal

Organizing with Love in Northwestern California

Terry Supahan¹

TRUE NORTH ORGANIZING NETWORK is a group engaged in community organizing in California’s “Far North,” especially the counties of Humboldt and Del Norte, and on Tribal lands. This region of California is often left “off of the map” (that is, out of the strategy) for statewide electoral campaigns. It’s also sometimes forgotten by funders of the state’s nonprofit infrastructure. True North Organizing helps develop grassroots leaders and expand civic participation in this context. Its work is grounded in building meaningful relationships across the region’s diverse faith and spiritual traditions, racial identities, Tribes, cultures, immigration statuses, ages, and incomes.

Terry Supahan is the Executive Director of True North Organizing. Throughout his 30-year career, he has worked with tribes and rural governments on California’s North Coast and throughout the West to bring communities together around their priorities for water, land, improving public schools, immigration, language, housing, and community economic development. This includes previous roles in the Planning Department of the Hoopa Tribe, and as the Tribal Manager and later Councilman for his people of the Karuk Tribe. Terry’s work has consistently sought to elevate underrepresented voices, build community-driven solutions, and advocate for equitable access to resources and services.

This conversation with Terry was in dialogue with Josh Clark, OBI’s Senior Social Scientist.

JOSH CLARK (JC): Thinking about the region of California’s far north where True North Organizing works, what would you say are the most common misperceptions, or important things about the region that people elsewhere in the state might not realize?

TERRY SUPAHAN: We are in a vast, physical region of the Redwoods in northwestern California, surrounded by rivers, surviving Indigenous people, environmentalists, loggers and ranchers and farmers — all kinds of folks. We are a microcosm of rural America in northwestern California. And I think what would surprise a lot of people is that in our community organizing work, we recognize that power rests in the relationship. We really believe in the concept that there’s no permanent allies, and there’s no permanent enemies. We ask, “What is the self-interest of you and your organization and your community? And I’ll tell you mine. Now, how do we work on things that we both care about?” And that’s tough. It’s easy said, and hard to do.

JC: The far north region of California has been in the news over the past year or so for a number of reasons. One was the historic victory of several Tribal nations in their multi-decade struggle to undam the Klamath River. This was the largest dam removal project in U.S. history, and it’s been celebrated by indigenous peoples and environmental activists the world over. Would you share a bit about the significance of the dam removal to the communities with whom you organize?

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TERRY SUPAHAN: Yes, and first, I want to say that I had two granddaughters and a grandson who were part of that epic and historic descent of the Klamath River, since the dams were removed, from southern Oregon all the way, that 300-mile journey in 30 days to the mouth of the Klamath River into the Pacific Ocean.

On the significance, it's a powerful symbol, and I say "symbol" in part because the dams were designed in the late 1800s and constructed in the early 1900s. They barely served any sort of alternative energy or electrical generation. The federal government primarily wanted to flood arid, high plateau lands for farming. Back then, they didn't even have any notion they should be building fish passages and protecting the anadromous fisheries that use the river system. So for Native Americans and anyone who cares about rivers and the planet, it was a huge and powerful victory — a win for what we believe is finding better ways to work with the Earth, and not against it.

There were people who couldn't believe that the

majority of people in our region wanted the dams to come down, because they thought it was flood protection and water storage and electricity generation. All of those things were false promises made over 100 years ago. Hopefully now all of us are a little bit better and smarter than we were then.

I think Native Americans and environmentalists started talking amongst themselves about the idea of dam removal in the late '70s, early '80s. They recognized that FERC, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, had a re-licensing time in the future. If you pull the federal license that allows a power company to operate those things, it would make it very difficult to operate the dam. So, at the back of pickup truck tailgates, and picnic tables, and in community halls, it started — quietly, and then loudly. People began talking about seeing it as a target to work towards.

JC: Those conversations are how it all gets started.

TERRY SUPAHAN: Absolutely right.



Klamath Basin Tribes and allies from the commercial fishing and conservation organizations stage a rally at the bi-annual meeting of the international hydropower industry, HydroVision 2006. The Tribes called for the removal of PacifiCorp's four Klamath River dams to help restore Klamath Salmon runs. Photograph by Patrick McCully.

JC: The far north was also in the news because of California's Proposition 50 on U.S. congressional redistricting. Prop 50 was the initiative put before voters in November 2025 to temporarily adopt a new congressional map in California. The map was drawn to be favorable to the Democratic Party, an initiative of Governor Gavin Newsom to offset the highly unusual mid-decade redistricting process in Texas that Trump pushed to deliver more seats to Republicans in the 2026 midterms.

The reason Prop 50 drew some attention to the far north is that the new map it proposed would transform the region's congressional representation. Basically, it would replace one solid "blue" coastal far north district and one pretty solidly "red" inland far north district with two districts that would both be "blue," or at least very hard for a Republican to win.

Prop 50 succeeded overwhelmingly, with a wide 64-36 margin of victory. But it really looked like most other elections in California, breaking down strictly along partisan lines. In the far north region, that means there were coastal counties that favored Prop 50, but inland counties where 70 or 80 percent voted "No."

What do you think will be the local "cost" of Prop 50 in the far north region? How does it impact divisions in the region, and/or possibilities for building bridges?

TERRY SUPAHAN: When people feel disconnected and disengaged, you'll see that resentment, anger, and other negative feelings are prevalent. For True North Organizing, Prop 50 doesn't really change our work, it just expands it. Because being able to meet with people who don't look like you, who don't act like you, don't have the same culture or religion or language, or vote like you — all those are differences for which it's easy for people to point to them and be comfortable staying separate from one another.

For True North, we are strong advocates of not only building our base, and working with allies who can see and imagine a social justice future that's resplendent, and working with young people, addressing climate change and education. We also want, with people with all those differences, to find out what they care about, what they need, what they're looking to do in this world. At the core of it, I want a world for my children and my grandchildren that isn't so divided. And about Prop 50, it has at least temporarily, for the next few years, been built on that division, because those are the politics that we're in. But it doesn't change the need to bridge that existed even before Prop 50.

We opened with questions about the Klamath River dams. The water and land of the north also haven't



changed. We're part of California, and we want people in Central and Southern California to recognize our region's environmental needs and concerns. So the people of this region can do a lot more together than when we only see one another divided, or we're trying to amass political money to fund our candidate versus your candidate. That just seems such a waste when there's so much that needs to be done together.

JC: Yes, even before we started recording, we were talking about relationships and how important it is to keep talking, and to not let the conversation go cold or go stale...

TERRY SUPAHAN: Can I interject right there? Because what you said made me think of a conversation last week with my 5-year-old grandson. He FaceTimed me, and I quickly made an excuse to hop off my work call to take his call, and we visited. There had been a shooting on the largest Indian reservation in California the night before. It involved teenagers — Native youth in high school. Out of an abundance of caution, the school district canceled school for that day. So in a very diplomatic, curious grandfather sort of way, I wanted to find out if this grandson's older brother had gone to school or not. Sure enough, the 5-year-old tells me that his older brother didn't have to go to school. I thought, "Oh my gosh, I don't want him to be afraid of school." And what I said was, "It always gets dangerous for all of us when we aren't talking — when we quit talking to one another. People who have differences have to find ways to keep talking." That's the conversation I had with this 5-year-old. It's so much better if people keep talking. It was a very powerful conversation to have.

JC: It is powerful. And it's simple in a way, but then again, when it comes to relationship building — how do you think about the strategy for doing it in the region where you work, in the face of struggles over resources, struggles over tangible material outcomes? How do the relationships overcome what can often feel zero-sum?

TERRY SUPAHAN: I appreciate that question. We like to say in our organizing that the first revolution is internal. And to me, that's a spiritual battle for all of us. I say "battle" because, traditionally, I see and believe in the titanic forces of good and not so good, or good and evil. I think, for all of us, we get to decide how we

respond. Anyone who's ever been in a personal relationship knows how hard just that is, let alone talking about more people, and more institutions, and more communities, and more regions. When I don't, or when me or my people don't, get what I want, you want to fight about it. You want to amass voters and change the situation.

There's something about not getting your way that I think is really critical in a lot of these situations and discussions. It's more about: "How do I fight spiritually? How do I lean into myself in a way that I can still be proud of myself, that I can still tell my kids and grandkids I fought a good fight?" Part of what it is to win is getting a lot of people to listen, and it's super hard, because you have to listen first. We come from a place of, "You tell me your position and what you're concerned about, and I'm going to tell you mine. Some of the things may actually align — or not! So let's figure that out, too." It's a commitment to ongoing conversation and critical dialogue.

But what's first is the moral compass you're using to guide you in these conversations, and what do you need to do to sharpen that compass so that we can go deeper in our conversations and talks. Because it's not natural or easy for any of us to do these things.

JC: It's true. A lot of times when we talk about bridging, or when we talk about building belonging for all, even for people who have denied belonging to others or to ourselves, there are questions. "Why?" We have to remember that those things aren't "add ons." Even if it's hard, those are matters of being consistent with our own values. That's the standard we hold ourselves to.

TERRY SUPAHAN: Correct. Well said. Thank you.

JC: Something that I think we hear about the far north of California is that many people there mistrust state government. Many want more local control when it comes to how public funds are spent and programs implemented. What are some reasons that far north communities doubt that state government can work for them?

TERRY SUPAHAN: I read something recently that California was the only state government in the country that had legalized genocide of Native Americans, with the governor's bounty, under the first governor

of California back in the 1850s.² That's an amazingly ugly part of history for all of us to address. For True North, we really want to be able to have those difficult conversations about history, because we don't see how we get better as a people — all of us — unless we challenge... well, we all have a different idea of history, depending on how much we know, or what we know, and what we believe. In relationship, I think we can have those talks and conversations that expose those different ideas about history, so that all of us could be closer and more accepting of how we got to this place. And then, how do we get to a better place?

I'm sure those people — those engineers and those politicians — who approved funding for those first dams on the Klamath River thought they were doing something that needed to be done. Through learning those mistakes, I hope we can make different decisions in the name of the planet, in the name of belonging — belonging to one another. I love what's on your website: “Who belongs?” Well, clearly, we all do.

True North has a hiring interview question that I'd never encountered before, but that I love. The question is: “Who do you love?” There is a single right answer. Once we're asked that question, we are confronted with: “What is the right answer?” Well, the right answer is “everyone.” You have to love everyone at some level. I'm not saying you have to be buddy-buddy with people who hate you or don't think like you. But they deserve love just as much as you do.

JC: That definitely resonates with the idea of belonging for all. It also makes me think of this idea of “the neighbor” that's been at the forefront of things happening across the country with ICE raiding communities. In that context, it's the question of “who is your neighbor?” Well, it's everyone around you. That of course echoes something biblical. It's the point of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Similar lessons are in many faith traditions and spiritual traditions, along with that answer to the question of “who are we to love.”

TERRY SUPAHAN: You've made me think of a quick story that I'd love to share with you from a few years

ago. You opened with a question about the dams on the Klamath River. Well, the further upriver you travel toward the Oregon border, the harder the divisions were on the issue of the dams. Once, a number of years ago, I had to go up that way because there was a Karuk family that we needed to go and pay respects to, because that family had lost a loved one. I needed to find their home. I didn't know them personally, and had never been there. So I had pulled off alongside a two-lane road, and I'd already passed a number of signs, like “Indian go home,” and “death to Indians and salmon,” and “leave our dams alone.” Strange language for me, because it didn't make a whole lot of sense. So anyway, I'm pulled off alongside the road, trying to figure out how to get to this home. Now this pickup truck pulls off in front of me. A tall, lanky cowboy with a cowboy hat and boots and jeans gets out and is walking toward me. All of the thoughts that you could imagine me having, I'm having. I'm wondering, “Do I get out of the car? Do I stay in the car? What's this moment gonna be about?”

What happened? Well, he was the nicest person. He had pulled over to see if I needed help, because he saw that I was pulled over and I had turned off my car. But he's just checking on me. So who's our neighbor? Well, in those moments, you want everyone to be loving and kind, gentle and helpful. But I had no idea! I really actually anticipated problems. And that's fine, too. I mean, you can always go there if you need to, but really, do we lead with our heart, or do we lead with our fists and paranoia and our worry? Well, it's much harder to lead with your heart.

JC: There's a very big tension there, absolutely. There's a tension between your openness across divides that we know exist, trying to be open to bridging those divides, versus being exposed and vulnerable, sometimes really in danger. The story that you just shared, I feel like it's such a good example of that. Do you feel that tension in the work True North is doing, or do True North organizers feel it out in communities?

2 For a short account of this history, see, Erin Blakemore, “California's Little-Known Genocide,” *History*, A&E Television Networks, November 16, 2017, <https://www.history.com/articles/californias-little-known-genocide>.

TERRY SUPAHAN: Yeah, I felt it just Wednesday. I was in a controversial meeting where all sides disagreed, or didn't even like being in the room with one another. I've continued to hear about it over the last 36 hours. We're still committed to the conversation. But we also have a principle, an organizing principle, that when there's tension, do a one-to-one. And that's obviously to keep the momentum of conversation going. So, if you're afraid, if you're angry, or that meeting didn't go the way you thought it should go, circle back around. It sounds simple, but we all know it's not, if we think about it. Do I have the courage to go back and tell someone that I didn't like these things, and I didn't understand why you said these things, and how do we continue to keep talking and move this thing forward? But anything that matters to you, and that matters to someone else, you have to know there's going to be problems to work through.

JC: A final question: Is there anything else you want to add to this conversation about what the far north region of the state of California could use “more of” — whether it's for organizing or just meeting the needs of communities?

TERRY SUPAHAN: I want to tell you about a project that True North is committed to seeing through, which is the creation of a retreat center in the Redwoods to support community organizers — and their families. Families need to be involved in this work, because they're pulled and strained in ways that we don't think are sustainable. We want people and their families to be a part of a healing process, to be part of a plan for sustainability, and to have kids and extended families be able to support the organizer who's in partnership with others.

The second thing is that we would love for this retreat center and its programming to support community organizing around climate change, and help young people figure out ways to think about, consider, and understand increasing temperatures of the planet. Third, we would love people — Black, brown, and white people from urban centers — to come to our region, to learn to not be afraid of the wilderness, to not be afraid of the outdoors, and to understand what we understand. We'd love for them to be able to come and visit and teach us what they know about surviving in their contexts, and we can teach them

what we know about surviving in ours. Hopefully then we can hammer out a vision of climate science and education that we could all benefit from.

JC: That sounds really exciting.

TERRY SUPAHAN: It is. We actually have our first tribal meeting on March 30th, with the tribe with the property right next to the one we're looking at for the retreat center. We're hoping that they're our first support as we build broad, inter-tribal support. This is an Indigenous-led project, for all of us — and for all our allies and neighbors.