

# ACORN And Progressive Politics in America

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## Summary

This paper takes a broad look at ACORN in terms of its role in America's progressive movement in the post-WW2 era and in the contemporary political landscape. It will focus on its achievements, strengths and weaknesses, on how it is similar to and different from other organizations that organize low-income people, and on some of ACORN's lessons for building a progressive movement.

## The Progressive Landscape

To those suffering from political hopelessness, Rick Perlstein's book, *Before the Storm*, about the Goldwater movement, offers some solace and lessons. Consider how depressed the Republicans were in 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson beat Barry Goldwater in a real landslide and the Democrats won huge majorities in Congress. At the time, almost every pundit in the country wrote the conservative movement's obituary. Goldwater's right-wing supporters were viewed as fanatics, out of touch with mainstream America.

But the GOP's right wing regrouped. With the help of conservative millionaires, corporations, and foundations, they created new organizations, think tanks, and endowed professorships at universities to help shape the intellectual climate and policy agenda. They recruited a new generation of college students and funded their campus organizations. They created a network of right-wing publications and talk radio stations. They identified potential political candidates, cultivated and trained them. They brought together the two major wings of the conservative movement -- the business conservatives and the social/religious conservatives -- into an uneasy but relatively stable coalition to elect conservative Republicans. Then they took over the atrophied apparatus of the Republican Party. They helped change the political agenda. In 1980, they elected Ronald Reagan. In 2000, they helped Bush steal the election. In 2004, they helped Bush win a second term, almost fair and square.

Let's remember that the Right has been cultivating its grassroots base – evangelicals, guns owners, and others -- for many years. It didn't happen overnight, as a reading of Ralph Reed's 1994 book, *Politically Incorrect: The Emerging Faith Factor in American Politics*, shows. Reed, former director of the Christian Coalition, recounts how his movement built itself up from scratch, utilizing the network of conservative pastors and churches, providing sermons, voter guides, get-out-the-vote training, and other resources to create a powerful organizational infrastructure. Separate, but overlapping with the religious right, the National Rifle Association and the gun lobby also used its huge warchest and organizational resources to mobilize its members and their families.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the religious right and the gun lobby isn't just an election-day operation. This is an ongoing movement that provides people with social, psychological, and political sustenance on a regular basis. Recent newspaper and magazine stories about the rise of “mega-churches” in suburban areas describe this phenomenon.

Now let's consider the landscape of the progressive movement. Let's play a mind game to help us look at it from a distance. For the sake of argument, let's assume that the annual operating budget of the progressive movement added up to \$25 billion. That includes the organizing, advocacy, and research staff of the major labor unions and the AFL-CIO, community organizing groups and networks (i.e. ACORN, IAF, PICO, Gamaliel, National Peoples Action, CTWO, Center for Community Change), environmental groups like the Sierra Club and Greenpeace, national women's groups like NOW, civil rights and immigrants rights organizations, gay rights groups, the

network of "public interest" groups like Common Cause, Public Campaign, the Center for Responsive Politics, and the Naderite networks (like Congress Watch), and civil liberties groups like People for the American Way, and the ACLU. Let's add in the national policy groups and think tanks like Economic Policy Institute, Center for American Progress, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Citizens for Tax Justice, Campaign for America's Future, Institute for Women's Policy Research, Policy Link, Demos, Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, Center on Wisconsin Strategy, Good Jobs First, the Fiscal Policy Institute, Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), and many others. Throw into the mix the budgets of various progressive media outlets -- Mother Jones, The Nation, American Prospect, Sojourners, Ms., Dollars & Sense, the "Air America" radio network (which includes the Al Franken Show), websites like AlterNet, TomPaine, and Common Dreams, and many others. Include the various progressive nonprofit public interest legal groups - like MALDEF, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Natural Resources Defense Fund, Lambda Legal Defense Fund, the National Women's Law Center, and others. Add the various national and regional organizer training programs. I'm not even including the various PACs (the union PACs, Emily's List, and others), the liberal churches and Jewish groups, the AARP, or various peace, human rights, and international "solidarity" groups.

Now let's reshuffle the deck. If we were starting from scratch, and had \$25 billion a year to spend, how would we spend it? How many organizers? Researchers? Lawyers? PR and communications staff? What kind of organizations -- single issue and multi-issue? How much would be allocated to unions, community organizing, environmental groups, women's rights groups, civil rights organizations, gay rights groups? What parts of the country -- which cities, states, congressional districts -- would you focus organizing work? How many staff would be based in DC? How many in "the field"? What issues would you focus on? What policy agenda?

Obviously, this isn't how the real world works. Every organization emerges out of specific circumstances, develops its own constituency and issues, raises money from members and outside funders, and tries to expand to fill a niche. There's no Progressive King or Queen to assemble all these resources and make some kind of rational allocation of money based on some agreed-upon criteria. But this mind-game does help us think about the condition of progressive forces in the US and how we might want to build a progressive movement that was able to take political power.

## **The Fragmented Mosaic of Community Organizing**

The purpose of progressive politics and movements is to reduce the level of poverty and the level of class, racial and gender inequality in the nation, promote sustainable growth, and promote peace and human rights at home and overseas.

No other major industrial nation has allowed the level of sheer destitution that we have in the United States. We accept as “normal” levels of poverty, hunger, crime and homelessness that would cause national alarm in Canada, Western Europe or Australia. Compare, for example, cities in Canada -- which has a similar economy and distribution of wealth -- with our own. We see the consequences every day, from the deadly levels of crime and violence, to the Third World levels of infant mortality, to the growing army of homeless people sleeping on park benches and vacant buildings.

Basic arithmetic tells us that the poor alone don't constitute a majority in any city, state, or congressional district, so that any effective organizing requires allies who are not poor. Even so, one of the most important roles for progressives is to organize the poor to speak and advocate for themselves, so that they are at the political table and able to bargain and negotiate for their own concerns.

There are 37 million Americans below the official poverty line -- \$18,400 for a family of four. This is 12.7% of the population. There are 62.8 million Americans below 150% of the poverty line -- \$27,600 for a family of four. This is 21.6% of the population. There are 90.8 million Americans below 200% of the official poverty line -- \$36,800 for a family of four. This represents 31.2% of the population. (These are 2003 figures from the U.S. Census)

For purposes of organizing, we can look at the demographic characteristics of the poor -- age, race, gender. We can figure out how many live in cities, suburbs, and rural areas. We know how many live in high-poverty neighborhoods and where those neighborhoods are. We should know which state legislative and Congressional districts they live in and what proportion of eligible voters they represent in each district. We can identify how many are the “working poor” with steady jobs, how many are marginally employed, and how many are jobless. We can find out how many lack health insurance, how many live in housing that is too expensive, how many are hungry or malnourished, how many face environmental dangers in the communities and workplaces, and how many send their kids to underfunded schools.

Lots of people know a great deal about the profile of the poor. How does it inform our organizing? One thing we do not know about the poor is how many - and which people -- are members of different organizations: churches, unions, neighborhood organizations, tenants groups, and other ways to identify “social capital.”

Moreover, there's no way to decide how to allocate progressive resources, to prioritize where and how to organize, to figure out which campaigns would be most effective in recruiting and mobilizing the people. Instead, different organizations -- unions, community groups, environmental justice groups, and others -- make decisions based on where they are located, what they are interested in doing, where they can get money, and other concerns. There is no overall logic, coherence, or strategy to how progressives do what they do. The Left is simply too fragmented to act in any coherent way. We operate on the principle of “let a thousand flowers

bloom” and hope that some of the flowers will grow into gardens.

Within this fragmented mosaic of movements and organizations that we call progressivism, ACORN is one of the shining success stories. It emerged out of the welfare rights movement in the 1970s and has gradually evolved into a multi-issue poor people’s organization with chapters in cities across the country. Other organizations -- unions, churches, and the AARP, among them -- have more low-income members, but among groups that do “community organizing” among the poor, ACORN is the nation’s largest. Moreover, it’s been around for over 30 years and has grown steadily. This alone is quite an accomplishment.

ACORN’s beginnings were part of what Harry Boyte called a “backyard revolution,” a mushrooming of local community organizing groups and community development organizations, hoping to stem and perhaps reverse the decline of urban (primarily minority) neighborhoods. With some funding from private foundations, thousands of community groups that worked on a variety of issues, using a variety of organizing strategies, and with uneven effectiveness. Almost every U.S. city (and a few suburbs) has at least one -- and in many cases dozens -- of community groups that do “organizing.”

Many (perhaps most) of these groups that emerged in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s eventually fell apart or remained small and marginal, unable to sustain themselves financially, economically, and politically. A few hung in, grew, and gained in strength, in part by becoming part of broader networks at the city, regional, or national levels. No one really knows how many community organizations exist, the total size of their budgets, the number of staff people who work for them, how long they’ve been in business, how many are linked to larger networks, or how effective they are. This makes any serious evaluation of the strengths and weakness of “community organizing,” or their role in progressive politics, difficult.

What seems clear, however, is that among the thousands of community organizations around the country, most engage in relatively modest efforts. These include pressuring the police to close down a local crack house, getting city hall to fix potholes, or getting the parks department to clean up a local playground. Some groups are more ambitious. Their community organizing has included forming tenant unions, building community development corporations, combating redlining, challenging police abuses, fighting against environmental and health problems, mobilizing against plant closings and lay-offs, and reforming public education and (as ACORN has done in New York City) even setting up charter schools sponsored by grassroots organizations.

Most of these community groups are not linked to any regional or national organizing or training networks. Those that are tied to such networks -- like ACORN, the Industrial Areas Foundation, Gamaliel, the Center for Third World Organizing, , PICO, US Action, the Center for Community Change, National Peoples Action, DART, and others - have been helped in various ways to improve the capacity of local

groups to develop leaders, mobilize campaigns, and win local victories.

Compared with groups like organized labor (with 13 million members) or even AARP (with 35 million members), ACORN -- with about 120,000 dues-paying members in about 70 cities -- is not particularly powerful at the national level. But that may not be the appropriate criteria. After all, ACORN is just one of many organizations that do “community organizing,” just like SEIU is one of many organizations that do “labor organizing.” One of the key distinctions in understanding progressive politics is that between “social movements” and “organizations.” The need to maintain an organization - with fundraising, staff, leaders, etc -- often creates “turf” competition with other groups working along parallel lines

In 1993, Karen Paget wrote an article in *The American Prospect* entitled, “Citizen Organizing: Many Movements, No Majority” in which she described (and bemoaned) the fragmentation of citizen/community organization groups and networks. Unfortunately, her conclusion 13 years ago -- that the whole of “community organizing” in the U.S. equaled less than the sum of its parts -- is still true today.

Until mid-2005, I might have written that, compared with the labor movement, there is no umbrella group for community organizing comparable to the AFL-CIO. The labor movement is now split in two separate umbrella groups, but - even so - the reality is that the world of community organizing is much more fragmented, and thus probably less effective, than it could be.

## **ACORN’s Role in Progressive Politics**

That said, within the world of community organizing, ACORN is without doubt the most effective in terms of its overall impact. Among the thousands of community organizations that now exist around the country, none has been able to achieve what ACORN has accomplished: a national organization with local chapters and the ability to simultaneously wage organizing campaigns at the neighborhood, city, state and federal level. Moreover, its impact should also be evaluated in terms of its effectiveness in participating in coalitions, its strategic innovations, and the “ripple effects” of its work (such as the living wage movement and the community reinvestment/fair lending movement) beyond its own organizational activities. ACORN can also take credit for training hundreds of organizers over the years who have gone on to start or work for other groups. Like the United Farm Workers, ACORN has become (perhaps unwittingly) a school for organizers for the wider progressive movement. (Although the UFW hasn’t had much organizing success in many years).

On its own, in coalitions with other groups, and as a model for progressive groups (including funders looking for innovative and effective organizing work), ACORN has demonstrated that it is possible to mobilize low-income Americans (particularly people of color) for change. The question for the future is whether, and how, ACORN

can contribute to building a strong progressive movement in terms of mobilizing people for action, winning elections, and influencing public policy

Few people recognize how hard it is to build membership-based community organizations among the poor. It is extremely labor-intensive, requiring constant attention to identifying and developing leaders, building organizations, fundraising, engaging in traditional lobbying and occasional direct action, conducting research and policy analysis, media savvy and other skills.

ACORN's longevity is quite remarkable. It has been in business for more than 30 years. It has grown, almost steadily, since the early 1980s. Many community groups, despite the best intentions, are unable to sustain their work amid victories and defeats. They can't seem to juggle all the myriad aspects of effective community organizing. ACORN has been able to do so, despite overwhelming obstacles.

Every observer of urban neighborhood problems recognizes that the sources of urban decline lay primarily reside outside neighborhood boundaries. The symptoms of urban decay -- poverty, unemployment, homelessness, violent crime, racial segregation, high infant mortality rates -- have their roots in large-scale economic forces and federal government policy. In the face of these realities, community organizations face enormous obstacles in repairing the social and economic fabric of their communities. What influence can neighborhood organizing groups have on policies made in City Hall, state capitals, Washington, and corporate board rooms?

ACORN has an answer. Perhaps ACORN's most impressive attribute is its ability to work simultaneously at the neighborhood, local, state and federal levels, so that its chapter members are always "in motion" on a variety of issues, and so that its local organizations can link up with their counterparts around the country to change national policy on key issues that can't be solved at the neighborhood, municipal, regional, or state levels.

In her book *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civil Life* (2003), Theda Skocpol laments the decline since the early 1900s of mass membership grassroots and mixed-income organizations and their replacement with advocacy/lobbying groups run by professional staff with little capacity to mobilize large numbers of people. Although ACORN is not very diverse in terms of its members' income, it is one of the few progressive organizations in the US that combines mass mobilization and advocacy.

One of ACORN's most important attributes is that it is a "federated" organization with a base at the local level, but with a national infrastructure and the capacity to wage campaigns simultaneously at the local, state, and national levels. Its staff works to build strong local organizations and local leaders that can influence municipal and county governments, as well as local corporations (such as banks), to address the needs of the poor and their neighborhoods.

Local organizing defines ACORN's core issues, but when national leaders and staff recognize problems that are energizing members in several cities, they can consider whether the issue would be more effectively addressed by changes in state or federal policy. ACORN employs a staff of researchers and lobbyists in its national offices in Brooklyn, NY and Washington, DC to serve the needs of local chapters. Issues such as welfare reform, housing, redlining and predatory lending provide ACORN with organizing "handles" at the local, state and national levels. Even ACORN's recent work in mobilizing the residents of New Orleans forced to evacuate by Hurricane Katrina benefited from ACORN's capacity to work simultaneously in several cities, in at least two states, and at the national level to put pressure on politicians and policymakers at each level of government.

ACORN deserves substantial credit for changing the way we think about poverty over the past decade. The "living wage" movement, in which ACORN has played a major role, has helped change the public's view of the poor and the social contract. Two decades ago, the concept of a "living wage" was a radical idea. Today, "living wage" is part of the mainstream public debate. President Clinton's rhetoric that government policy should "make work pay" helped shift public attitudes. The title of John Sweeney's 1996 book, *American Needs a Raise*, played on the same theme. Today, there is widespread popular support, among most Democrats and many Republicans, for the Earned Income Tax Credit, which provides income assistance to the working poor. The popularity of Barbara Ehrenreich's best-selling book, *Nickel and Dimed*, about America's working poor, and the growing protests against Wal-Mart's low pay, indicate that concerns about inequality and poverty are moving from the margin to the mainstream of American politics.

ACORN's strategy to inject this issue into state ballot measures is another important step. In early 2004, ACORN initiated a statewide ballot initiative in Florida to raise the state minimum wage, registered thousands of residents, mostly in low-income, minority neighborhoods in cities, to increase turnout on election day, and won a decisive victory the following November. On its own, this is an impressive accomplishment. Since its victory in Florida, ACORN and its labor allies have begun talking about grassroots minimum-wage initiatives in other states in 2006, particularly where Democrats have a chance to expand, or hold on to, key offices. Campaigns are already underway in Ohio, Michigan, and Arizona, and ACORN is exploring possibilities in six other states and several cities. The strategy is designed to increase voter turnout and to provide candidates with a clear economic-justice issue. Organizers also hope to reach out to white, church-going voters (including Republicans) who earn barely enough to stay above the poverty line. (In part, they seek to counter right-wing initiatives on gay marriage and opposition to affirmative action.) Activists also hope this state-by-state strategy will lay the groundwork for raising the federal minimum wage. The last such raise—to \$5.15 an hour in 1997—has been completely eroded by inflation. A nurse's aide earning that figure has to support herself and raise her two children on \$10,700 a year. More importantly, this could help lay the groundwork for electoral campaigns to help liberal Democrats win



various Congressional and Senate seats by raising voter turnout among the poor and liberals.

ACORN's successes have catalyzed its opponents. When Newt Gingrich was Speaker of the House, for example, he instigated a investigation into ACORN's finances and tax-exempt status. In a nasty (but unwittingly flattering) critique of ACORN – "ACORN's Nutty Regime for Cities" -- in the Spring 2003 issue of *City Journal* (published by the right-wing Manhattan Institute), Sol Stern sought to discredit ACORN by comparing its work unfavorably to the efforts of Jane Addams and the settlement house movement at the turn of the 20th century. Addams, an upper-class college educated woman, started the nation's first settlement, Hull House, in Chicago in 1889 and the idea soon spread among reformers in cities across the country. According to Stern, "Hull House and its many successors emphasized self-empowerment: the poor, they thought, could take control of their lives and communities through education, hard work and personal responsibility."

Ironically, in some ways ACORN is doing exactly the kind of work that Addams and her colleagues at Hull House would be doing if they were alive today. Like ACORN, Addams supported organized labor and lobbied for legislation that was considered radical in its day. She fought slumlords and corrupt politicians. She fought to outlaw child labor and for women's suffrage. Like ACORN she mobilized community residents to support pocket parks, playgrounds, garbage collection, police and fire protection and closed sewers. Like ACORN, she was not only committed to empowering individuals, but to strengthening the fabric of neighborhoods as well. Equally important, she helped knit these political forces into a broader progressive movement that fought for, and frequently won, policy changes at the local, state, and federal levels. Indeed, in her day, many people considered Addams - a socialist, feminist, pacifist and union supporter - a dangerous radical. Had he been writing a century ago, Stern no doubt would have lambasted Addams and other Progressive reformers for promoting socialism.

Indeed, ACORN must be seen in the context of the broader Left and progressive movements. Even though the organization usually shuns such ideological labels, ACORN identifies itself with the nation's progressive tradition and movements. ACORN's policy agenda is in the progressive and New Deal tradition of saving unfettered capitalism from excessive greed by pushing for tenement housing reforms, workplace safety laws, the minimum wage, aid to mothers and children, Social Security, the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively for better wages and working conditions, subsidies to house the poor, and policies that encourage banks to make mortgage loans to boost homeownership.

ACORN is frequently compared with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the organizing network founded by Saul Alinsky in the late 1940s. ACORN and IAF have chapters in some of the same cities, and often work on similar issues (schools, housing, public services), but they never work together (an issue that can be discussed separately). ACORN tends to recruit its members through door knocking in poor

neighborhoods. This is extremely labor-intensive work. In contrast, IAF organizes through already-established organizations, mostly churches. IAF uses religious values as a unifying force. As a result, IAF's local chapters usually have more members than ACORN's and in some cases have a somewhat stronger internal culture. IAF groups also tend to be much slower at responding to new issues and opportunities, because it requires moving these institutions and their leaders.

The IAF has built strong local multi-issue organizations among the poor and the nearly poor in many cities, but it has not sought to build the kind of federated organization that can wage policy campaigns at the national level. The IAF is, instead, a network of local and regional organizations that have little contact with each other, except at occasional meetings among the lead organizers in each region. That is why, ironically, the IAF -- whose Baltimore affiliate (BUILD) mobilized the first successful "living wage" campaign in 1994 -- was not able to translate that pioneering local victory into a broader movement, while ACORN has used its federated structure to help sustain a national "living wage" movement, with victories in dozens of cities.

One of ACORN's strengths is its combination of "inside" and "outside" tactics and strategies. ACORN's activists and leaders often work both inside the system (organizing the poor to play hardball politics) and outside the system (recognizing the need for protest and confrontation).

ACORN is not shy about using the in-your-face confrontational protest tactics. ACORN is unapologetic about its tactics, in part because it not only helps draw public attention to neglected issues but also helps build membership. Equally important, these tactics typically get results. Public officials and private businesses who decry ACORN's tactics wind up agreeing with its agenda - or at least negotiating with its leaders to forge compromises.

At the same time, ACORN recognizes the limits of protest as a tactics as well as the limits of community organizing as a strategy. It recognizes the fundamental paradox of community organizing. In essence, all community organizing groups, even the most effective, mobilize a relatively small number of people. Unlike most labor union campaigns -- which require gaining the support of a majority of members in a given workplace in order to win an NLRB election -- community organizing only requires that there are enough people mobilized to disrupt business as usual, to get an issue into the media, or to catalyze allies who have influence over public officials or corporate leaders. Most successful community organizing involves using a group's very limited resources in strategic ways. This makes it possible to win many "issue campaigns." But this approach is limited when it comes to electoral politics -- where you need to win a plurality of voters to achieve a victory.

That is why ACORN has made strong alliances with organized labor (particularly SEIU) and has made a strategic and effective leap into the controversial arena of electoral politics, not only doing voter registration and get-out-the-vote (GOTV) work

(much of it outside its own membership base), but also supporting candidates and running some of its own members for public office (in NY, as part of the Working Families Party).

Also, because it is a national (and federated) organization, ACORN has the capacity to target resources - particularly its organizing staff - to different parts of the country when they can be helpful in key electoral races. For example, ACORN had a significant role in the 2004 national elections - such as its work with Americans Coming Together and other electoral coalitions, and its work on ballot referenda in key swing states.

ACORN is also one of the few groups that has successfully figured out how to combine organizing with development and “services”, and minimize the inevitable tensions that occur when the same organization engages in both. It runs a housing development non-profit, it runs several public (charter) schools, and it provides mortgage counseling and other services. These activities often conflict with organizing and protest, but ACORN has done better than most groups in recognizing and addressing these tensions.

ACORN has its limitations. These are due in part to the shortage of money and other resources, and partly due to its own organizational culture and outlook, some of which are subject of internal debate among its staff and leaders.

For some of the reasons mentioned earlier, ACORN has not done as effective a job as it could in identifying, training, and developing grassroots leaders. ACORN has its own training institute and has had many dynamic leaders over the years, but its organizational culture creates obstacles to long-term leadership development. As a result, ACORN is probably more staff-driven than it claims to be, although many of its local grassroots leaders are very effective.

Ultimately, ACORN must be evaluated in terms of its role in helping shape and build a broad progressive movement that can influence public policy.

## **Progressives’ Roles in New Deal and Great Society**

It is important to examine progressive movements in the context of broader political, economic and social trends. What obstacles and opportunities did progressive groups confront? Were they able to take advantage of opportunities or did they fail to do so? In hindsight, it may appear that progressive successes – such as the minimum wage, or civil rights laws, or environmental laws, or the ascendancy of women’s right -- were inevitable. In fact, they were the result of leaders’ decisions about tactics and strategies, and their capacity to mobilize people, to recruit allies, to identify openings and possibilities and take advantage of them, often against enormous odds.

From the 1930s through the 1960s, the American “social contract” was based on the premises of the New Deal -- a coalition led by the labor movement, its strength focused in cities, its core constituency immigrants and their children, African Americans, and, to a lesser extent, white southern small farmers, with allies among middle-class reformers (i.e. planners, intellectuals, journalists, social workers) and some liberals within the business community. The New Deal resulted in the adoption of Social Security, the minimum wage, the right to unionize, government-subsidized housing for the working class, the TVA, and other progressive policies. Urban community organizing as we know it -- based on the Alinsky model and its offshoots - was not a major component of the New Deal coalition. It wasn't until the mid-1960s “Great Society” era that organizing around urban renewal, job training and other anti-poverty issues played an important part in the liberal- progressive coalition.

During the postwar era, from the late 1940s through the early 1970s, the U.S. experienced a dramatic increase in per capita income and a simultaneous decline in the gap between the rich and the poor. The incomes of the bottom third, even the bottom half, of the class structure rose faster than those at the top.

From the beginning, however, conservative forces, particularly most big businesses and industry trade groups, sought to thwart and weaken the New Deal. That was the primarily motivation behind the “domestic cold war,” often referred to as McCarthyism or the Red Scare. Most business leaders feared a dramatic expansion of the New Deal in the postwar era and fought any effort to expand government regulation of business, to make the tax code more progressive, to promote full employment, to encourage racial integration, and to expand the social welfare state. Their success can be seen in the dramatic defeat of Henry Wallace's campaign for President in 1948 and in the defeat of President Truman's plans for a national health insurance system and passed of the anti-union Taft-Hartley law over Truman's veto. But in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the New Deal coalition - particularly the CIO labor movement, big-city mayors, and the addition of veterans groups and even some liberal Republicans - was able to expand the policy agenda to include the GI bill to make college accessible to veterans, and mortgage programs to help veterans and working class families buy homes.

If rising affluence made a war on poverty possible, the civil rights movement and the urban unrest of the 1960s made it necessary. In the cold war battle between capitalism and communism, the conditions in America's ghettos and rural areas embarrassed the nation's political leaders as they espoused the advantages of the “American way of life.” And for leaders in the Democratic Party, especially in the North and Midwest, the civil rights movement catalyzed a moral force and a voting bloc they could not ignore. The Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act, and other civil rights victories laid the groundwork for an assault on legalized apartheid and the growth of a black middle class in the United States.

But many progressives at the time understood that these civil rights victories were not

a substitute for a major effort to reduce poverty. They had hoped to expand the New Deal, but settled for a more modest effort, labeled the Great Society and the “war on poverty” by President Johnson, beginning in 1964. It was at this point that community organizing made played a significant part in local and national politics. They played an important role in demanding, and in some cases implementing, anti-poverty and community development programs, fueled in part by requirement that local resident get to participate in these programs.

Even so, we should not over-emphasize the role that community organizing played in the Great Society programs that started with LBJ and continued through the Nixon years. The players with the strongest political clout were liberal labor groups, civil rights organizations and, with much ambivalence, many big-city mayors. In the 1960s and 1970s, cities were still very important in terms of the size of the population, the number of voters, the location of jobs and of union members, the composition of Congressional districts, and the power of their Congressional representatives (e.g. Rep. Adam Clayton Powell of New York City).

Representing the left wing of the Democratic Party, United Automobile Workers (UAW) president Walter Reuther had been making proposals since World War Two to renew and expand the New Deal and engage in national economic planning. He advised Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to champion a bold federal program for full employment that would include government-funded public works and the conversion of the nation’s defense industry to production for civilian needs. This, he argued, would dramatically address the nation’s poverty population, create job opportunities for African Americans, and rebuild the nation’s troubled cities without being as politically divisive as a federal program identified primarily as serving poor blacks.

Both presidents rejected Reuther’s advice. (In part they were worried about alienating Southern Democrats. In part they were concerned about alienating sectors of business who opposed Keynesian-style economic planning). Johnson’s announcement of an “unconditional war on poverty” in his 1964 State of the Union Address pleased Reuther, but the details of the plan revealed its limitations. The War on Poverty was a patchwork of small initiatives that did not address the nation’s basic inequalities. Testifying before Congress in April 1964, Reuther said that “while [the proposals] are good, [they] are not adequate, nor will they be successful in achieving their purposes, except as we begin to look at the broader problems [of the American economy].” He added that “poverty is a reflection of our failure to achieve a more rational, more responsible, more equitable distribution of the abundance that is within our grasp.”

Although Reuther threw the UAW’s considerable political weight behind Johnson’s programs, his critique was correct. Since the 1960s, federal efforts to address poverty have consistently suffered from a failure to address the fundamental underlying issues. With the exception of Social Security and Medicare (health insurance for the elderly), most programs targeted at individuals provide a safety net to keep people from physical suffering, not to lift them out of poverty. For example, even at its peak, welfare benefit levels, which vary dramatically among the states, never reached the

official poverty threshold, even with food stamp benefits added. Medicaid began in 1965 as a means-tested health insurance entitlement for the poor, with benefits varying by state. Housing subsidies were not an entitlement at all and have never reached more than one-third of the families who were eligible for them. The minimum wage has usually been far below the poverty threshold. Only the earned income tax credit (EITC) for the working poor, begun in the mid-1970s and expanded in the 1990s, has actually lifted some families above the poverty level.

In the 1970s, the New Deal and Great Society gains were supplemented by other victories that emerged out of civil rights, women's rights, environmental and consumer activism, fueled by the emergence of the Naderite network, feminism, environmental groups, and an upsurge in community organizing. These include affirmative action, the Clean Air Act and other environmental laws, strong regulations on business regarding consumer products and workplace safety (such as OSHA), and significant improvements in the legal and social rights of women, including reproductive freedoms. The major victories that emerged from community organizing (linked to civil rights) were the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (1975) and the Community Reinvestment Act (1977), which resulted from the ability of groups to link local and national campaigns around bank redlining.

## **Since the 1970s: The Rise of the Right - the Left on the Defensive**

Since the late 1970s, liberals, progressives, and Democrats have been on the defensive, seeking to protect the key components of the New Deal, Great Society, and subsequent victories from being dismantled by the increasing powerful right-wing forces -- led by the uneasy alliance between big business and the Religious Right, and the mainstream of the Republican Party.

ACORN was born in the 1970s in the aftermath of the civil rights and anti-war movements, when many activists were rethinking how to build (or rebuild) a progressive movement for social change. It emerged at a time when the post-WW2 prosperity - fueled by the rise of the US as a global superpower, steady economic growth, a narrowing gap between and poor -- was coming to an end.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, major U.S. corporations began an assault on the labor movement and the living standards of the poor and working class. This view was best expressed by Business Week in its October 12th, 1974 issue: "It will be a hard pill for many Americans to swallow -- the idea of doing with less so that big business can have more...Nothing that this nation, or any other nation, has done in modern economic history compares with the selling job that must be done to make people accept this reality."

The late 1970s saw the beginning of several trends: the rise of neo-conservatism as a political and intellectual force, the dismantling of the social safety net, a dramatic

decline in union membership, the chronic fiscal crisis of major cities, and the increase in the political power of big business and its politically and intellectual allies.

One major trend that has shaped U.S. politics -- and the capacity for organizing -- is the increasing suburbanization of the population. (The 1992 presidential election was the first in which a majority of voters were suburbanites). Some observers think this geographic shift has drawn a new fault line through American politics. Thomas and Mary Edsall argued in *Chain Reaction* (1991) that “suburbanization has permitted whites to satisfy liberal ideals revolving around activist government, while keeping to a minimum the number of blacks and the poor who share in government largess,” leading toward “a national politics that will be dominated by the suburban vote.” In a 1992 article in *The Atlantic*, William Schneider argued that as the center of gravity shifted to the suburbs, more voters’ concerns would shift in a private, narrow direction. In this “suburban century,” said Schneider, presidential candidates and congressional majorities can pay no political price for ignoring urban America. In the 2004 elections, some analysts attributed Republican victories in key swing states to voters in the newer (exurban) suburbs, especially among lower middle class church goers, many of them regular congregants of new “mega-churches,” that have grown along with suburban sprawl.

These conservative forces continued to gain momentum through the Reagan and Bush I years (1981-1991), were somewhat held in check during the Clinton years (1992-2001), and were back in the political saddle during the Bush II years (2001 to today).

Big business and right-wing foundations consistently and effectively invested in a conservative infrastructure of think tanks, political action committees, media (like the *Weekly Standard*, radio talk shows, and the blogosphere), and other tools. It trained conservative activists in the skills to run for office, developing a “farm team” of local activists who worked their way up the electoral ladder from local school boards to Congress. It joined forces with the Religious Right to identify social issues that could be used as “wedges” to help elect conservative candidates. It used its political clout in states to systematically redistrict state legislative and Congressional districts to give conservative Republicans an electoral advance, eventually taking over both houses of Congress and a majority of state legislatures. It coordinated its political and policy efforts by building bridges between the various wings and sectors of economic and social conservative groups, embodied in the weekly meetings led by Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform.

The conservatives developed a clear and concise “anti-government” ideology that shaped public debate and public “liberal” ideas about activist government on the defensive (including Clinton’s statement that “the era of big government is over”). A central tenet of conservative ideology is the belief that government interferes with individual liberty, is less efficient than the private sector, and in many cases is simply unnecessary. Among the world's industrial nations, the US has the lowest overall level of taxation (especially for the wealthy), has the weakest regulations on business for

consumer and worker protections, and has the smallest safety net in terms of health insurance, child care, and anti-poverty programs.

Even so, conservatives like President George W. Bush, his Republican allies in Congress, his intellectual strategists like Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform and William Kristol of the Weekly Standard, and the corporate-sponsored policy wonks at the American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute, and the Heritage Foundation argue that (with the exception of military spending) we need to further reduce government, in large part by cutting taxes even more, especially for the very rich. They call this "starving the beast," reducing taxes so much that government in general, and the federal government in particular, will be virtually paralyzed.

Once Bush II was selected by the Supreme Court in 2000, progressives were back on the defensive. The policy and political agenda has been controlled by an alliance of big business conservatives and social-religious conservatives and the right-wing of the Republican majority in Congress. Bush quickly abandoned any commitment to "compassionate" conservatism. His "faith based" urban initiative was simply a way of redirecting existing federal funds toward his political base among the Religious Right.

On many fronts, the Bush administration is the most conservative regime of the past century. During the Bush years, progressives have had little success in promoting progressive reforms at the federal level. With Congress in Republican hands, there was little progressives could do but try to stop bad things from happening: the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, the Patriot Act and other invasions of civil liberties, dismantling federal consumer, environmental and worker protection laws, slashing programs for the poor, crony capitalism, corporate scandals and tax breaks for the wealthy. Small defensive victories - such as stopping Bush's efforts to restrict overtime pay for millions of workers and the privatization of Social Security - - have had to suffice.

After Bush took office, many of the positive trends of the 1990s -- reductions in unemployment, poverty, crime, families without health insurance -- reversed direction. Median household income fell from \$45,062 in 2001 to \$44,389 in 2004 (in 2004 dollars). The nation's poverty rate rose from 11.7 % in 2001 to 12.7% in 2004, from 32.9 million to 37 million people. The rate for Blacks rose to 24.7%; for Hispanics, to 28.9%. Urban poverty grew from 16.5% in 2001 to 17.5% two years later. The Bush years saw a continual fraying of the social safety net. The number of Americans without health insurance climbed from 41.2 million (14.6%) to 45.8 million (15.7%) between 2001 and 2004. Some of the dire predictions about Clinton's welfare reform program came to fruition during the Bush years. For example, the proportion of families who leave welfare but cannot find jobs, and the number of former welfare recipients still in poverty, increased.

Under Bush, rents and housing prices increased faster than incomes, especially for the poor. In 2000, the national "housing wage" -- the amount someone who is working 40 hours a week has to earn to afford a typical two-bedroom apartment in a particular



area -- was \$12.47; by 2004, it was \$15.37, much higher in many cities. Bush proposed major cuts to the Section 8 housing voucher program, eliminating 250,000 vouchers in 2005 and 600,000 vouchers by 2009, a 30% cut. Low-income tenants would face a rent increase of about \$2,000 a year.

During the Bush years, city officials, reeling from the loss of federal and state aid, had no choice but to cut essential services, including public safety, libraries, road repair, and public schools. The cities' fiscal traumas were compounded by the Bush administration's most expensive federal mandate -- its "war on terrorism" and "homeland security" initiatives after 9/11 -- because Washington failed to provide municipalities with adequate funds to comply with the requirements.

None of this is meant to suggest that the American public has become more conservative on economic justice issues (it hasn't) or that there haven't been some incremental victories since the 1980s (there have). As Larry Bartels (a Princeton political scientist) has pointed out in a recent paper presented at the APSA meetings, Tom Frank, author of best-seller, *What's The Matter With Kansas?*, is simply wrong that most Americans, including white working class voters, have become conservative in their values or their voting.

The proportion of Americans who define themselves as "liberals" has been declining for several decades. But this does not mean that Americans do not share most "liberal" values. For example, fewer women call themselves "feminists" now than did 20 years ago, but more women agree with once-controversial "feminist" ideas like equal pay for equal work or a women's right to choose. Likewise, more Americans today than 20 years ago believe that government should protect the environment, consumers, and workers from unhealthy workplaces and other dangers. Most Americans now think that the federal government should help guarantee health insurance for everyone.

In the 2000 and 2004 races for the White House and Congress, the partisan vote margins were extremely close. Gore won the popular vote in 2000. And in 2004, a shift of a small number of votes in Ohio and Florida would have resulted in a Kerry victory. The Bush and Republican victories were due mostly to how well the GOP and its allies mobilized the white, conservative, evangelical base compared with how well their liberal counterparts (unions, MoveOn.Org, environmental groups, women's rights organizations, civil rights groups, community groups like ACORN, and coalitions such as Americans Coming Together, and America Votes) did in mobilizing the Democratic base. Exit polls from the November 2004 election reveal that the public is hardly in sync with Bush's broader agenda. For example:

- 70% of voters were "very concerned" about the availability and cost of health care and another 23% are "somewhat concerned."
- 54% percent of voters thought that Bush pays more attention to large corporations than to "ordinary Americans."

- 52% of voters believed that the economy is either "not so good" or "poor," compared with 47% of voters who thought the economy is "excellent" (only 4% do) or "good."
- 43% of voters thought the job situation in their area was worse than it was four years earlier, compared with 23% who thought it was better. (34% thought it was the same).
- 49% of the voters said they were "angry" or "dissatisfied" with Bush, while 48% were "satisfied" or "enthusiastic" with Bush. This is an incredible low level of support for an incumbent President, especially in the middle of a war.
- 53% of voters thought the war in Iraq was doing "somewhat" or "very" badly and 46% of voters "somewhat" or "strongly" disapprove of the US decision to go to war with Iraq. But...
- 55% of voters thought that the war in Iraq is part of the war on terrorism.

Even on what the media have been labeling "moral values" (by which they really mean opposition to gay marriage and to abortion), voters were far from monolithic.

- 55% of voters thought that abortion should be legal in all cases (21%) or most cases (34%). In other words, a pro-choice majority.
- 60% of voters believed that gay and lesbian couples should either be allowed to legally marry (25%) or form civil unions but not marry (35%). Only 37% opposed any legal recognition of gay/lesbian relationships.

Despite these and other survey findings that reveal that Americans are generally in favor of activist government (and that a majority of workers support unions), liberals and progressives have not been successful in countering conservative forces in terms of both a political infrastructure or an ideological "frame" or message. Progressives have not yet found an agenda for the 21st century to replace the New Deal and the Great Society, to counter the right-wing's "anti-government" message, to find a way to protect and expand social democracy at home in the midst of globalization.

## **The Lessons of Clintonism - too little, too late, but some space for progressives**

What can progressives, and community organizer groups, learn from the experience of Clintonism? The Clinton years represented a test of progressive organizing and ideas.

Anticipating a Democratic victory in the 1992 presidential race, many liberal think tanks, foundations, and organizing and advocacy groups began drafting bold new policy agendas to address poverty, the urban crisis, and the environmental crisis. The timing seemed perfect. The Los Angeles riots coincided with the end of the Cold War.

When the Berlin Wall fell, and the Soviet Union collapsed, there was much public discussion about the prospects for a "peace dividend" to reorder national priorities and address long unmet domestic needs.

In 1992, Clinton was not the favored Democratic candidate among most progressives. But once he was elected, progressives hoped that Clinton's victory would usher in a new era for the nation's cities and the poor. We sometimes forget that Clinton initially had bold plans to expand the New Deal and Great Society legacy. To build broad political support, he emphasized universal policies rather than means-tested programs narrowly targeted to the poor -- an approach that Walter Reuther would have endorsed.

These hopes were quickly dashed. Early in the Clinton administration, the Republicans (led by minority leader Senator Bob Dole) and the Democratic majority in Congress thwarted the president's efforts to enact a public investment plan to stimulate jobs, universal health insurance, and even a child immunization program. After the November 1994 elections put a Republican majority in Congress, any significant progress on such matters was impossible. The Republican takeover of Congress exacerbated the political isolation of cities, symbolized by Clinton's proposal a month later to dramatically cut the HUD budget and his willingness to consider eliminating HUD altogether.

The Clinton administration's ambivalence about pushing a progressive agenda reflected his own electoral coalition and the Democratic Party's own divisions. Clinton was elected with only 43 percent of the overall vote. Almost half of all eligible voters (disproportionately the poor and minorities) stayed away from the polls. Clinton won the vast majority of urban voters, but he owed his victory to the fact that Texas billionaire Ross Perot, running as a third-party candidate, took 19 percent of the vote, mostly from George Bush, and to the support of middle-class suburban voters who had voted for Reagan and Bush in the previous three elections. His governing agenda reflected these political realities.

Democrats pay more attention to cities than Republicans do because many of their key constituency groups live there. The safest seats in Congress are those urban districts that routinely elect progressive Democrats. But election day urban turnout is typically much lower than voting rates in wealthier suburbs, especially in mid-term elections. This can hurt Democrats higher up on the ticket-candidates running for governor and the U.S. Senate, as well as President.

Unquestionably, postwar suburbanization has altered the national political terrain. In 1944, thirty-two large old central cities cast 27 percent of the national vote in presidential elections. By 1992, their share had declined to 14 percent. Another study found that twelve large central cities cast 21.8 percent of the national vote in 1948 but only 6.3 percent in 2000 (up from 5.9 percent in 1996), even as they became more distinctly Democratic and less likely to vote compared with national patterns. Residents of cities with populations over 500,000 cast only 9 percent of the vote in

2000. Clearly, big-city electoral clout dwindled in the postwar years, especially in the large, old cities of the Northeast and Midwest. Much of this loss happened because eligible voters moved from cities to suburbs. It also happened because central-city voters became less active compared with those in the suburbs. During the Depression and the New Deal, urban political machines and labor unions mobilized urban voters, enabling large cities to match the national rate of turnout. Their propensity to vote peaked in 1944 at 113 percent of the national average and remained above it through 1952. After that, urban voter turnout declined relative to the rest of the nation. In 1960, voter turnout was 62 percent in the thirty-two major central cities, compared with 64 percent in the nation. Only in two presidential elections since then, 1976 and 1984, did urban turnout exceed the national average. Otherwise, it was well below the national level. In 1992, for example, urban turnout was 47 percent compared with the overall rate of 55 percent. Where unions, community organizing groups and others can help increase turnout within “safe” Democratic areas -- even in areas without much partisan competition -- it can help elect Senators, Governors, and Presidents.

Many Democrats in Congress (especially those representing suburban districts) were closely linked to business interests that opposed progressive taxation, Keynesian pump-priming, and social spending. Clinton inherited the huge federal deficit produced by the Reagan-Bush tax cuts and increased defense spending, limiting his ability to address domestic concerns without significant tax increases or dramatic cuts in military spending.

As a result of these political realities, Clinton see-sawed between being a moderate and a liberal. He needed the support of progressive groups, and liberal voters, to win election and re-election, but he tended to take them for granted because he viewed suburban “swing” voters as the key to his electoral success. Clinton sought to project his appeal beyond city lines to achieve an electoral majority. He signaled to suburban voters that he spoke to their interests by talking about defending the middle-class standard of living (for example, health care reform), promoting middle-class values (for example, “ending welfare as we know it”), and achieving economic competitiveness (for example, balancing the budget and adopting the North American Free Trade Agreement). Although he tried to project these messages in ways that would not antagonize his urban base, he was not above distancing himself from urban blacks, as when he criticized black rap singer Sister Souljah’s lyrics.

What was most important about the Clinton years was that liberals and progressives were part of the Democratic coalition -- partly, at least, inside the tent, helping to shape policy. No one expected a Clinton administration to be the salvation for the Left. But most progressives realized that even a moderate Democrat in the White House provided openings for progressive reform that had been impossible during the Reagan-Bush years. Equally important, a Democratic majority in either the House or the Senate meant that many of the key committee chairs were occasional allies in the struggle for progressive reform.

What was accomplished during the Clinton years? On the policy front, there were

incremental victories and a few defeats, but no major breakthroughs. Although they had to fight some defensive battles (like opposing Clinton's welfare reform plan), the progressive movement - unions, community groups, women's rights groups, environmentalists, among them - were mostly able to push for positive initiatives. They were frustrated by the Clinton's administration's failure to be bolder - in other words, by the slow pace of progress, by Clinton's failure to take greater advantage of the opportunities made available by a rising economy to address issues of poverty, inequality, and urban distress. Clinton's liberal critics believed that his administration could have done much more to address the plight of the poor in the context of such dramatic economic expansion. "We should be ashamed we haven't made more progress in this economy," said Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund. "It is totally unacceptable that with this much prosperity we have millions of uninsured children. What's going to happen when a recession comes?" Wendell Primus, a former top official in Clinton's Department of Health and Human Services, said, "We've clearly made gains in this administration. But I think we missed an opportunity to do even better."

Unlike the Reagan and Bush view, the Clinton administration argued that "macroeconomic policy is necessary, but not sufficient" to reduce poverty. The Clintonites did not believe that a rising tide, on its own, lifts all boats.

On the organizing and policy fronts, unions got Clinton and Congress to strengthen OSHA and enact legislation to protect strikers from being permanent replaced. Environmental groups saw incremental improvements in the Clean Air Act and other laws. ACORN got ambivalent White House support for strengthening enforcement of the Community Reinvestment Act. Housing activists and CDCs got a slight increase in the HUD budget and greater support for targeting funds to nonprofits. Anti-poverty groups saw an expansion of both EITC and food stamps, but a significant loss with the enactment of welfare reform.

During the Clinton years, economic and social conditions generally improved. Some major cities reversed their long decline. The nation's urban unemployment rate, as well as its crime rate, was the lowest in a decade. The nation's poverty rate (11.3%), and the poverty rate in central cities (16.1%), was lower than it had been in twenty-five years. Home ownership rates for Latinos and blacks increased, although the gap with whites remained significant. Even air quality improved in many urban areas. The improvements in cities during the 1990s were due largely to an unprecedented national economic expansion, reinforced by federal policies that reduced unemployment, spurred productivity, lifted the working poor out of poverty (such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and a minimum wage increase), and targeted private investment (stimulated in part by stronger enforcement of the Community Reinvestment Act) to low-income urban areas. During the Clinton years, there was a victory on the Motor Voter law, but no majority initiatives on labor law reform, or campaign finance reform, or other changes that would help level the political playing field and limit the power of big business and the rich.

## What next? - opportunities and obstacles for progressive organizing

During both the Clinton years and the current Bush era, progressive forces, including community organizing groups, have pushed forward and won many victories, particularly at the local level.

The labor movement is clearly the backbone of any effective progressive movement. Since the 1970s it has steadily lost density (proportion of the labor force in unions). Even so, there is real excitement over the successes over a number of major unions and (despite or because of the split between the AFL-CIO and the Change to Win coalition) a sense that a revitalization of organized labor is possible. Some of the bigger unions have laid the foundations for future growth, as recent gains in Los Angeles, Houston, and elsewhere indicate. Where the labor movement has been most successful, it has focused organizing efforts among workers in low-wage industries, such as hospitals, hotels, janitors, garment workers, home health care workers, and others. This work has primarily been among women, immigrants, and people of color. Unions that have made the most headway in recent years have drawn on the tactics and themes of civil rights crusades and grassroots organizing campaigns that emphasize dignity and justice, and that forge alliances with community and church groups, and that have put an emphasis on the development of leadership skills among the rank-and-file.

Among unions and community organizing groups, there is growing momentum at the local level, and in some places, the state level, for progressive policies, and some significant electoral victories in municipal and state politics. The most dramatic example of success is the growing number of cities (now more than 100) that have adopted living wage laws, a tribute to the alliances between unions, community organizations, and faith-based groups that have emerged in the past decade and for which ACORN deserves considerable credit. ACORN has also been central to the "community reinvestment" movement, which in the 1980s and 1990s made significant headway in forging grassroots coalitions to stop banks from redlining urban neighborhoods and engaging in predatory lending as well as to forge partnerships with lenders to expand housing development. In some cities, housing activists have joined forces with unions and other groups to push for inclusionary zoning laws and municipal housing trust funds, such as the \$100 million annual fund in Los Angeles.

Battles at the local level -- to improve housing conditions, unionize low-wage workers in the service and light manufacturing sectors, resist bank redlining and predatory lending, improve public schools, fight against environmental hazards, expand public transit, and others -- can win improvements in people's lives. But progressives know that we really cannot solve our nation's economic and social problems -- including urban problems -- without changes in federal policy. For example:

1. To level the playing field for union organizing campaigns, we need to reform the nation's unfair labor laws.
2. To improve conditions for the growing army of the working poor, we need to raise the federal minimum wage and expand participation in the Earned Income Tax Credit.
3. To provide adequate resources to housing poor and working class families, we need a National Housing Trust Fund or other legislation to expand federal subsidies.
4. To address the nation's health care crisis, we need some form of universal national health insurance.
5. To improve our public schools, especially those that serve the nation's poorest children, we need to increase federal funding for smaller classrooms, adequate teacher training, and sufficient books and equipment. We cannot rely primarily on local and even state funding for public education.
6. To provide families with adequate child care, we need a universal child care allowance that reaches families regardless of income. This can only be accomplished with federal funding and some state matching formula that accounts for variations in states' (and parents') ability to pay.
7. To redirect private investment in cities and older suburbs, we need to provide sufficient funds to clean up toxic urban brownfields.
8. To address the problems of growing traffic congestion, we need federal funds to improve public transit of all kinds as well as federal laws to limit tax breaks and other incentives that promote suburban sprawl and "leapfrog" development on the fringes of metropolitan areas.

The most successful organizing, therefore, needs to link local, state and national-level campaigns -- the kind of "federated" approach that ACORN has developed. But in doing, progressive organizing groups face a number of challenges, as the economic, demographic, and political landscape changes. These challenges include the following:

1. Fiscal crisis. Municipal governments and many state governments confront chronic fiscal crises. To the extent that progressive victories require additional funding resources (as opposed to regulatory policies), cities and states are feeling the pinch. Without additional federal funding, it will be difficult to seriously address the nation's health care, housing, education and child care crises.

Increasingly, city officials have sought to deal with fiscal crisis by becoming more "entrepreneurial" - by encouraging private investment and promoting public-private partnerships. What this means, in practice, is that cities subsidize private

development, typically on terms dictated by the private sector. In response, community organizing groups have, since the 1990s, demanded that public subsidies to private companies include a quid-pro-quo of “community benefit agreements” - including jobs, housing, parks - on terms dictated by community groups and (in some cases) unions. (The idea is somewhat modeled on the “community investment agreements” that community groups have negotiated with banks to resolve anti-redlining protests). One of the largest and most dramatic agreements of this kind is ACORN’s agreement with developer of the mega Atlantic Yards complex in Brooklyn.

2. Suburbanization. The United States is now a suburban nation. More than half the population - and more than half of all voters -- live in suburbs. Almost half the nation’s poor live in suburbs, too. A growing number of suburbs now face “urban” problems - poverty, crime, homelessness, underfunded schools, and so on. There is a widening economic divide within suburbia, as a recent Brookings report on economic segregation reveals. ([http://www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/20041018\\_econseggregation.htm](http://www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/20041018_econseggregation.htm)). It is simply wrong to say that suburbs are a homogeneous constituency lacking any shared interests with central cities. In fact, suburbs are highly varied and becoming more so. Perhaps a third are doing worse than central cities on such indicators as poverty rates and the incidence of crime

Congress and many state legislatures are dominated by suburb districts. Most community organizing groups, including ACORN, have focused on low-income areas of inner cities. This is no longer adequate in terms of building political strength, In terms of influencing public policy, strength in inner city neighborhoods gives ACORN an important role in influencing municipal politics, which is why it has been so successful in leading the movement for “living wage” laws, which now exist in more than 100 cities and counties around the country. But in terms of state and federal politics, ACORN’s strength is in legislative and Congressional districts that tend to be “safe” for Democrats, mostly liberal Democrats.

The progressive Left -- the labor movement, community groups, women’s groups, and others -- needs a strategy for building a base in the “swing” state legislative and Congressional districts that are primarily outside cities. They are on the borders of cities and inner suburbs. Or on in inner suburbs and outer suburbs. Or they are where outer suburbs (exurbs) and small towns are being gobbled up by suburban sprawl. Without a strategy for mobilizing voters in these areas, we cannot build a majority movement in Congress. Without a policy agenda that addresses the concerns of some significant sector of suburbanites - especially but not exclusively those in inner-ring suburbs - community organizing and labor unions will become victims of the trends that the Edsalls and Schneider warned about more than a decade ago.

The building blocks for an effective progressive movement today start in cities and move outward to working class suburbs and some liberal middle-class suburbs. ACORN can perhaps be faulted for not organizing the working class families in cities and older suburbs, which would make its impact even greater. These families are one



or two notches above poverty, but still not part of that shrinking group of “middle class” Americans who have stable and secure jobs, health insurance, secure pensions, paid vacations, who own homes, send their kids to good schools, and can afford to pay for their college tuition and room and board. These are also the “swing” voters - or nonvoters - whose numbers and political clout are key to forging a progressive coalition.

Labor unions and community organizing groups must reach out to the suburbs. They must mobilize voters in “swing” legislative and Congressional districts outside central cities. They must help organize people around troubling trends in suburbs like underfunded schools and the shortage of decent, affordable housing. They must find common ground issues that can help them developed a regional agenda to channel jobs and economic development into declining business districts, in contrast to cut-throat competition between cities in the same region trying to outbid each other for private investment or to limit suburban sprawl and traffic congestion.

In their book, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, John Judis and Ruy Teixeira show that a growing number of middle class professionals who work outside the corporate world and live in newer suburbs share a progressive outlook on both economic and social policy, and could be enlisted in a coalition that addresses issues of economic fairness, limits on suburban sprawl, revitalization of cities, and expansion of social programs such as health insurance and child care.

3. *Immigration and Ethnic Diversity*: The racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. and its metropolitan areas is more complex and diverse than ever before. As many demographers have noted, the demographic trajectories of our major metropolitan areas are no longer dominated by the dynamic of whites fleeing to the suburbs as central cities become increasingly populated by blacks. The massive wave of immigration over the last four decades and the increased suburbanization of blacks, Latinos, and Asians have moved our metropolitan areas beyond the paradigm of “politics in black and white.” Although most large central cities, such as New York and Los Angeles, are becoming less white, they are also becoming less black, as African Americans suburbanize and as immigrants and their children take the place of the native born. Most suburbs are also becoming more heterogeneous in racial and ethnic terms. There is a growing number of “melting pot suburbs.”

Unlike in the 1960s and 1970s, these transitions are not pitting whites against blacks, but rather are creating more complex patterns. Although the full political implications of this shift have yet to play out, new forms of ethnic expression, and, in some cases, cooperation, are being overlaid on the black-white racial tensions that drove urban politics in the postwar period. The emerging politics of interethnic relations is not going to be easy, but at least it is less likely to be locked in racial polarization. More complex interracial coalitions will form. As Gary Orfield has observed, these trends surely offer “new possibilities for successful diversity.”

With obvious exceptions, racism and racial discrimination is more subtle and less

overt than it was in the past. Nevertheless, there is considerable documentation that landlords, real estate agents, appraisers, lenders, police, teachers, doctors, and others today treat whites differently than they treat Blacks and Latinos, even when income is factored in. Anyone stopped for “driving while black” can attest to this.

It may be possible that intentional discrimination has been reduced over the past few decades. But what may remain are more covert, institutional forms of racial discrimination. A good example is the recent debate over issues of redlining. Lenders now argue that underwriting standards that consider an applicant’s credit history are a necessary part of any review process. It is well-known that whites are more likely to have wealth assets and less likely to have poor credit records, than Blacks and Hispanics with comparable incomes. Thus, Blacks and Hispanics have inherited a disadvantage, which means the playing field for obtaining a mortgage (or insurance) is not level, even if lenders and insurers treat applicants in a “color blind” fashion. Banks claim that even if the outcome of their loan-processing reviews result in racial disparities in outcomes, they are not evidence of racial discrimination.

Public opinion polls consistently show that white Americans are more supportive of laws against racial discrimination and of racial integration in neighborhoods and schools than they were 25 or 40 years ago. But it is difficult to mobilize public support around more subtle forms of racial discrimination or around institutional practices that result in racially disparate outcomes but which appear, on the surface, to be racially “neutral” in intent or procedure. The backlash against affirmative action is one symptom of this. Clearly the Bush administration’s response to the Katrina disaster, particularly in New Orleans, resulted in part from the fact that New Orleans is a majority black (and mostly Democratic) city. But accusations that Bush was a “racist” met with considerable skepticism among leading opinion leaders.

These dynamics creates dilemmas and opportunities for progressive organizers. How do we deal with the reality of racism and still find a common ground approach for building majoritarian support?

4. Decline of urban power structures. In the 1960s and 70s, many community organizing groups and their academic allies did “power structure” research to identify the key corporate and political players in a community, the interconnections within the corporate establishment and its junior partners (foundations, law firms, universities), and the divisions within and between the corporate and political elite. These local corporate power structures have been weakened by changes in the corporate economy. Cities no longer have as many major employers with local headquarters. For example, there are no longer any major banks based in Los Angeles, the nation’s second largest city. Most major employers are now branches of large companies. At the local level, they are run by branch managers. These people have less of an economic, political, and personal stake in the city and region.

Groups working against bank redlining no longer can confront the directors of the local bank on their own turf. These banks are now run from distant boards. Local

unions, community groups, and enviro/smart growth groups working to restrain Wal-Mart can find local organizing “handles,” but must find ways to work together across the country to influence decisions made in Bentonville, Arkansas.

One might even ask: Where is the local power structure now that we need it? Who can local groups negotiate with? Without some kind of national network or movement, local groups are limited in their ability to bargain with mega corporations.

5. The Chicken Little syndrome: fact and fiction about capital mobility. Community organizations, unions, environmental groups and other progressive groups generally want higher wages for workers, more progressive taxes on big business and the affluent, and more regulations on business to make them behave more responsibly. Because our cities and suburbs rely primarily on local revenues, all progressive urban activists face a serious dilemma: if local (or state) public officials move too aggressively to tax or regulate the private sector, business can threaten to pull up stakes and take their jobs and tax base with them. They can also mobilize a sustained political assault (often with the aid of the local media) against the incumbent for being unfair to business. Few politicians want to be stuck with the reputation that because they lost the "confidence" of the business community, they drove away jobs and undermined the tax base.

Whenever progressives propose a policy to make business act more responsibly -such as reduce pollution, or improve working conditions, or enact a living wage law, or regulate developers - some business leaders react in horror that it will destroy the incentive to invest and hurt the business climate. As a result, most officials accommodate themselves to business' priorities. I call this the Chicken Little syndrome.

Most unions, community organizing groups, and environmental groups often have no good response to these business threats when even sympathetic politicians buy into the Chicken Little. Of course, these are not new questions. At the turn of the century, manufacturers warned that American business would suffer if legislators enacted laws against the exploitation of child labor. In many ways, the history of progressive reform is a constant struggle between reformers seeking government regulations on business and business stating that such regulations will hurt the "business climate" and create unemployment. In an increasingly global economy, however, business is more mobile than ever. As firms become more internationalized, their ability to set the ground rules increases as well.

Because our federal system allows states and localities to set many business conditions, footloose corporations can look for the best "business climate" -- low wages, low benefits, low taxes, lax environmental regulations and a "union free" atmosphere. In this situation, many state and local government officials feel that in order to attract or maintain jobs, they have to participate in "bidding wars." This puts each participant in a weaker bargaining position and undermines the economic and fiscal health of all communities.

Business warnings are not always empty threats. Tax increases, wage increases, and various government regulations can damage business profits and lead to decisions to downsize, relocate, or even go out of business. But the factors that contribute to business strength and weakness are not the same in all places, at all times, or for all industries or firms.

Local public officials are often reluctant to accuse business lobbies of bluffing -- or lying -- when they claim a government policy will undermine "business confidence" and push companies to relocate or curb expansion plans. For government officials and staff to negotiate with business on an equal footing, they cannot rely solely on businesses and developers (or their consultants) to provide information, as is too frequently the case. Although some businesses are mobile, many are tied to the local economy. They are relatively "sticky" or immobile.

A major difference between conservative, liberal and progressive politicians is their willingness to constantly test how far government can go before business acts on its threats to leave, cut back, expand elsewhere, or organize political opposition. If progressive elected officials are to challenge business prerogatives, they need to have a strong political constituency that will support them despite the potential threats of businesses. They, and the community groups and unions that support them, also have to know when and how to compromise. Progressive city officials and activists, in other words, must have a clear sense of when the threats of business are real and when they are not. .

How can we tell when business is bluffing and when its threats are real? Unless we can answer this question, progressives -- community organizing groups, unions, environmentalists, and their allies among elected officials -- will be bargaining from a position of weakness, with at least one hand tied behind their backs. One question is how to recognize firms or industries that are more or less "sticky." Which firms or industries are more or less tied to specific cities, states, or regions? Is it possible that businesses that have a stronger stake in localities may be our unwitting allies? At the national level, we can raise the same questions. Federal laws actually promote competition between cities, regions, and states. The Taft-Hartley Act, for example, allows states to enact anti-union "right to work" laws. Our federal system allows cities to establish their own property tax rates and can cut special deals for particular investment projects, exacerbating bidding wars for business.

For progressive organizers, the Chicken Little syndrome has several implications. One is that we must be in a better position to answer the question, "when is business bluffing?" We have to know more about the conditions that encourage and discourage investment and disinvestment. We have to know more about specific industries and firms so that we can "call the bluff" when necessary. This knowledge would spare cities costly bidding wars and prevent businesses from playing municipalities off each other to attract private investment.

Second, we need federal and state legislation that puts restrictions on bidding wars between cities and states for private investment. We need to change some of the ground rules that allow companies unfettered capital mobility? Should our tax laws, environmental laws, labor laws, and other laws be reformed to make it more difficult for companies to play Russian roulette with our cities? The answer is to enact a common national standard and a more level playing field.

6. Militarism and globalization. A discussion of the challenges facing progressives would be incomplete without some focus on the military industrial complex and the dilemmas of globalization. We will never solve our domestic problems as long as we continue to spend such a large part of our federal budget on national defense. Today, more than a decade after the end of the Cold War and all the talk about a "peace dividend," our country has not significantly reduced its reliance on military spending. This has three serious consequences. First, there isn't enough money in our federal budget for domestic economic and social programs. Second, our private economy is still dominated by military research and production, which means we divert much of our scientific and technical expertise and invest too little in civilian industries. Third, we use our military to promote regimes overseas that limit human and workers' rights, and that promote the "race to the bottom" in terms of working and living conditions.

The labor movement has played an increasing role in challenging free trade, promoting human rights abroad, working closely with anti-sweatshop groups, and even, to some extent, opposing the war in Iraq and U.S. militarism. The environmental movement has increasingly moved in this direction, especially in terms of fighting for global environmental standards along with international labor standards, as conditions of international trade agreements. In general, the community organizing movement has few links to U.S. movements that focus on human rights, militarism, opposition to unregulated free trade, and solidarity with movements at home and overseas that promote fair trade. In part this is a function of the limits of "localism" and in part it is a result of the internal culture of community organizing groups that focus on domestic issues.

## Conclusion

The history of the past century shows that progress is made when people join together to struggle for change, make stepping stone reforms, and persist so that each victory builds on the next. This kind of work is slow and gradual, because it involves organizing people to learn the patient skills of leadership and organization building. It requires forging coalitions that can win elections and then promote politics that keep the coalition alive.

Grassroots organizing is rarely dramatic. The news media rarely pay attention to the small miracles that happen when ordinary people join together to channel their

frustration and anger into solid organizations that win improvements in workplaces, neighborhoods, and schools. The media are generally more interested in political theater and confrontation -- when workers strike, when community activists protest, or when hopeless people resort to rioting. As a result, much of the best organizing work during the last decade -- including efforts during this election year -- has been unheralded in the mainstream press.

Political victories are about more than technology and election-day turnout. They are about message and movement. Successes on election day are a by-product of, not a substitute for, effective grassroots organizing in between elections. Over the past century, the key turning points for improving American society involved large-scale mobilizations around a broad egalitarian and morally uplifting vision of America, a progressive patriotism animated by "liberty and justice for all." These movements drew on traditions of justice and morality. They redefined the rights and responsibilities of citizens, government, and business. In the Gilded Age, it was agrarian populism and urban Progressivism. During the Depression, it was the upsurge of industrial unionism linked to Roosevelt's New Deal. In the 1960's and 1970s, it was the civil rights, women's rights, and environmental movements, promoting a vision of how the nation's prosperity should be shared by all but not squandered for future generations.

The Progressive Left has yet figure out how to frame issues and mobilize constituencies in the early 21st century that can achieve sustained political and economic power. But each time there has been a political realignment, it occurred in ways that even its strongest proponents could not have anticipated.

Michael Harrington, the writer, activist, and democratic socialist, used to say that progressives have to be long-distance runners. We're in this for the long haul.

America today is holding its breath, trying to decide what kind of society it wants to be. Liberal and progressive forces are gaining momentum, but still lack the organizational infrastructure needed to effectively challenge the conservative message and movement. They have begun to invest in building that infrastructure -- think tanks, grassroots coalitions, technology, recruitment of staff, identification and training of candidates. Some of that investment bore fruit last year in November 2004 -- including the impressive work of the Americans Coming Together project -- but there is more to be done. ACORN has an important role to play - as an organization with its own membership, as part of a broader progressive coalition, and as a model of how to effectively use organizational resources to build a movement to social justice.

## Note

1. The most fascinating factoid from the exit polls of the November 2004 election revealed that when voters' loyalties were divided between their economic interests and other so-called "moral values" concerns, union membership was a crucial

determinant of their votes. For example, gun owners favored Bush by a 63-36% margin, but union members who own guns supported Kerry 55-43%, according to an AFL-CIO survey. Bush carried all weekly church-goers by a 61-39% margin, but Kerry won among union members who attend church weekly by a 55-43% margin. Bush won among white men by 62-37% margin, but Kerry carried white men in unions by a 59-38% margin. Bush won among white women by 55-44% but Kerry won among white women in unions by a 67-32% margin. In 2004, the labor movement poured enormous resources (money, staff, members) into the election. They worked in coalition with community groups like ACORN, environmental, women's rights, consumer, and civil rights groups. But there were simply too few union members to overcome the Bush forces' edge. The long-term decline in union membership is perhaps the most important factor in explaining the gap between how well the Kerry and Bush forces did in mobilizing their respective bases. Union members - 35% in the 1950s, 25% in the 1970s - is down to 11% today. Had union membership been at its 1970s levels, Kerry would have won by a landslide.

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## About the Author

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