

The ACORN witch hunt

US voter registration group under attack

Tom Eley
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The activist organization ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), which is best known for its efforts to register poor and minority citizens to vote, has been under a ferocious media and political attack for weeks. This culminated in overwhelming bipartisan votes in the Senate and House last week to strip the organization of federal subsidies, and a call from President Barack Obama on a Sunday news show that it be investigated.

ACORN, which has been the focus of right-wing attacks for years, was the victim of an “undercover” video frame-up, in which two self-described conservatives, pretending to be a prostitute and a pimp, sought counseling from a number of ACORN community outreach offices.

Video footage of the meetings, in which ACORN staff members respond to inquiries by the two about how to carry on illegal activities and avoid paying taxes, have been relentlessly promoted by Fox News and other media outlets.

Rather than exposing the obvious political motivation behind the attack on ACORN, the group’s benefactors in the Democratic Party have joined in the operation. Democratic legislators in Washington and Democratic governors in the states have attempted to outdo their Republican counterparts in denouncing ACORN, ordering investigations, and cutting the federal, state and city grants it receives.

On September 14, the Senate voted 83-7 to block the Housing and Urban Development Department from providing community grants to ACORN, which claims more than 400,000 members in twelve hundred chapters across the country. The House then voted 345-75 to bar ACORN from receiving any federal funding whatsoever through the “Defund Acorn Act,” and the Senate returned with another lopsided vote

forbidding ACORN from receiving money from an Interior Department spending bill.

New York’s Democratic attorney general, Andrew Cuomo, announced he would investigate ACORN’s use of funding from the state, while New York City’s liberal council speaker, Christine Quinn, said the city would freeze all its ACORN contracts. Similar measures have been put in place across the country.

Even the US Census Bureau, which recruits volunteers from 80,000 organizations in its efforts to increase participation in the census, announced earlier this month it would no longer accept the services of ACORN.

Speaking on nationally televised Sunday news shows, President Barack Obama called for an investigation into the group’s activities, while meekly claiming it is not the “biggest issue facing the country.”

The Democratic Party has joined in the attack on ACORN in spite of the fact that it is closely linked to the group, both through personal and political ties. Its voter registration efforts among the poor and minorities have overwhelmingly benefited Democratic candidates. ACORN’s leadership are members in good standing of the so-called “progressive” wing of the Democratic Party establishment.

Sitting on an ACORN advisory panel are John Podesta, a close ally of Obama who organized his transition to the White House, and Andrew Stern, head of the Service Employee’s International Union.

Obama has enjoyed close ties to ACORN and its affiliates for years. He worked for an ACORN affiliate during his days as a “community organizer” in Chicago, and he represented the group in a lawsuit against the state of Illinois in 1995. In the 2008 Democratic primaries, Obama’s campaign gave over \$800,000 to an ACORN affiliate to assist with voter

registration.

The aspect of ACORN's work ostensibly exposed as "corrupt" by the video was its community outreach. Most of ACORN's work is focused on assisting the poor in finding health care, housing and financial assistance.

But these charitable efforts have nothing to do with the attack on the organization. ACORN's crime, rather, is that it registers poor and minority workers to vote.

Right-wing commentators and Republican politicians freely admit this is the case. One of the two filmmakers, James O'Keefe, has flatly declared that he undertook his undercover work not to expose that ACORN offices might be providing counsel to prostitutes, but because it registers groups who vote against Republicans. "Politicians are getting elected single-handedly due to this organization," O'Keefe said to the *Washington Post*. "No one was holding this organization accountable."

It is, in the first place, absurd to hold all of ACORN accountable for the comments a few workers were baited into making by political opponents in one or two offices. There is ample evidence that O'Keefe and his accomplice, who were dressed in the sort of "street" attire that one might see at a costume party, failed in most of their efforts to entrap ACORN office workers. One ACORN office in Philadelphia filed a police report on the pair.

The absurdity of the "exposé" notwithstanding, Republicans and media commentators argue that if ACORN representatives have advised undercover conservative reporters on how to commit prostitution, it must follow that the organization's voter registration efforts are also criminal. This is an example of the logical fallacy known as the amalgam.

ACORN's voter registration activity has in fact been relentlessly scrutinized for years by the right, which has nonetheless managed to turn up no significant body of evidence to prove its accusations. In the build-up to the national elections last year, Republicans and their allies brandished about allegations of "voter fraud" related to the group in a bid to tamp down voter turnout and to cast doubt on the outcome of the election, should it be close.

In the 2008 election, ACORN collected over 1.3 million voter registration forms, and itself threw out 400,000 of these for incomplete information,

duplicating second forms, or for being fraudulent.

Earlier, in 2006, ACORN was at the center of the infamous purge the Bush administration carried out against US attorneys. The best known firing, that of the US attorney for New Mexico, David Iglesias, took place because Iglesias had determined not to investigate politically motivated charges of voter fraud levelled against ACORN. (See "New evidence shows Bush White House orchestrated purge of US attorney")

At the heart of the attack on ACORN is the Republican Party's attempt to limit the vote among the fastest growing sections of the population—minorities, the poor, and the youth—who tend to vote against it, under conditions where the Republican's electoral base is eroding.

That the Democratic Party has joined in the attack on ACORN exposes that it is no more committed to the right to vote than the Republican Party. While the Democrats are more than willing to rely on the efforts of groups like ACORN to "get out the vote" in election years, their greater concern is that the aspirations of working class voters will come into conflict with the right-wing fiscal and social policies they are putting in place.

It is increasingly probable that ACORN will collapse. ACORN's situation has become even more precarious after evidence surfaced in the *Washington Post* that the group's founder and his brother may have been involved in the embezzlement of millions of dollars. ACORN has announced the closure of a number of local offices, and late last week said that it may suspend its voter registration efforts.

The author also recommends:

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[22 October 2009]



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