

Appeasing right wing, US Justice Department launches ACORN probe

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The Inspector General of the US Justice Department has agreed to open a formal investigation into whether the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) sought or received any Justice Department grant money, and if so, whether Justice officials reviewed the use of such funds.

The decision by the Obama administration follows a campaign by Republicans and right-wing news outlets demanding the cut-off of public funds to the organization, which conducts voter registration drives in poor and minority neighborhoods and provides housing, legal and financial assistance to low-income residents.

The organization was the victim of a right-wing sting operation, in which two conservative activists, dressed as a pimp and prostitute, took a hidden camera to ACORN offices in several cities and sought advice from employees on how to carry out illegal activities and avoid paying taxes. Video footage of the operation has been repeatedly aired on Fox News and other media outlets.

Rather than exposing the political character of the attack, the Democratic Party, which has chiefly benefited from the voter registration activities of the group, is throwing the organization to the wolves. During Sunday's television talk shows Obama—who had worked for an ACORN affiliate during his days as a “community organizer” in Chicago and represented the group in a lawsuit defending voter rights against the state of Illinois in 1995—called the videos “disturbing” and said there should be an investigation.

Last week, the US Senate voted to prohibit ACORN funding in its spending bill for the Departments of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development, and the House of Representatives voted to deny all

federal funds to ACORN.

On Monday, Inspector General Glenn A. Fine wrote Texas Rep. Lamar Smith, the top Republican on the House Judiciary Committee, indicating that his office would open a probe into whether ACORN had gotten Justice Department grants.

Lamar welcomed the decision saying an investigation would “help Congress ensure that money allocated to support law enforcement efforts is not instead used to support criminal conduct.” He added, “It is clear that ACORN has fostered a culture of corruption. With investigations of ACORN now occurring in 20 states, it is time for the FBI to open up a full scale investigation into possible criminal conduct by ACORN.”

Republicans are demanding other federal agencies review the grants, contracts and entitlements that ACORN received. Under political pressure, the Census Bureau announced it would not use the organization to collect census data, and ACORN said it was suspending a joint program with the Internal Revenue Service to provide tax assistance to low-income people.

ACORN has long been targeted for its efforts to register poor and minority voters who are largely disenfranchised during elections. Because these voters have largely supported the Democrats, the Republicans have charged the organization with “voter fraud” and taken legal steps to curtail its operations or shut the organization down.

The organization was in the middle of the illegal efforts by Bush administration officials to fire US district attorneys who failed to pursue charges of voter fraud. Publicly released emails show that Karl Rove directly pushed for the termination of US Attorney David Iglesias, in large part for his decision not to pursue allegations of voter fraud against ACORN in 2006. Iglesias had investigated the charges and found

them unwarranted.

Shortly before the 2008 presidential elections, the FBI opened up an investigation into Republican allegations that ACORN was engaged in voter fraud. The FBI has not commented on the case since.

Among those leading the witch-hunt in Congress is California Rep. Darrell Issa, a multi-millionaire who came to political prominence in 2003 when he personally financed the campaign to overturn the results of the California gubernatorial election and recall Democratic Governor Gray Davis.

The responses of a few ACORN employees—who have since been fired—to the right-wing sting operation have been used to suggest that the entire organization is engaged in criminal activity. While echoing this specious claim, the media scarcely bothered to report that several employees contacted the police after the couple asked them for assistance.

In Philadelphia, for example, the staff filed a police report after the couple left. In National City, California, police said an ACORN worker—Juan Carlos Vera—who appeared to give advice to the couple about their plans to smuggle children from Latin America for a prostitution ring, had contacted them after the incident.

The political motivations behind this witch-hunt were made clear by John Fund, columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, in comments on National Public Radio's "On Point" program Tuesday night. Fund denounced ACORN's voter registration efforts for "clogging up the voter rolls with fraud" and "gumming up the system."

The *Wall Street Journal* columnist—who has been engaged in a decade-long campaign against the organization—is the author of the 2004 book *Stealing Elections: How Voter Fraud Threatens Our Democracy*, which helped give the Republican Party a plank on which to intimidate voters and such organizations as ACCORN during the past two presidential elections.

In it Fund rails against ACORN and measures to facilitate voter registration, including the Motor Voter Act, which enables voters to register when they apply for their driver's license.

When an NPR listener pointed out that the columnist's newspaper and the Republicans attacking ACORN had defended the criminal activities of the Wall Street banking executives who created the current

economic catastrophe, Fund attempted to blame ACORN and similar groups for the collapse of the banking system, saying its advocacy bank providing loans to low-income families had precipitated the sub-prime mortgage crisis.

While the Democratic Party has made use of ACORN's "get out the vote" activities, the fact that it has joined the attack on this organization demonstrates that it is no more committed to defending the right to vote than the Republican Party.



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