

Activist group ACORN collapses following witch-hunt

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25 March 2010

The announcement March 22 that the liberal community activist group ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) will disband and cease operations is the outcome of a protracted right-wing assault. While ACORN had been targeted by the extreme right for years, the attacks against the group assumed a more aggressive and organized character since the 2008 presidential election.

ACORN has said it will now implement a plan to close its “remaining state affiliates and field offices by April 1” and that it will work to “resolve all outstanding debts, obligations and other issues.” The decision comes just two days after reports emerged claiming the organization was nearly bankrupt.

With federal funding no longer available, and private donations dwindling due to the ongoing smear campaign against it, ACORN had reached a state of crisis, losing half of its 30 state chapters in the past six months. The two largest state chapters, New York and California, split with ACORN to form their own independent groups.

A March 20 statement by ACORN CEO Bertha Lewis, said her organization had “faced a series of well-orchestrated, relentless, well-funded right-wing attacks that are unprecedented since the McCarthy era.” She added, “Our effective work empowering African American and low-income voters made us a target.”

ACORN was formed in 1970 and grew into a network of community activist groups that organized around a number of social issues including the demand for a living wage, a fight against predatory lending and home foreclosures, the reform of the public education system and voter registration drives among minorities and low-income citizens. At its peak, ACORN claimed

400,000 members and had chapters in 100 US cities, with others in Canada, Mexico, Argentina and Peru.

Since 2003, ACORN had registered 3 million voters. Some 1.3 million of these were registered during the 2007-08 presidential campaign period, a fact that incurred the wrath of Republican Party officials who feared the overwhelming majority of these new voters would support Democratic candidates.

With criticism of the group mounting, it was revealed in 2008 that ACORN was the subject of an FBI investigation into voter fraud. Allegations were made that the organization was turning in false voter registration forms. However, only a handful of false forms, among the millions of legitimate ones submitted by the organization, were ever discovered. This did nothing to stop ultra-right figures from pursuing a hysterical witch-hunt against the group.

Among the more outrageous attacks on the organization came during a 2008 presidential debate when Republican candidate John McCain warned that ACORN was “on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy.” In reality, a Congressional Research Service report revealed in December 2009 that “there were no instances of individuals who were allegedly registered to vote improperly by ACORN or its employees and who were reported ‘attempting to vote at the polls.’”

In 2009, ACORN was the victim of a now infamous frame-up perpetrated by conservative activist James O’Keefe and his accomplice Hanna Giles who went to ACORN offices posing as a pimp and prostitute seeking advice on how best to carry out their illegal activities and avoid paying taxes. Heavily edited video footage taken with a hidden camera during one meeting, in which it appeared that ACORN workers

were advising the two undercover “investigators” on getting away with their crimes, was broadcast for days on the cable news channels. All of the allegations were treated as fact and O’Keefe’s credibility went unchallenged for a significant period of time.

The exoneration of ACORN in these matters did not receive the same wall-to-wall coverage. On March 1, 2010 the Brooklyn District Attorney’s office cleared the organization of any of the supposed criminal activity said to be found on the O’Keefe tapes. After investigating the allegations made by O’Keefe, District Attorney Charles Hynes released a statement saying, “On Sept. 15, 2009, my office began an investigation into possible criminality on the part of three ACORN employees ... That investigation is now concluded and no criminality has been found.”

The *New York Daily News* reported on the DA’s findings, writing, “While the video by James O’Keefe and Hannah Giles seemed to show three ACORN workers advising a prostitute how to hide ill-gotten gains, the unedited version was not as clear, according to a law enforcement source.” The *Daily News* source is quoted as saying, “They edited the tape to meet their agenda.”

O’Keefe was later arrested in January 2010, along with three others disguised as telephone repairmen, after allegedly attempting to tamper with the phone system at the New Orleans offices of Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu.

Following the O’Keefe tape scandal, the US Congress moved in September 2009, in a bipartisan vote of 345 to 75, to prevent ACORN from receiving any further federal funding. Congressman Darrell Issa, the Ranking Republican on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, denounced the group as a “criminal conspiracy” and claimed they had “engaged in systemic fraud.”

The Congressional vote was later ruled unconstitutional by Nina Gershon, United States district judge for the Eastern District of New York. Gershon wrote in her decision that ACORN had “been singled out by Congress for punishment that directly and immediately affects their ability to continue to obtain federal funding, in the absence of any judicial, or even administrative, process adjudicating guilt.”

Playing an especially rotten role in the witch-hunt against ACORN was the Democratic Party. The

Democrats benefited greatly from the organization’s voter registration activities and maintained close relations with ACORN for years. During the 2008 primaries, the Obama campaign itself donated more than \$800,000 to an ACORN affiliate to aid in voter registration drives.

When the media frenzy surrounding the scandals manufactured by right-wing activists made a partnership with ACORN problematic politically, the Democrats turned against it. Barack Obama, the one-time donor to the organization, called for the group to be investigated in an appearance on national television. In Congress, the Democrats stood side by side with the Republicans in punishing the group. No attempt was made to expose the fundamentally reactionary and anti-democratic character of the assault. While the Republican right may have begun the attack on ACORN, it took Obama and the Democratic Party to finish them off.



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