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## **In Their Rush to Abandon Acorn, Many Are Ignoring Its Accomplishments**

*By Pablo Eisenberg*

The most recent attacks on Acorn, the largest low-income grass-roots network in the country with more than 400,000 members, have put the organization in grave danger.

The troubles facing Acorn are important not just because they put the survival of an important poverty-fighting group at risk but also because it demonstrates what could well happen to any nonprofit group — or other entity — that refuses to toe the line of conservative ideologues and activists. Such assaults will continue unchecked unless nonprofit groups join forces to push back. Thus far they have been unwilling to do so.

Acorn's latest woes came after two conservative activists, posing as a prostitute and pimp, visited four of the organization's affiliates, pretending to seek advice on how to establish a bordello. The activists shot videos that they released to Fox News, which, along with some conservative blogs, has spearheaded an attack on the organization.

Acorn was already reeling from the revelation a year ago that the brother of its founder and former director had embezzled almost \$1-million from the organization 10 years ago. During the past year, Acorn has been working hard to revamp its governance structure and improve its financial-accountability mechanisms.

Few people would defend the mistakes, mismanagement, poor staff training, and lack of accountability that has marred Acorn practices in the past. Indeed, the current leadership of the organization has acknowledged those shortcomings and is trying to do something about them.

But the critics have gone much further than Acorn deserved. In the assault on Acorn, no lies have been spared, no accusations tempered by reason, and no acknowledgment has been made of the enormous good Acorn has done over the years. Behind the attacks are a deep hatred of liberals and progressives — especially those in the Obama administration — and a lack of concern and respect for poor and minority constituencies. It is part of a strategy to divert

attention away from the important legislative efforts that many conservatives don't want to succeed: a health-care overhaul; stiffer environmental standards; tougher regulations for financial institutions; and efforts to create jobs.

While lies, innuendos, and unproved accusations by conservative critics and politicians might have been expected, it is harder to explain why mainstream observers and progressive politicians have not questioned many of the anti-Acorn criticisms and allegations.

Only six Democrats in the Senate were gutsy enough to oppose the bill that prohibits Acorn from receiving any more federal money. Their Democrat colleagues, including some of the allegedly most progressive senators, like Tom Harkin of Iowa and Charles Schumer of New York, ran for political cover and voted to support the measure, scared by the onslaught of right-wing broadcasts and newspaper articles. Ironically, Senator Schumer had appeared two months earlier in Washington at an Acorn fund-raising event where he lavished praise on the work and accomplishments of the organization.

Those senators, as well as all but 75 members of the House, which passed a similar bill, accepted the substance of the allegations against Acorn without bothering to verify them or to ask Acorn and its supporters to present their side of the story.

The mainstream press was slow to pick up the story about the videos but did so when criticized by the right for either ignoring the scandal or protecting Acorn. *The Washington Post's* ombudsman acknowledged the criticism and said the *Post* would do a better job.

What he failed to mention was the lack of fairness and balance in the *Post* story that appeared on the front page the same day, an article that repeated at length the attack on Acorn by Rep. Darrell Issa, Republican of California, and others but did not bother to get comments from Acorn leaders or describe recent efforts by Acorn to improve many of its practices. Other major newspapers similarly gave little space to Acorn's side of the story.

Not unexpectedly, major progressive foundations abandoned ship a year ago when news of the Acorn embezzlement first became public. They either cut off grants or suspended payments to the group with the promise that the grants would be reconsidered if Acorn took the proper steps, financial and administrative, to turn itself around.

A network of grant makers was created to provide a single source to which Acorn could communicate its progress. But those foundations have not yet provided any money, even relatively small

amounts, to help Acorn manage its difficult transition, even as the organization was making necessary and difficult changes. With the exception of a few very small foundations, they simply left the group high and dry, not a very responsible position for wealthy institutions that say they believe in risk taking and in strengthening the management of nonprofit groups, not to mention providing assistance to poor and disadvantaged people.

The Ford Foundation recently awarded Acorn \$500,000, but after the video scandal received wide publicity, its board suspended the grants indefinitely. Only one major foundation appears to have the courage to support Acorn during its trying times. The California Endowment is reviewing a \$500,000 grant to California Acorn, and the odds it will make the award are good.

The failure of foundations to provide even minimal support to Acorn as it struggles to overhaul its governance and financial structures reflects poorly on grant makers' commitment to save an important champion of low-income and minority people and the courage of philanthropic leaders.

Progressive nonprofit groups have also been slow to rise to Acorn's defense.

When the videos were first broadcast and the conservative attacks accelerated, one could have heard a pin drop among progressive nonprofit organizations. They seemed loath to respond or get involved. Finally, a few organizations like the Alliance for Justice came out publicly in support of Acorn and distributed comments about the situation to journalists. But valuable time was lost during this initial period of silence, giving conservative activists, politicians, and journalists more opportunity to spread their poison relatively unchallenged.

If foundations and nonprofit groups do not learn to join forces to fight back against such attacks, other community-organizing networks are likely to become targets of future attacks. So are Planned Parenthood, the Sierra Club, consumer groups, and others.

Nonprofit groups must throw away their fears of going public in defense of reasoned analysis and debate. They must be prepared to talk to the news media, hold press conferences, write articles and blog posts, and rebut scurrilous allegations that are not based on fact.

Their trade associations, which have remained silent about Acorn thus far, should be ready to get off the sidelines to protect the integrity of the nonprofit world. Rapid, intensive counterattacks may be one of the most effective means to blunt the force of future

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irrational but effective right-wing assaults.

The Boy Scouts has it right: "Be prepared" is their motto. It should be the watchword of responsible nonprofit organizations as well.

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