



Several hundred members of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) march against Social Security privatization in Washington, D.C. in March 2005.

Where's the Outrage?

By Mike Miller, Editor-At-Large

Why aren't millions of Americans marching in the streets? Why aren't hundreds of thousands of them volunteering to work in local, state and national elections, and participating in mass meetings to hold elected officials accountable once they're in office? Why aren't tens of thousands engaged in acts of non-violent disruptive civil disobedience? It certainly isn't because the conditions don't call for them.

A social security "crisis" is trumpeted by the President despite the fact that the non-partisan Congressional research arm says the issues now being debated are about policy not a funding crisis. A credit-card company sponsored bankruptcy "reform" bill aimed at correcting "abuses" now moves through Congress, with support from Republicans and Democrats despite the fact that health crises, divorce and job loss are the overwhelming

reasons for people turning to bankruptcy. The President promises his quick signature. Federal funding for affordable housing continues to shrink. Good jobs continue to disappear, replaced by low-pay service sector jobs. Americans now work significantly more hours than ever in the last 50 years. Corporate scandals are now so common as to be almost routine. Tax "reform" takes money from the middle-class and gives it to the wealthy, while the poor get a token. "Tort reform" seeks to deny individuals malpractice financial settlements for their grief. Student loans and grants shrink while tuition costs increase faster than the rate of inflation. Twice, first in Florida in 2000, now at least in Ohio in 2004, massive Republican efforts to suppress the black vote effectively denied thousands the opportunity to cast their ballots and may have made the difference in each election's outcome.

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The President and his foreign policy apparatus lied about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, failed to capture Osama bin Laden, adopted an arrogant “we know what’s good for you” approach to the Middle-East that created tens of thousands of new admirers, and who knows how many new recruits, for Al Qaeda and made torture an acceptable technique in the “war against terror.” The Administration will create a new threat just in time for each election at home to gain voter support for the Republicans. On their immediate agenda are, at least, Syria, Iran, North Korea and Venezuela.

Writing in the mid-March issue of *Time*, Jeffrey Sachs observes, “In a world of plenty, 1 billion people are so poor, their lives are in danger. Eight million people die each year because they are too poor to stay alive.” We may soon reach the point where the combined policies of international financial institutions, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and multi-national corporations are responsible for more economic murders than the combined deaths caused by Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot and Rwanda’s Hutus.

The Latest Outrages: Social Security Crisis and Bankruptcy Reform

Most non-conservative observers acknowledge there is a social security problem about 30 years in the future when, if nothing is done, funds will start to run out. Writing for the Wellstone Democratic Renewal Club, sociologist and Bay Area political activist Harry Brill sees Bush’s program to privatize social security as “an opportunity for progressives to advocate for an alternative, progressive agenda, one that will increase benefits for retirees at all income levels without jeopardizing the social security account. Rather than engaging in a defensive battle, we should support a program that reflects a progressive vision. The way in which social security taxes are determined is unfair and extremely regressive. No taxes are paid on earnings over \$90,000. Moreover, in contrast to the Federal Income Tax, earnings from dividends, rent and other investment income are not subject to the social security tax...Billionaire Bill Gates contributes almost nothing more to social security than working people do.”

Atlanta Journal-Constitution Editorial Page

Editor Cynthia Tucker has this to say about Administration-supported credit-card reform: “The [Bush] war on working- and middle-class America continued apace last week when a piece of legislation favored by bankers and credit card companies – and pushed by the president – passed in the U.S. Senate. The new bankruptcy bill would make it harder for middle-income individuals to file under Chapter 7, which usually allows some debt-forgiveness. Under the new law, individuals (with some exceptions) have to keep working to pay off their debts, even if it takes several years.

“Financial industry lobbyists claim they are only going after deadbeats who can afford to pay, but the research suggests otherwise. A few deadbeats may indeed file for bankruptcy to get out of paying for cars or big-screen TVs they knew they couldn’t afford. But the vast majority, experts say, have been forced into substantial debt by some unforeseen personal catastrophe – death of the major breadwinner, job loss or medical crisis, for example.”

New York Times Op Ed columnist Paul Krugman says, “The bankruptcy bill fits right into this picture. When everything else goes wrong, Americans can still get a measure of relief by filing for bankruptcy – and rising insecurity means that they are forced to do this more often than in the past. But Congress is now poised to make bankruptcy law harsher, too.”

Warren Buffett recently made headlines by saying America



Community leaders meet with Senator Clinton in Washington, D.C.

is more likely to turn into a “sharecroppers’ society” than an “ownership society.” But I think the right term is a “debt peonage” society – after the system, prevalent in the post-Civil War South, in which debtors were forced to work for their creditors. The bankruptcy bill won’t get us back to those bad old days all by itself, but it’s a significant step in that direction.

Why Hasn’t There Been Outrage?

The scope and depth of outrages is so vast as to be numbing, and certainly to feel overwhelming. Many Americans simply hunker down and do the best they can with the cards that are dealt. If they are in economic trouble, they often blame themselves. Without community organizations in which private pain can become a matter of public concern, they suffer in silence. Significant numbers voted for Bush because of their fear of international terrorism. The religious right has an army organized around the so-called “moral issues,” many of whom vote against their economic interests. But the fact remains that a majority of Americans do not support Bush’s domestic agenda.

A more careful analysis is needed. A significant portion of what could be the leadership for a mass movement against economic tyranny at home has been coopted, while another portion has withdrawn from engagement with “the powers and principalities.” The former are either in small, typically foundation-funded, “projects” which limit their ability to engage in politics or are absorbed in Democratic Party politics. The latter are in sectarian left isolation.

The Precedent for Lessons

When the civil rights movement exploded in the Deep South, a tiny infra-structure of resources and leadership was available for it. “Movement centers” such as Highlander Folk School, Southern Regional Council and Southern Conference Education Fund were few and far between. Branches of the NAACP, local women’s and other civic associations and the black church were possible bases for action, but they were embattled (NAACP was outlawed in Alabama), caught up in legal rather than organizing strategies or quiet.

In 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, the Montgomery Improvement Association, led by a new minister in town, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., shut down the city’s public transportation system with an almost 100% effective, year-long, boycott. Five years later, in February, 1960, black students at Greensboro, South Carolina, held the first sit-in at a local Woolworth’s fountain that refused to serve black patrons. Soon thousands of African-American students were engaged in sit-ins, freedom rides and other acts of civil disobedience in the Deep South. Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the organization formed by the sit-in students, led militant direct action, voter registration and community organizing efforts in the Deep South that stirred the



“We demand justice!”

nation to support an end to legal discrimination and denial of the right to vote. By 1965/66, national civil rights and voting rights legislation was adopted, and an enforcement mechanism was in place to insure that blacks could vote. By the 1970’s, there were more elected black public officials in the South than anyplace else in the country.

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For the most part, officially condoned violence against black people disappeared, black sheriffs were elected and black deputies and police were hired throughout the south. But the persistent problem of poverty, “The Movement’s” other target, remained and, in some cities and counties, grew worse.

In the north, a primarily student and religious community

anti-war movement, combined with the determination of the Vietnamese to throw foreign troops out of their country, forced a Republican Administration to sign a peace treaty with the Communists. This movement shared the moral outrage of the civil rights movement, and by the early 1970s drew into its orbit of influence a majority of the American people.

The national economic poverty and “poverty” of powerlessness now require the same focused righteous indignation that was aroused by Deep South racism. So does U.S. empire-building foreign policy. The Bush Administration has brought these problems into sharp focus, but they are not new; they persisted through Democratic and Republican Administrations.

Where Is Community Organizing?

Today, a large community organizing infrastructure is in place. It has multiple victories that include significant issues, millions of members, a cadre of professional organizers and religious and foundation funding. National networks have “trained” tens of thousands of leaders. Yet no one is nationally mobilizing the potential for opposition to the outrages being visited upon the American people. There’s something wrong here.

Why aren’t the local units of both individual membership and “institution-based” community organizations places where people are telling their stories of pain, of: having to choose between health care and eating, lost pensions, two-wage earners in a household to barely make ends meet, home foreclosures, bankruptcies, doubling-up to afford the rent?

Why aren’t there thousands of people at accountability sessions going on in almost every State and Congressional District in the US to demand of members of Congress that instead of privatizing social security they improve it?

Why aren’t there pray-ins at the churches of CEOs who take multi-million dollar packages while laying off tens of thousands of workers while they raid their pension plans?

Why aren’t the extravagances of conspicuous consumption by the wealthy the objects of ridicule and satire by the creative talents of people who would like nothing better than to give pomposity and arrogance a kick in the rear? (How fat does the Golden Calf have to get?) And why aren’t thousands of pastors being agitated by organizers to re-read the economic justice mandates of the Bible? (Indeed, in them mainline and Catholic leadership might find a unifying theme to substitute for the divisiveness of individual morality issues, and Evangelicals and Pentecostals might find these moral messages have more to do with the lives of their

people than gay marriage!)

I fear the answers are too plain: dependence on external funding and fear that funders will object to “politics” (at their peak of influence, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Southern Christian Leadership Conference had few grants – most of their money came from individuals – both wealthy and “small check donors”, churches, synagogues and unions); territoriality (if we can’t run the campaign, we’re not going to participate); the straight-jacket of timid thinking (it’s not “immediate, specific and winnable”).

The Opportunity: What Can Be Built?

In a period of mass mobilization, organizing is possible and can be speeded up. That’s what the industrial union movement did in the 1930’s.

It’s what the southern civil rights movement could have done had it the capacity and patience for serious organizing. (When the famous Selma to Montgomery march took place, SNCC organizers used its spirit and mobilization through Lowndes County to identify potential leaders and organization participants. The Lowndes County Freedom Organization soon thereafter became one of the most potent organizing projects in the South – unfortunately, there were too few of them.)

These domestic economic issues touch numbers of people exceeding by far the actual memberships of community organizations. That means an opportunity for local direct membership groups or local congregations to reach more deeply into their members and constituencies to expand their active base. It means an opportunity to relate biblical and democratic tradition justice themes to current issues, giving deep meaning to campaigns so they can equal the “morality” of the religious right’s emphasis on the “social issues.”

The organizing traditional wisdom that makes “movements” and “organizing” contradictory needs to be challenged. Organizing can quicken its spread and depth in a time of movement. Mobilizations create movement and can be undertaken by organizations to create the opportunity to gain new recruits and deepen the commitment and capacity of existing leaders. **SP**

Will community organizing seize the opportunity?

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