

From:

Sent: Tuesday, February 23, 2010 9:29 AM

To:

Subject: acorn "confidential" to an e-list

From: Nathan Henderson-James <nathanhj@gmail.com>

Date: February 22, 2010 11:34:27 PM EST

To: lwoodhouse@gmail.com

Cc: Townhouse <townhouse@googlegroups.com>

Subject: Re: [townhouse] Re: ACORN

Reply-To: nathanhj@gmail.com

> Folks,

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> What I'm about to say is, unless I explicitly say so, totally and completely confidential.

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> First, reports of our demise today mostly aren't accurate, though this CBS blog report does a decent job:

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> <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2010/02/22/politics/politicalhotsheet/entry6232622.shtml>

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> Here's the full statement that we released to those who asked. This is quotable.

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> **ACORN statement**

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> Today in New York a group of grassroots leaders and organizers who have worked with ACORN for many years announced today that they are establishing a new, state-based organization. There was a similar announcement last month in California.

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> **ACORN Communications Director Kevin Whelan issued the following statement:**

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> "ACORN's national leadership respects the decision of this dedicated group of community leaders who have done so much to help make their neighborhoods, cities, state, and the country a better and fairer place. We know they will continue to do great work and we wish them well.

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> Bertha Lewis continues to serve as the CEO and Chief Organizer of ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) that speaks for low income families nationwide. (Ms. Lewis does not have a position with the new community organization that was announced in New York today.)

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> It's no secret that ACORN has had to fight hard to survive a series of vicious right wing attacks over the past year and half and that this has made it harder for ACORN to raise funds and organize and serve its members. We understand the desire of local grassroots leaders in some states to move ahead focusing solely on the fight to improve their communities."

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> Bertha will be releasing a statement tomorrow about a set of internal changes that ACORN is going through to deal with current circumstances that will include an emphasis on our online work around issues of importance to low and moderate income families.

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> **Now I'm back to being confidential.**

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> The truth is that it is hard for us to foresee any scenario where ACORN continues beyond the end of 2010 and some of us think it might not last that long. It is definitely true that over the next week or so we should see a dozen or more organizations launched on the state level by staff who used to work for ACORN and leaders who developed their skills as ACORN members. These are not just simple name changes, but reimaginings of how best to organize low and moderate income constituencies without any of the legal problems and funding issues dogging ACORN, not to mention the brand damage.

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> Andrew noted that this might be tactically smart, a reaction to the global situation that helps the work of building power for poor people to continue. We'd like to think so, but the jury's probably out on whether these state-level organizers and leaders are making the right choice. We'd happy to help anyone who wants to write about this by offering our insights and connecting you with folks going through this process.

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> Others have noted that the circumstances surrounding the changes and attacks besetting ACORN have raised questions about what it means to be a progressive movement and, indeed, whether or not there really is one. I suspect that I'm too close to this story to have an unbiased opinion here, but I want to emphasize two things.

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> One, there will be a fight over the narrative of ACORN's demise. The people on top of the power structure want a narrative about the corruption of popular organizations and how they are simply vehicles for the personal enrichment and power fantasies of their top staff members while pushing public policies that destroy middle America. This is bad not just for the legacy of ACORN, but also for what it says about a progressive agenda, about organizing, and about people without power who start to wield some. It also gives people pushing a pro-corporate agenda a way to tar progressives and even non-progressive Democrats running for office with the ACORN brush. It will represent an enduring loss for our side, though I'm not yet sure how large that loss will be. (Certainly there won't be anyone to mobilize the 850,000 new voters who voted in 2008 as a result of our voter registration drives in key states - NC, OH, IN, MO, NM, CO, etc. - conducted since 2004.)

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> The other narrative, the one that works better for progressives, is one that says the attacks on ACORN were part of a concerted attempt to demobilize key progressive constituencies because they banded together to take power and threaten the status quo and that the legacy of ACORN deserves that regular people stand up for themselves and organize to take power, to pass public policies that create an America we all want to live in. One in which organizing is about average people making their lives and their communities and their workplaces better.

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> That narrative will be contested for a bit and you can be sure that it will be marked by serious right-wing triumphalism. Our side needs to make sure our narrative wins, using the kind of pushback that's taken place recently around O'Keefe. That's been beautiful.

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> The second thing I wanted to talk about is what happened, or didn't happen, when the O'Keefe attacks started. I can't say that ACORN didn't make mistakes. We did. And we were weakened by the past sins of the previous leadership that was ousted in the wake of the embezzlement scandal. So we're not innocent. But the breathtaking swiftness with which the Congress condemned us on the basis of what have been clearly shown by real journalists to be nothing but the purest propaganda and the concomitant abandonment of ACORN by all but the most staunch allies calls into question a lot about how we think of ourselves as a "movement". I don't want to give short shrift to the people who did stand up. Many of them are on this list and many of them did tireless work to pushback and we were all up against a 24-hour propaganda channel.

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> But it's also true that in a moment of extreme duress, orchestrated by propogand videos, we, as a movement, stood by as ACORN got gutted, while we also handed the forces of pro-corporate politics a handy club to kick the shit out of anything that vaguely sounds progressive. And that comes with a license to go after the next group or groups that embody the progressive agenda. This went beyond ACORN. We were just a convenient target to make into a bogeyman. This was about everything progressives stood for. And when it came time to stand up, most of us didn't.

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> I respect that the story is more nuanced than this reductionist telling. However, this episode has a lot of lessons for us, not just in deconstructing how the attacks against us were orchestrated and carried out, but in what kinds of fault lines within progressives it exposed. What can we learn about how to avoid this again? What can we learn about where we are weak and how to get strong? How can we build structures that are dedicated to movement-building, not just winning specific policy goals? And many many others.

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> ACORN will be around for a few more months for sure and I'll be doing the online work throughout it all. We're going to be aggressive and we're going to be loud and we're going to do it as long as we can. After that I'll be joining one of the organizations that comes out of ACORN's demise, helping to reimagine community organizing for the 21st century.

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> Last one to leave turn out the lights and wipe the server.

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> Regards,

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> Nathan HJ

> ACORN Online Campaigns